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The Bible Story

Volume 4

Chapter 80

"We Want a King!"

THE immense gathering of Israelites at Mizpeh in the autumn of the year had resulted in many thousands repenting and pledging themselves to greater obedience to God. (I Samuel 7:6.) It was the season of the Feast of Tabernacles.

As soon as it was over, the news came that a Philistine army was approaching. The people fell into a state of panic. They pleaded with Samuel to ask God to spare them from their enemies. (Verses 7-8)

God Answers!

After Samuel had made certain that the Philistine army was indeed near at hand, he had a lamb prepared for a burnt offering to God. Samuel officiated at the ceremony. He had God's authorization to do so because the priesthood at that time had passed from Eli to himself.

(Although Samuel was not of the priesthood family, he was a Levite. He had been consecrated to God's service as a Nazarite and trained in the priesthood by Eli. [Numbers 6:1-6; I Samuel 1:11; 2:11, 18, 26; 3:1.] Until a worthy descendant of Aaron could be trained in the responsibilities of the priesthood, Samuel served as priest, as well as prophet. Thus it was proper for him to make this offering.)

As the lamb burned on the altar, Samuel prayed fervently. (I Samuel 7:9.)

"God of Israel, deliver your people here at Mizpeh from their enemies!" he cried. "You have seen and heard how they have come to admit and repent of their wrong ways. You have promised to protect the repentant and the obedient. Now I claim that promise of protection for these people, and commit their lives into your merciful hands!"

Even before Samuel had finished praying, the Philistine army swept into the Mizpeh area intending to set upon the thousands of families camped there. Although many of the Israelite men were armed, they weren't organized or prepared to meet an onslaught by so many well trained and determined enemy troops.

Just before the Philistine army came into view, the sky clouded over with alarming rapidity. The clouds were low, very dark and swirled about in a most unusual manner. As the attackers came almost within reach of the outermost tents pitched around Mizpeh, great bolts of lightning forked down from the brooding overcast, striking directly into the foremost ranks of the Philistines! (I Samuel 7:9-10.)

As the thunder roared, an earthquake shook the ground around the Philistines and threw their whole army into disordered confusion. Scorched and blasted bodies were tossed in all directions. Those near the front ranks who witnessed the blinding slaughter cringed back in stark fear, then turned to collide with and trample the troops behind them. This set off a disrupting chain reaction that carried all the way to the soldiers in the rear ranks. What had been a confident advance was turned to swift retreat, to the awesome roar of ear-splitting thunder!

This sudden turn of events was the cue for the armed Israelite men to act. Quickly banding together, they set out in swift pursuit of the fleeing Philistines. Those who had no weapons picked up weapons that were dropped by dying or fleeing Philistines. The enemy soldiers had just gone through a long, fast march, and were easily overtaken. In their state of fatigue they were no match for the Israelites. Not very many Philistines escaped the lightning -- or the swords, spears and arrows of the pursuers. Shortly after the battle, Samuel had a large stone pillar set up at the site of the conflict, which was a few miles north of Jerusalem. It was a monument to commemorate the help God had given them that day. (I Samuel 7:11-12.)

Samuel's Foolish Sons

This was the turning point in the struggle of Israel against Philistia. The Philistines had long since captured Israelite towns from Ekron to Gath, a distance of about fifteen miles in an area not far from the coast. Israel at last took the towns back. At the same time hostilities ceased with the Arameans to the east. They dwelt in the old land of the Amorites, whom Moses destroyed. The Arameans came to be known at this time in history by the name Amorites, because they dwelt in the land of the uprooted Amorites. (Verse 14, last part)

All this was a reward from God because most of Israel had turned away from worshipping the idols of surrounding nations.

Samuel was the spiritual advisor to Israel for the rest of his long life -- about fifty years. He didn't return to Shiloh because God had forsaken the city and the tabernacle. (Psalm 78:55-64.) Shiloh was destroyed during the trouble with the Philistines, although the Bible gives no detailed account of such a great loss. (Jeremiah 7:12 and 26:6.)

Samuel chose to live at Ramah, six or seven miles north of Jerusalem. There he built an altar to be used for sacrifices to God.

Every year Samuel moved his quarters for a time to the cities of Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpeh. This made it more convenient for people to contact him for matters of spiritual judgment. (I Samuel 7:15-17.)

After many years of such activity, Samuel began to feel the strain. Gradually he delegated more and more of his duties to his two sons, Joel and Abiah. He spent most of his time at Ramah, while his sons took over a large part of his work by establishing quarters in Beer-sheba in the territory of Simeon to the south.

Although Samuel had carefully reared his sons in the right ways, and felt that they were prepared to be assistant judges because of their ample training and ability, matters didn't work out as he expected. Out from under the watchful eye of their father, the two men began to take advantage of their positions by secretly taking bribes for judging some cases unfairly. (1 Samuel 8:13.)

This corrupt practice was carried on for only a few years. While Joel and Abiah were becoming increasingly greedy and wealthy, a growing number of Israelites were unnecessarily suffering in one way or another because of injustice. Samuel had no knowledge of what was going on, or he would have acted at once to remove his sons and make amends for their unfair deeds.

One day a group of the leading men of Israel came to Ramah to talk to Samuel, who had no idea of their intention.

"We are here to protest the conduct of your sons at Beer-sheba," one elder explained. "We want no more of them. Instead of helping people, they have been harmful!"

"Sirs, I don't know what you are talking about," Samuel said in a puzzled tone. "Please explain what my sons have done."

"It would take days to tell of their wrongdoings," another elder observed. "We have found they aren't honest and just, as you are. If you were twenty or thirty years younger, we might be satisfied with you as our leader. But we need someone else -- someone who can be more than a judge to Israel. We want the kind of leader that other nations have -- a king!" (1 Sam. 8:4-5.)

"... a King?"

Samuel could scarcely believe what he had heard. This sudden demand for a change in form of government was so startling that he forgot for the time being about the accusations against his sons. He carefully scanned the faces of those before him. It wasn't difficult to tell by their serious expressions that they were quite determined.

"Please excuse me a few minutes, gentlemen," he said. "I shall return shortly."

He went at once to a private room to pray. He realized that he needed God's advice on how to answer the elders.

"What must I say to these men?" Samuel earnestly asked God. "If I say that I will have no part in helping them with their impudent request, they will surely turn against me. If I so much as think of agreeing to their demands, that would be against your will."

"Don't be too upset over this," God answered Samuel, though the Bible doesn't explain how He communicated with him. "The elders and the people they represent do indeed want a king. It isn't that they don't want you as their leader. It's because they don't want me, their Creator, to rule over them. Ever since I brought the

Israelites up from the land of Egypt, they have rejected me again and again by rejecting the men I have chosen as leaders. During the past several years most of Israel has turned back to me in some degree. Now they are again going back to the ways of the pagan nations about them. You haven't known it, but your sons have given them cause to protest. They are using this as a reason for rejecting my government and demanding a change to a manmade form of government. If they insist on a king, that's what they deserve. Tell them they can have one. At the same time warn them what they can expect if a king is to rule them." (I Samuel 8:6-9)

Samuel was most unhappy to hear about his sons' conduct and about the direction Israel was once more taking. As he had promised, he went back a little later to confront the Israelite leaders.

"I have taken your request to God," Samuel addressed them. "He isn't pleased with what you are asking, so He has decided to grant you something that in the long run won't really please you – a king!"

Feeble grins broke out on the faces of only a few of the elders. Samuel's manner of describing their so-called victory didn't seem to inspire cheerfulness in most of them.

"Now let me tell you what you can expect if a king is made the head of Israel," Samuel continued in an ominous tone. "In the first place, he will draft your young men into a great standing army. A king chooses whom he pleases for what he pleases. Many of your sons who are trained toward being master craftsmen in various pursuits will be forced into lesser careers in the bloody art of war. At the same time, many who have lesser ability will become military leaders.

"He will also take your young women to be bakers, cooks, maids, housecleaners, dishwashers and for every service for which a king and his princes and underlings have a need. Besides, he will choose your best fields, vineyards and orchards to take from you to give to those in high offices under him. He will demand a tenth of what all farmers and wage earners produce. He will take your servants and your animals if they are to his liking. Even some of you may become his lowliest servants. In time many will cry out in despair because the king has taken so much from them. In that day God will do nothing to help you because of the choice you are now making." (I Samuel 8:10-18.)

God's Warning Ignored

There was silence among the elders following Samuel's warning. Then the men began to talk in subdued voices among themselves. After a period of discussion, a spokesman approached Samuel.

"We have considered all you have told us," he said to Samuel, "but we can't believe that any king of Israel would ever do as you have pointed out. You can't convince us that we won't be better off with a leader like the ones other nations have -- one who is able to preserve order as well as successfully fight our battles."

Samuel sorrowfully surveyed the men before him. He knew that Israel would soon face her enemies, who were beginning again to make attacks at the borders. This

was one of the reasons why the elders wanted a fighting leader. There was no need for a massive fighting force for the Israelites as long as they obeyed God, but they were inclined to go their own ways and now looked to an army for protection. It is the same way in present-day Israel.

"Sirs, you will soon learn what will be done to carry out your unusual request," Samuel told the assembled leaders. "I trust you all will return safely to your various cities." (I Samuel 8:19-22.)

Shortly afterward, in the territory of Benjamin, an ordinary event took place that had a great bearing on Israel's future. There a man by the name of Kish, who owned a farm and raised fine donkeys, discovered that his mare donkeys and their colts had disappeared from his grazing fields. Fences around farms weren't common in those times except for low stone walls around some of their vineyards, gardens and fields. Livestock often roved far away, sometimes to be recovered only after searching for them a long time.

Realizing that his missing animals might be in some distant area, Kish decided to send his son Saul after them. The stock raiser was a large and powerful man, but his son was even larger. Young Saul had developed a strong physique in his years of labor on his father's farm, and towered to a height of about seven feet! Kish knew that if his son found that someone had stolen the donkeys, he wouldn't have too much trouble convincing the thief to give them back.

"Take provisions for a few days for both yourself and one of your servants," Kish told Saul. "Bring the animals back even if you have to search behind every hill in the high country of Ephraim." (I Samuel 9:1-3.)

Setting out with donkeys, Saul and the servant zig-zagged north through the territory of Benjamin and into Ephraim. There they turned back southeast to pursue a circular course through the rugged Mt. Ephraim and Benjamin area into the northern region of Judah.

God Leads Saul to Samuel

"We shouldn't waste any more time," Saul told his servant. "We have covered many miles and have been gone over two days and have accomplished nothing. By now my father is probably much more concerned about us than he is about the donkeys. We should return home at once. Later we can look for the animals in other directions."

"I have a suggestion, sir," the servant said. "We are very near the city where lives the man of God who is Israel's prophet. If we were to visit him, he might be able to tell us where the donkeys are."

"Do you mean Samuel?" Saul asked. "Should we bother the leader of most of Israel with a matter such as ours? Besides, we have nothing to bring him as a gift. Even all our food is gone."

"Perhaps we have enough money to give him," the servant suggested.

There was little need for the two men to be carrying much money with them, inasmuch as they had brought what they considered sufficient provisions. All they could come up with was a quarter shekel, which would be equal to a small sum today. But it had good value in those times. Saul decided that it would suffice as a token of respect, and they set out to try to find Samuel. (I Samuel 9:4-10.)

Just outside the city they met some young women carrying water from a well. From them they learned that Samuel lived most of the time outside of town, but that he would soon be arriving to officiate at a special sacrifice that was to take place that day.

The day before this took place, God had spoken again to Samuel, informing him that about twenty-four hours later He would send him a young Benjamite to be the new leader of Israel and a staunch captain against the Philistines.

"You won't recognize him when you see him," God explained, "but I will let you know who he is."

As Saul and his servant came into the city, they noted that other people were hurrying to the place where the special sacrifice was to be made. Among them was a well-dressed, elderly man with a friendly but dignified appearance. "Sir, could you tell me where I can find Samuel, the chief of Israel?" Saul asked the elderly one.

Samuel turned to look. When he saw the young giant striding along behind him, he stopped and regarded him with unusual interest, wondering if he could be the one God revealed he was to meet. At the same instant he heard a voice. "This is the one who will soon reign over my people," the voice spoke. "Anoint him captain of Israel as soon as you have the opportunity to be alone with him!" (I Samuel 9:11-17.)

Chapter 81

A King is Chosen!

WHEN SAMUEL saw Saul for the first time, God informed Samuel that this was the powerful young Benjamite who would become the leader of Israel. Saul didn't know who Samuel was, though God had caused him to walk up to Samuel and inquire where the chief of Israel could be found. (I Samuel 9:10-18.)

Samuel Finds His Man

"I am Samuel," the older man answered. "Is there some way I may help you?"

Saul and his servant were startled by the words. They hadn't expected to meet Samuel among the people who were walking to the spot where a special sacrifice would be made.

"Yes -- there is, sir," Saul explained hesitantly, "but probably you won't consider it a very important matter. My father owns a farm northwest of here. A few days ago he discovered that several of his donkeys were missing. This man and I have been looking for them over a large area. We have come to you to ask if you know where they are, or if God might tell you where they are."

Much as Saul had been startled and surprised when he realized that he had run into Samuel, he was even more startled and surprised by Samuel's next remark.

"God has already helped locate your father's donkeys. I shall tell you about that later. There is a matter of much greater importance that you should be concerned about now. I am aware that you are Saul, the son of Kish, and I happen to know that you have been chosen for a very high office in Israel."

Saul didn't know exactly what to say, and that was because he didn't understand what Samuel was talking about. "I don't know what you mean, sir," the young Benjamite said in an uncomfortable tone. "I am of the smallest tribe of Israel, the tribe that has suffered great disgrace. And," he added modestly, "my family is the least important in the tribe of Benjamin. Why should I be chosen for anything?"

"I shall explain all this at another time," Samuel replied. "Go now before me to where the sacrifice is being made. I'll speak more with you after the sacrificial ceremonies are over."

Samuel then seated Saul and his servant as dinner guests with about thirty other people. These probably included certain leaders of Israel and some of the learned men who were instructors in a nearby college Samuel had established for training chosen men for careers in teaching the laws of God to the people.

Saul was greatly impressed by being in the company of such men. He was honored almost to the point of embarrassment when Samuel requested that a special portion of meat be set before Saul. This was the shoulder. The shoulder, the choice part of

an offering, told those present that Saul was a very special guest. (I Samuel 9:19-24.)

That night Saul and his servant were guests at the house occupied by Samuel. Before bedtime Samuel took Saul up on the roof, which was a flat area where the dwellers of the house went for privacy. There the elderly judge explained to Saul that God had picked him to be the head of Israel, and briefly told him what would be expected of him. Saul could scarcely believe that such honor and responsibility would soon be his. He felt that he wasn't prepared for such a position, but Samuel persuaded him that inasmuch as God had chosen him, He would surely give him divine help.

Saul Anointed King!

After a night's rest, Samuel told Saul that he should return to his home for a time, and that he would like to walk along with him and his servant on their way out of town. As soon as they arrived in a secluded area, Samuel asked Saul to send his servant on ahead. (I Samuel 9:25-27.)

When the two of them were alone, Samuel followed God's instructions by pouring a small container of olive oil over Saul's head.

"I anoint you for consecration to the rank of captain of Israel!" Samuel exclaimed. "This is the office God has already decreed for you."

The elderly judge congratulated Saul by kissing him on the cheek, which in those times meant about the same as our present-day handshake.

"I shall leave you here," Samuel told Saul. "Don't be concerned about your father's donkeys. They have been found. Let me tell you what will happen to you on your way back, so that you will know for certain that God is speaking through me concerning you.

"A little way north of here, at the place where Jacob buried Rachel, his wife, two men will appear and inform you that your father's donkeys have been found, and that he is worried because you have been gone so long. After you leave them, you will walk out on a plain where there is a large oak tree. There you will meet three men who will be going northward to offer sacrifices at Bethel. One will be carrying three young goats. One will be carrying three loaves of bread. The other will be carrying a bottle of wine. They will speak to you and insist on giving two loaves of their bread to you." (I Samuel 10:1-4.)

"Later, you will come to the hill of God -- Mount Moriah, at Jerusalem -- where the Philistines have built a garrison. As you approach the nearby city, you will see a group of men carrying musical instruments. They will be from one of my colleges for training ministers. They shall speak and sing of things that have to do with God. You will join them, and God will guide you in what to say before them. You will begin to feel like another man with other interests. When you experience all these things I have mentioned, you will realize that God is beginning to work through you.

"After you have rested at your home, go down to Gilgal. Stay there for a week. I shall join you there to tell you what next to do." (I Samuel 10:5-8.)

As Saul moved northward with his servant companion, his head was swimming with the startling events of the past hours. It was like a fantastic dream. But as he thought about these things, he realized that if God could inspire Samuel to forecast the details of their return trip home, there was no reason to doubt that God could work through anyone He chose, and that the Creator owed no explanation to those whom He chose to work through as to why He picked them. Somehow Saul felt that he suddenly had a different outlook on many things.

Samuel's Prophecies Fulfilled

He wasn't completely convinced, however, that matters were going to turn out just as Samuel had predicted. Soon, however, as they traveled, his servant reminded him that they were passing close to Rachel's tomb, and pointed to the rocky area off to the left that had been a landmark of the Israelites for centuries. Saul remembered what Samuel had told him about two men meeting him at this place, but he didn't see anyone around except a few laborers in a distant field. As he walked on past the tomb site he began to think that Samuel hadn't been exactly accurate in his predictions.

Suddenly Saul was aware that two of the field laborers had left their work and were hurrying toward the road. They were waving and shouting to attract his attention. Saul stopped to see what they wanted.

"We've been watching for you to come by this way!" one of the men panted. "We have news for you!"

"Your father's donkeys have been found, and have been returned to his farm," the other said. "Your father is very concerned about you, and hopes that you will return very soon."

Saul was pleasantly startled to find these strangers carrying out a part of Samuel's prediction. At the same time he experienced a surprising feeling when he realized that the God of Israel had arranged this matter just because of him. He heartily thanked the two men for their information and continued northward into a prairie area. After a while he and his servant arrived at an unusually large oak tree. They sat down there to rest in the shade.

"I was told that we would meet three men at an oak tree on our way home," Saul mentioned to his servant. "There is no one in sight. Perhaps this isn't the right tree."

At almost that moment three men appeared over a nearby rise. As they approached, Saul could see that one was carrying three young goats. Another had a leather bottle hanging over his shoulder. The third had a flat package tucked under his arm. (I Samuel 10:9.)

"Hello, there!" one of them called out. The other two gave friendly nods.

"A good day to you, sirs," Saul answered. "Are you by any chance going up to Bethel?"

"We are indeed," one of them replied in a puzzled tone. "How could you guess that?"

"I noted the young goats and the wineskin," Saul answered, "and I supposed they were for sacrificing on the altar at Bethel."

"Perhaps you are as hungry as you are observing," the man with the package remarked. "We have three loaves of bread here, and we have just eaten. All we need is one for the offering. We would like to give you the other two loaves."

"Thank you," Saul said, "but we really don't need them. We are close to the end of our trip."

"A man of your size requires an unusual amount of nourishment," the fellow countered. "Please take these two loaves."

"All right," Saul smilingly agreed, remembering Samuel's words about accepting the bread. "Thank you for being so considerate of us."

Finally Convinced

As the two men moved on with their beasts, Saul marveled at how Samuel's predictions had come true to that time. He wondered if any or all of the beings they had met up to that time could have been angels instead of men.

When they arrived at the hill where a Philistine fortress was situated -- at present-day Jerusalem -- Saul anxiously looked for the group of men about which Samuel had spoken. He expected to see the men as soon as he arrived. His disappointment mounted as the minutes went by. Just when he had begun to conclude that Samuel had done well, after all, in correctly predicting two out of three situations, he spotted several men walking together and carrying musical instruments. He moved eagerly toward them, and hesitantly joined them when they began playing, singing and speaking.

These students and instructors from one of the colleges Samuel had instituted were impressed by Saul's willingness and desire to join them so that he might learn more of the history of Israel and what God required of obedient Israelites. Meanwhile, several people passed by who knew Saul, all of whom wondered what this young man was doing in the company of such a religious group. (I Samuel 10:10-13.)

When Saul finally arrived home, he was warmly greeted by his family. He didn't at first mention to any of his relatives his exciting experience with Samuel. Finally an inquisitive uncle began to question him.

"Just where have you been these past few days?" the uncle inquired.

"Why do you ask?" Saul cheerfully queried. "You know that we were trying to find my father's lost donkeys."

"I know that you set out to try to find them," the uncle persisted. "But where did you go and what did you do?"

"We went north to Mt. Ephraim and then southward into southern Benjamin," Saul replied. "On our way back we went to the leader of Israel, Samuel, to ask him if he could tell us where the donkeys were. He told me that the animals had already been found. We returned home to find them here."

"That Samuel is an amazing man," the uncle observed, wagging his head thoughtfully.

Saul could have told his uncle about Samuel's feast and other matters, but he didn't wish to invite questions that might lead to the disclosure of Saul's being chosen as the future leader of Israel. (I Samuel 10:14-16.)

Shortly after Saul's return home, Samuel sent out a decree that the Israelites should come to Mizpeh on a certain day to witness the election of their future king. Of course Samuel already knew that Saul would be king, but God had told him that at least the heads of families should be present when the person who would rule them should be chosen.

Because this was something they had long desired, the people turned out in huge numbers. The mood of most of them was most festive, but Samuel sobered many of them by what he had to say.

God Guides the Selection

"Before we get to the business of choosing a king," Samuel addressed the crowd, "I want to pass on to you some things that God has spoken to me. He wants me to remind you that although He brought your ancestors out of Egypt and saved them and you from many enemies, you rejected Him as your ruler when you asked for a man to rule over you. God's way is to lead and instruct you through men who have a special knowledge of God's laws and ways -- men who are dedicated to serving God and the welfare of the people through God's great mercy and wisdom. But now you want a king, the kind of leader pagan nations look up to, God will give you a king, and He has told you what to expect if that kind of leader becomes too ambitious or lets his power go to his head. Now let us get on with the election, and may God guide the one who will be chosen!" (I Samuel 10:17-19.)

Inasmuch as this matter was to be determined by the drawing of lots, the leaders of the tribes of Israel were asked by Samuel to participate in the drawing. Marked tabs were put into a container. One was taken out at random, and handed to Samuel. There was silence as the people waited, each person hoping that his tribe would be chosen.

"Benjamin has been chosen!" Samuel announced. "Your king will come from that tribe!"

There was a cheer from the Benjamites, but after it ceased there was a murmur from the rest of the people. They couldn't forget the bloody civil war that had been triggered by the evil actions of a few wanton Benjamites.

The next choice to be made was that of a family or clan from the tribe that had just been picked. There was a tab for every family. One was taken out and handed to Samuel.

"The Benjamite family of Matri has been chosen!" Samuel told the people.

A cheer went up from those of that family who were present. Tabs were then prepared for all eligible men in the family of Matri. One tab was taken from the container and given to Samuel.

"From the tribe of Benjamin, of the family of Matri, a son of Kish has been chosen as the man to be your king!" Samuel declared. "His name is Saul!" (1 Samuel 10:20-21.)

Although most of the Israelites didn't know Saul, a great sound thundered up from the crowd.

"Show us this man!" the people roared.

Samuel sent men to bring Saul. They returned a few minutes later, while the crowd still yelled, to report that Saul was nowhere to be found!

Chapter 82

King Saul to the Rescue!

A DRAWING of lots before a large throng of people at Mizpeh disclosed that Saul, a Benjamite, was to become the first king of Israel. The people loudly demanded to see the man, but he couldn't be found. (I Samuel 10:17-21.)

A Bashful King

The continued boisterous demands of the crowd became wearying to Samuel. He realized that the people wouldn't be satisfied until Saul appeared. Samuel was certain that Saul couldn't be very far away because he had seen him earlier in the day. Searching had been futile. The only thing left to do was to take the matter to God, who had just performed a miracle for Israel by causing certain lots to be drawn.

"We humbly ask you to make known to us where Saul is," Samuel asked God.

"He is hiding in the mass of carts and camping gear brought in by the people who arrived this morning," a voice said to Samuel.

The elderly prophet immediately advised his aides where to look. Shortly afterward they returned with Saul, who was greatly embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to Samuel. "The thought of appearing before such a large crowd was too much for me."

"Buck up!" Samuel smiled. "You'll be all right. Pull yourself up to your full height and walk with me out before the people."

It was difficult for the young Benjamite to go before such a throng as though he were something on display, but he obediently accompanied Samuel to the elevated place where the lots had been cast.

"This is Saul, the man who will be your king!" Samuel called out to the people as he took the younger man by the arm and gently pushed him forward. (I Samuel 10:22-23.)

A mighty cheer welled up from the crowd at sight of the large, tall, athletic and handsome man. The cheering continued for so long that Samuel finally held up his hands for silence, but the noise of the crowd didn't die down right away.

"Your God has chosen this man for you!" Samuel called out to the people. "You see for yourselves that there is none quite like him in all of Israel!"

Another long cheer came from the crowd. Gradually it turned into a disorganized chant, finally developing into a definite statement.

"Long live the king!" the people shouted over and over. This expression of affection for royalty has lasted to this day.

After Saul had walked out of view, the voices gradually ceased. Samuel then outlined to the people the changes that would be required because of a different kind of government soon to go into effect.

"Return to your homes, and may God be with you," was the last thing Samuel said to the assembled Israelites. (I Samuel 10:24-25.)

A King without a Kingdom

Carefully eluding the people, Saul set out for his home in Gibeah to continue working on his father's farm. This was according to Samuel's suggestion. The older man knew that it was up to God to create a situation that would lead to Saul's coming into active leadership of Israel.

Saul didn't go home by himself, though possibly he would have preferred to do so because of his retiring nature. Whether or not he liked it, he was accompanied by a number of trusted men whose business it was to make certain that he arrived safely at his father's farm -- and thereafter to serve as his royal attendants.

For days after his returning home, many people came to bring him gifts and wish him well. At the same time there were some who came to jeer at him and taunt him with insulting remarks. Large and strong as he was, Saul could have given these hoodlums some painful moments. But he realized that a king should never brawl nor lay hands on his taunters. Nor should anyone who lives by God's laws, for that matter. Saul controlled himself to the point that he didn't even act as though he heard them. (I Samuel 10:26-27.) However, because Saul did not receive the complete support of the people, he was unable to set up a royal organization. Saul waited patiently until circumstances should work toward his being more widely accepted.

Shortly after lots had been drawn to determine the man who should become Israel's first king, an Ammonite army appeared in the area of Jabesh-gilead, a city just east of the Jordan River in the territory of Gad.

The inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead were fearful when they saw such a fighting force approaching, but they were filled with panic when the Ammonite army marched up and completely surrounded their city. The people weren't equipped to fight off armed besiegers. This could mean being bottled up until food ran out, if the enemy chose to stay that long. If the Ammonites chose to attack, defeat would be only that much sooner.

All they could do would be to throw themselves on the Ammonites' mercy -- if any. And the Ammonites were known as a very cruel people.

The leaders of Jabesh-gilead made their decision, and fearfully went to confer with their besiegers.

Nahash, the Ammonite king, was a harsh, arrogant man who was intent on driving Israel out from the territory east of the Jordan River. He was aware that Israel under Jephthah's leadership had crushed his nation's army nearly forty years previously. And he felt that it was time the score was more than evened.

"For Israelites, you show considerable courage," Nahash observed sarcastically as he stared at the leaders of Jabesh-gilead. "Surely you are aware that the people of your city are alive only because I prefer to take my time in destroying them!"

"We realize that," the Gadites replied uneasily. "But by fighting to the end, we could make your siege costly. We're here to tell you that we are willing to become your servants if you will agree to spare us."

Nahash gazed at them in disbelief. Then he broke out into a roar of hoarse laughter. When he finished laughing, his expression abruptly changed again.

Cruel Peace Terms

"My only agreement with you," he spat at the Gadites, "is that I will scoop out the right eyeball of every man in Jabesh-gilead! That would prevent you from ever taking up arms against me and should give the rest of Israel something to think about!" (I Samuel 11:1-2.)

The Gadites were startled at this cruel declaration, but they made one more attempt at trying to save their city.

"Please give us seven more days of freedom," they humbly asked the glaring Nahash.

"Now why should I spare your city for seven more days?" the Ammonite leader slowly asked in mock concern.

"So that we may send messengers to other Israelite tribes to bring us help," they explained. "If no one comes to rescue us within a week, then do as you will with us."

Nahash glanced around wide-eyed at his officers.

"Have you ever heard anything like this?" he asked. "We have come many miles over a hot desert to conquer these people, and they have the gall to suggest that we postpone the conquering until they can scrape together an army to try to fight us off!."

"You fear that an Israelite army will come if we send the messengers?" the Gadites bravely asked, knowing that such a question might be their last. For a moment it seemed that Nahash would become very angry. It was evident that he was making an effort to control himself. Then a bitter grin crept over his swarthy face.

"You wouldn't believe me if I were to tell you that I don't fear any part or all of Israel," he muttered slowly as he leaned forward and shook his finger at the Gadites. "Just to prove my contempt for your nation, I'm going to give you those seven days you've

asked for! You have my permission to alert all your tribes. If they send an army here, then that will spare me the trouble of going over the Jordan to destroy it! Now go!" (I Samuel 11:3.)

As soon as the Gadites had disappeared from view, Nahash's officers began to express their concern because of what could result from their king's rash promise.

"We'll see to it that those messengers never get far from Jabesh-gilead, sir," they told Nahash.

"Why bother?" the king grinned. "We know that Israel doesn't have a standing army. It would be impossible to form one and move it here within a week. After we've taken Jabesh-gilead, we'll clear the Israelites out of the land east of the Jordan. Then we'll give some attention to those on the other side of the river."

So saying, Nahash settled back to enjoy a glass of wine. His officers withdrew, their exchanged glances making it plain that they didn't completely share their leader's confidence.

Not long afterward messengers arrived in various parts of Canaan with the startling news that the Ammonites were besieging Jabesh-gilead, and would move into western Canaan unless an army could be sent at once to stop them.

The messengers were not sent directly to new king Saul for help. Although they had accepted Saul as their king, most Israelites knew he was just a farmer with no military background. They had little confidence in his ability to save them. Saul had not yet proved himself to them.

King Saul Acts

As in other parts of Canaan, the people of Gibeah, Saul's home town, fell into a state of fear when they heard the news. Some were so terrified at what they imagined would happen that they went around shrieking and moaning.

Saul knew nothing of all this until after a messenger had arrived in Gibeah. He was driving a herd of cattle in from a grazing area when one of his men met him to tell him what had happened. (I Samuel 11:4-5.)

These events having to do with the Ammonites triggered Saul into action as the king of Israel. He knew he had an immediate responsibility to the people of Jabesh-gilead. He was so moved by the threat of one of Israel's ancient enemies that he decided to whip up a fighting force immediately. As a means of getting fast action, he sent pieces of freshly butchered work bulls to the leaders of the tribes of Israel. The messengers who brought the pieces explained to the leaders that it was a reminder from Saul and Samuel that their bulls, too, would be slashed up in like pieces -- unless the leaders immediately sent armed men to help rescue the people of Jabesh-gilead.

This edict was promptly obeyed by the leaders, who feared what God might do to them if they failed to deliver the men. Within hours thousands of able men were swarming into Bezek, a town west of the Jordan River not far from Jabesh-gilead.

Meanwhile, the men who had come from Jabesh-gilead returned to their city with news that help would be there by about mid-morning of the next day. The leaders were so happy to hear that rescue was on the way that they decided to talk to Nahash again.

"We have decided to surrender to you," the Gadites told the Ammonite king. "By tomorrow our people will come out to you. We hope that you will spare our city, if not us."

"A very touching performance," Nahash grinned, nodding knowingly. "Why speak of surrender when you have no choice? I've given you your chance, but don't think that your people will get away with keeping any valuable possessions. Everything they bring out with them will be examined by my men. Now enjoy your last few hours with the sight of both eyes. By tomorrow night every man of you will have only one good eye!"

Back in Bezek, Saul was pleased at the count of Israelites who had rallied in defense of Jabesh-gilead and the nation of Israel. Close to a third of a million men showed up. Most of them were untrained, but all were armed and ready to fight. (1 Samuel 11:6-10.)

Although Saul had never commanded an army, he was inspired in what to do. He lost no time in getting the men by night across the Jordan River. There he divided them into three parts. Each division was commanded by a man who had military experience. One was sent south of Jabesh-gilead to wait until dawn. Another was dispatched to a point out of sight north of the city to wait until the same time. The third stayed on the west side toward the river.

By dawn next day, Nahash was getting anxious for the people of Jabesh-gilead to come out of the city.

The Surprise of His Life!

"I'll give them just a little while longer," he grumbled to his officers. "Then if they're not out, pull up your equipment and batter the gates in!"

At that moment an excited lookout raced up to Nahash's tent.

"Many men are approaching on foot from the west!" he panted.

The Ammonite king lunged to his feet and strode outside with his officers. When he saw the dark line of humanity spreading across the plain, in the early dawn light, his anger was greater than his surprise.

"Those Gadites are trying to trick me!" he snapped. "Form all the men in their fighting ranks except enough to guard the gates of the city! We'll settle with those Gadites as soon as we wipe out our attackers!"

Ammonite officers began barking orders. The circle of Ammonite soldiers melted away from around Jabesh-gilead. While men were moving swiftly and noisily about, another excited lookout was desperately trying to make himself heard.

"An army is coming from the north!" he kept yelling.

An officer finally heard him, and rushed the report to Nahash. At first the Ammonite leader wouldn't believe it, but when the oncoming men were pointed out to him, his angry mood started to turn to one of concern. He shouted orders to his officers to change battle tactics. Officers yelled new orders to their men, who began to become confused. Then someone noticed that both attacking bodies of men had ceased moving. The Ammonites were puzzled, but all they could do was stand and wait or flee.

"Hah!!! Perhaps they're losing their nerve, now that they see how many there are of us," Nahash remarked as he stared intently at one group and then at the other.

There was an excited shout from several Ammonite soldiers who were pointing southward. Nahash looked to see a third army coming into view over the low hills! Glancing to the north and to the west, he saw that the other two divisions were approaching again. It was plain to him then that the first two divisions had halted to await the arrival of the third so that all three could attack at once!

For a moment Nahash was tempted to give the command to retreat to the east. Many of his soldiers, including himself, were mounted and could easily have escaped. But he knew that he would have to account to his people for leaving his foot soldiers behind to be slain. The only thing to do was to spread out and meet the oncoming human vise.

Minutes later arose the harsh shouts of men rushing together in the deadly contact of battle! (I Samuel 11:11.)

Chapter 83

Indecision, Idolatry, Chaos!

THREE LARGE Israelite divisions closed in on his army from three different directions. But the cruel, haughty and boastful king of the Ammonites stood up to the attack. He hated the Israelites too much to do otherwise. (1 Samuel 11:1-10.)

The Invader Routed

The Ammonites had always prided themselves on their fighting ability. On clashing with their ancient enemy, they fought desperately, but it wasn't God's will that they should succeed. God determines the outcome of wars. For hours they battled to free themselves from the closing ring of Israelites, and for hours they fell before the fiercely wielded weapons of Israel.

By the middle of the day the Ammonites were defeated and scattered. Not even two of them remained together to fight. Here and there could be seen a man fleeing toward the east, but the Israelites overtook and slew these fugitives. (1 Samuel 11:11.)

Nahash, who had bragged that he would remove the right eyes of the men of Jabesh-gilead, hoped to seek out a leader of the Israelites so that he might slay one of high rank. The opportunity didn't arrive. The Ammonite king went down in a pool of blood early in the battle.

Leaving thousands of dead Ammonites scattered over a vast expanse of the plain, Saul regrouped his army for instruction.

"With God's help you have been victorious," he told them. "The people of Jabesh-gilead have asked me to thank you for helping save them and their city. Return to your homes if you wish. Those of you who would like to accompany me back across the Jordan River are welcome to do so."

Samuel came out to meet Saul after the new king had crossed over to the west side of the river. With him were many people who wished to join the elderly prophet in congratulating Saul. Now, at last, there was great and growing enthusiasm for the new leader. But trouble started to develop when a part of the crowd began to loudly demand that something be done about the men who had insulted Saul at his home near Gibeah, and who had refused to recognize him as their leader.

"Find all those who treated Saul with contempt and disrespect!" was the cry that came up from many throats. "Bring them here and let us kill them before our brave new king!"

When Saul heard this, he hastily strode out before the crowd. He realized that public opinion was beginning to run strongly in his favor because he had become a sort of hero overnight, but he didn't want anyone punished because of disclaiming him as Israel's leader.

"I appreciate your loyalty!" Saul called out to the crowd, "but no one is to be slain just because he doesn't approve of me! Your strong feelings of revenge aren't right! They should be drowned in a warm glow of thankfulness to God for sparing our lives and giving us victory over the Ammonites!" (I Samuel 11:12-13.)

The throng was silent. Those who had made the demand for a death penalty to Saul's dislikers were either angered or embarrassed. But no one spoke out in defiance of their leader's rebuke. Finally someone started to cheer, and most of the people joined in a loud ovation.

After the shouting ceased, Samuel appeared before the people to ask them to congregate soon at Gilgal, about forty-five miles southward. There all of Israel was invited for public ceremonies having to do with Saul.

Samuel Warns Against Idolatry

Later, at Gilgal, a growing crowd applauded King Saul for leading the army of Israel to overcome the Ammonites. Although he had already anointed Saul privately as the new leader of the nation, Samuel went through the rite once more to confirm it for the benefit of the people. (I Samuel 11:14-15.)

After hours of celebration, offerings and sacrifices, when the festive mood of the crowd was beginning to subside, Samuel went out to speak to the people.

"Over the years I have listened to your requests," Samuel told them. "One of them was for a human king and a change of government. I took the matter to God, and now your young king is standing in your sight. I have been of service to you and to God ever since my childhood. I have executed His decisions. Now tell me, have God or I been unfair? Can anyone say that I have taken a bribe? If anyone can prove it, I am ready to pay it back here and now. If any of you has a fault to find with me, step up here and let me know about it."

Nobody came forward and nobody spoke up. "Am I to assume that your silence means that God is a witness that you have found no fault with me as God's servant?" Samuel asked of the crowd.

"God is our witness that you have been honest," many voices chorused. (I Samuel 12:1-5.)

"Then take heed to what I'm saying now," Samuel continued. "You have seen down through our history how God supplied men of great ability when Israel was in trouble. Israel cried out for help in Egypt, and Moses and Aaron were raised up to help lead our ancestors here. When the people turned to idolatry, God sent the armies of the kings of Hazor, Philistia and Moab. The Israelites cried to God when the pagan armies attacked, tearfully confessing that they had sinned by worshipping Baal and Astaroth [Astaroth is the Hebrew word for the Anglo-Saxon goddess Easter].

"God then sent men such as Jerubbaal [Gideon], Bedan, Jephthah and Samuel to help rescue Israel time after time. Lately there has been more trouble because of breaking God's laws. But even when it was reported that the king of Ammon was

planning to attack you, you desired to have a human king, such as Nahash was, to ride before your army. I reminded you that God is your King, but you insisted that your king be a man. God has given you your desire in the man who was confirmed just a few hours ago. (I Samuel 12:6-13.)

"Now I am solemnly warning you that you must obey God if you want Him to protect you and your king. If you refuse to live by your Creator's ways, then you will lose His protection and blessing. You and your king will come into a time of misery and want. Your enemies will come to conquer you as they did your ancestors!"

Hardheaded Doubters!

Most of the people were impressed and sobered by this warning, but even from where he stood, Samuel could make out the slightly sneering expressions of not a few who believed that there was nothing to fear from God under any circumstances. Many still insisted in their hearts on learning the hard way. They were the kind who refuse to take correction until forced to admit they have been wrong!

"I perceive that there are some among us who don't think of our Creator as a real and mighty force," Samuel went on. "Perhaps a great miracle would give them a better understanding. Look at the sky! This is the wheat harvest season when it is clear and cloudless. Look in the sky. Does anyone think that a thunderstorm will occur this afternoon?"

"Of course not!" some hardheaded character shouted. "It hardly ever rains this time of year!"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"Ordinarily we might not expect any rain," Samuel concurred. "But I am going to ask God to send a sudden thunderstorm! You'll see God's power. It will also be a sign that those who asked for a king over Israel have sinned in doing so, even though God has allowed that king!"

Most of the people looked a little uneasy. Some of them grinned. A few laughed sarcastically. Samuel fell to his knees and stretched his arms upward. (I Samuel 12:14-17.)

"Great God our Creator, I call on you to show your people that you are aware of all that goes on with them, even to their very thoughts," Samuel prayed. "Make their wicked ways known to them, that they may repent and follow your ways. Show them your miraculous power by causing a deluge of rain to fall this very afternoon!"

Most eyes turned upward to the clear, blue spring sky. Samuel didn't join the crowd in scanning the heavens. He disappeared into a nearby tent for a time. Those who believed him didn't know just what to expect. A few of those who didn't believe him began to make fun of the situation.

"How can we have rain without clouds?" someone yelled.

"That's the part the prophet forgot!" someone else shouted. "Somebody go get a cloud and shove it up in the air."

"Help! I'm drowning, Samuel!"

"I brought a washcloth! Now bring on the rain so I can have a bath!"

"This rain is so dry that it's chapping my skin!"

"That's the sort of thunder I like -- the kind that can't be heard!"

While these distasteful remarks were spouting up from here and there in the throng, the greater number of Israelites could only wait in uncomfortable suspense. Then came shouts from some of these, but not because they were trying to be funny. They were shouting because a small, wispy cloud had resolved out of the blue. It grew so swiftly that within minutes it was a heavy, spreading mass of vapor.

What a Miracle!

The foolish remarks ceased. All eyes were glued to the dark, turbulent, threatening sky. The sun was blotted out. A heavy shadow hung over the assemblage. The next instant the area was brilliant with a bolt of lightning stabbing down from the clouds, followed by a booming clap of thunder.

The lightning stabbed down with increasing intensity. The whole region was soon crackling and hissing with flashes of electricity. Thunder became a constant earth-shaking roar.

Then came the rain, streaming down in such a massive torrent that men shouted, women screamed and children screeched with fear. The ones who had made fun of Samuel, afraid that they would be struck by lightning, were among the first to run and yell for help. (I Samuel 12:18.)

"Come out of your tent, Samuel!" they loudly begged. "Ask God to stop this storm before we are killed!"

"Pray for us, Samuel!" others shouted. "We realize that we were wrong in asking for a king!"

When Samuel heard people repenting because of demanding a change in leadership, he came out of his tent and into the heavy down pour to implore God to stop the storm. There was a sudden decrease in the lightning and rain -- almost as if suddenly turned off. The clouds dissolved, leaving clear, blue sky again. Warm breezes soon dried soaked clothing, but many people were so frightened that they continued shivering. Everyone knew God had dealt with them for their sin. There were no doubters now.

"You have nothing to fear now," Samuel called out to the crowd, "as long as you obey God and let nothing turn you aside from serving Him at all times. Then He will never forsake you, for you are the people He has chosen for a mighty purpose.

You should be thankful for that, and for all that God has done for you. I shall continue to pray for you and to show you the right way. And once more I make this warning: **DON'T TURN AWAY FROM GOD, OR YOU AND YOUR KING WILL BE DESTROYED!**" (I Samuel 12:19-25.)

With that, Samuel dismissed the people. They left with good intentions, but what happened later proved that the elderly prophet's warnings weren't as effective as he hoped and prayed they would be.

Saul, meanwhile, was shy about using his authority as king. He let the people do as they pleased. Soon they were again turning to paganism.

After several years of Israelite lawlessness, God again allowed the Philistines to take over part of Israel. It happened so quickly that Saul didn't know about it until after it took place. He wasn't aware until then of the need of a communication system that would give him knowledge of what went on all over the nation, and that he should use his authority to do something about the nation's protection. He was beginning to learn the responsibilities of a king.

But when Saul saw the Philistines overrun his Israelite brethren whom he loved, he finally realized he must take action. After having been king about twenty years, Saul began to mobilize a small army for action.

King Saul Challenges the Philistines

By this time Saul was in the beginning of his second twenty years of reign as king of Israel. Conditions now were really bad. The Philistines from the west, who had overpowered the Israelites, had become increasingly demanding masters of a great part of Israel.

One way in which the Philistines controlled the Israelites was to forbid them possession of files or devices for sharpening metal cutting edges, which meant that it was almost impossible for the Israelites to make knives or swords for equipping an army. The Philistines saw to it that no blacksmiths should remain among the Israelites. When the Israelite farmers and carpenters needed their tools sharpened, they had to go to the Philistines. (I Samuel 13:19-21.)

Saul continued to rule Israel from Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. This must have been somewhat awkward, what with Philistine garrisons located only miles distant. One garrison was only two or three miles to the north at a place called Geba.

Saul's fighting force consisted of only about three thousand men, few of whom carried swords or knives because of the Philistines' restrictions. Their only weapons were a few bows and arrows, slings and farm implements. Saul kept two thousand of the troops as a bodyguard. The other thousand soldiers were used to protect his young son, Jonathan, who had been trained as a soldier. (I Samuel 13:2.) Saul possessed a sword and armor, as also did Jonathan. (I Samuel 13:22.)

Although he didn't have his father's permission, Jonathan one day led his thousand soldiers toward the small garrison at Geba. It was situated on a hill. More of a

lookout or outpost than a fort, it had relatively few Philistines stationed there. Their prime purpose was to keep their eyes on the area to the north of Gibeah.

Moving at night and carefully concealing themselves among the rocks as they approached, Jonathan and his men managed to completely surround the hill. Silently and slowly they crept up to close in on the fortification. A ladder was quietly placed against the wall, and men stealthily filed up and over the top. Most of Jonathan's troops had no part in scaling the wall, nor was it necessary. The handful of Philistines was completely surprised and overcome. It wasn't much of a victory, but it meant much to Jonathan to overcome even a few of his nation's oppressors and to capture some precious swords, spears and knives.

This capture of the lookout at Geba had a far-reaching effect, however. The news spread swiftly throughout Israel. Each time it was related, the matter gained in scope and meaning. By the time it reached the commanders of the Philistines, the reports were that Saul had stormed and captured a major Philistine garrison, and that Israel was now completely armed and ready for war.

Realizing that the enemy would do something quite forceful about these reports, Saul had no choice but to summon able men to battle by the blowing of trumpets and by fire signals the Israelites understood. Men were to assemble as soon as possible at Gilgal for quick organization into fighting units, though without swords they would be ill-equipped. (I Samuel 13:3-4.)

Israel's able men answered the call, but two or three days later they lost all desire to fight. That was when it was reported that thousands upon thousands of enemy foot soldiers, horsemen and chariots were moving eastward only a few miles from Gibeah! (I Samuel 13:5.)

Chapter 84

Without an Army

WHEN Jonathan overran a Philistine garrison, King Saul called for men to come to Gilgal to get ready for war with the Philistines. Thousands of Israelites obeyed the summons. (I Samuel 13:1- 4) But when they learned that a huge fighting force of enemy foot soldiers, horsemen and charioteers was approaching from the west, panic overcame them.

Saul Disobeys God

A great part of the would-be troops fled out of Gilgal to hide in groves, bushes, pits, gullies, on hilltops and anywhere they thought they could conceal themselves from the enemy. Some scattered across the Jordan River into the territory of Gad.

A small part of the Israelite men mustered enough courage to stay with Saul in Gilgal, but the king was discouraged at such a display of cowardice by so many. (I Samuel 13:5-7.) He had already sent a message to Samuel for help, and again he was discouraged to receive word from Samuel that he would arrive from Ramah a few days later. Saul was supposed to wait in Gilgal a week after sending for Samuel during any time of trouble. (I Samuel 10:8.)

What with the enemy approaching, a week was a long time to Saul. He had almost decided that all was lost when he received a report that the Philistines had stopped their advance to set up a camp at Michmash, a few miles north of Gibeah. (I Samuel 13:5.) This was only about fifteen or twenty miles from Gilgal. This meant that the Philistines were only a day or two away if they should move on. Lookouts and messengers were stationed to let Saul know immediately what the enemy would do next.

Six days of painful suspense dragged by. The Philistines continued at Michmash. Saul knew that they knew he was in Gilgal, and that they probably were aware that he wasn't prepared to confront them. He spent most of his time wondering why they didn't attack. When the seventh day dawned since Saul had sent his request to Samuel, Saul was becoming more worried every hour. By late afternoon he was so worried that he decided to wait no longer for the elderly prophet and his advice in prayers and offerings. Saul decided that he would personally make burnt offerings and peace offerings so that God might be moved to step in and somehow save Israel. (I Samuel 13:8-9.) He should have been patient. The seventh day was not yet over.

Just as he finished making a burnt offering, it was reported that Samuel was riding into Gilgal. Saul stopped what he was doing and hurried to meet him.

"I have been told that you are making offerings to God," Samuel said to Saul. "I hope that the report isn't true."

"Why -- yes, it is," Saul replied hesitantly.

"But why?" inquired Samuel. "You know that it isn't for the king to direct spiritual matters. That is a responsibility of God's ministers."

"I did it because I hoped God would be pleased and not allow the Philistines to come on us," Saul replied. "I did it against my better judgment, since you didn't show up to advise me. My army is scattered and the Philistines are ready to attack. I was fearful of waiting any longer."

"You have been most unwise in your conduct!" Samuel bluntly told the king. "I did show up in time. The seventh day is not yet over and the Philistines have not yet attacked. If you had obeyed God, He would have established your family as perpetual kings."

"But you have overstepped your authority, which does have definite limits. God has made it known to me that your days are numbered as the king of Israel!"

A Bewildered King

Saul's self-willed expression faded. He knew that the elderly prophet always spoke the truth, and he was shaken by his words.

"Are you saying that Israel will fall merely because of me?" Saul asked anxiously.

"Israel will survive for a time in spite of you!" Samuel replied. "God will produce another man to become king who is more inclined to be obedient to Him." (I Samuel 13:10-14.)

Leaving Saul in a thoughtful state, Samuel left for Gibeah. Saul was confused, bewildered. Samuel hadn't told him when he would lose his throne. Hoping to gain God's favor by staying close to Samuel, Saul summoned his men and his son, and all of them followed Samuel to Gibeah. Only about six hundred soldiers had remained with the king. Saul moved with them to Gibeah by night, hoping that the Philistines wouldn't learn where the Israelites had gone.

The vast Philistine forces remained for a time at Michmash, obviously aware that their presence was keeping the Israelites in a state of constant fear. (I Samuel 13:15-16.) Then one day they showed signs of moving. Excited Israelite lookouts hoped they would be able to report that the enemy was on its way back to Philistia. But instead of retreating, the Philistines moved a short distance to the southeast to camp at a more advantageous spot near the edge of a deep valley. (I Samuel 13:23.) From there they sent out three companies -- one to the northeast, one to the east and one to the west. They moved slowly, pitifully plundering and ravaging the Israelite homes and farms and villages in their paths. For some reason they chose not to move south toward Gibeah. Very likely they considered Saul's little army not worth the bother. The Israelites were powerless, since the Philistines had taken away their swords, spears and blacksmith's tools. (I Samuel 13:17-22.)

Saul's son Jonathan had lost his little army when so many soldiers had fled for their lives. His only remaining helper was a young and loyal armorbearer, who carried Jonathan's shield and extra weapon until they were needed in battle.

But Jonathan and his courageous companion were about to accomplish more, with God's help, than a thousand soldiers could accomplish under ordinary circumstances.

"Many of the Philistines are gone from their camp," Jonathan observed. "Let's sneak over there and see what's going on! God can do anything. And if He chooses to give us protection, perhaps we can do something worthwhile for Israel. God can work through two men as easily as through a whole army."

"If that's what you want to do, then I'm for it," the other agreed.

"Good!" Jonathan exclaimed. "Now here's my plan. From where we are here at Gibeah, it's over two miles across the valley and up to the camp of the enemy. If we're careful, probably we won't be seen till we're very close to the base of the cliff where one edge of the camp is. If the Philistines discover us and threaten to come down against us if we come any closer, then we'll give up and return here. But if they ask us to come up to them, then we'll do so. We'll consider it a sign from God that He will help us." (I Samuel 14:1, 4-10.)

A Daring Exploit Succeeds

Saul and his six hundred men, together with the high priest Ahiah, were at that hour concealed in a high, rocky area, possibly the same place where the six hundred escaped Benjamites had taken refuge when there was war between the Benjamites and the other tribes of Israel. From there, without Saul's knowledge, the two young men quietly crept away and down into the valley. (I Samuel 14:2-3.)

As they neared the other side, they saw enemy sentries appearing at the edge of the cliff. They heard them loudly and laughingly remark that at last Israelites were beginning to come out of their hiding places to surrender.

"Come up here!" the sentries called down. "We won't harm you! We want to show you how well we're stocked with arms to use against your people! We'll even let you return to tell them how wise it would be for all of them to surrender now instead of being killed later!"

"That's the sign I told you about," Jonathan said in a low voice to his armorbearer. "I really believe it means that God will help and protect us. Follow me up the cliff!" (I Samuel 14:11-12.)

At that point there was a steep, rough rock jutting up from the sloping cliff. Jonathan clambered up the rock on the side opposite the garrison, with his companion close behind. After reaching the top, he suddenly leaped onto the edge of the cliff to face the grinning men who thought they were about to take two prisoners. Before they realized what was happening, Jonathan's sword was slashing into the nearest of them, killing or maiming all within reach. His armorbearer, with Jonathan's spear, followed behind, finishing off all who were not killed by Jonathan.

Within that vital minute about twenty of the enemy lost their lives at the hands of only two young Israelites whom God had inspired to start something that turned out to be more than a great battle. (I Samuel 14:13-14.)

Having slain all the guards who had come into sight, Jonathan and his companion hid themselves behind a rock to wait for more men to appear. When more rushed into sight and saw the bodies sprawled near the edge of the cliff, they stopped in their tracks.

"The Israelites must be gathered behind that rock and down under the edge of the cliff!" someone shouted. "Get back before they attack again!"

The Philistines Panic

This was enough to trigger the imaginations of the Philistines, who fancied that Israelites were about to swarm up over the ledge in great numbers. They rushed back through the camp, shouting that they were being attacked. Startled by the running and shouting, thousands of other troops assumed that something terrible must be happening, and joined the mad retreat.

Some of the Philistine officers weren't so easily frightened. Realizing that the sudden confusion had probably stemmed from some kind of misunderstanding, they ordered men to leap in and halt the running troops. The result was dreadful. Some soldiers were hired troops of different nationalities. In the confusion they couldn't tell friends from enemies. Soon all the soldiers were fighting among themselves with such violence that the Philistine army was well on its way to self-destruction!

Frantic officers sent messengers out to the three companies of soldiers that had spread out on plundering missions, ordering them to return as quickly as possible to camp to help quell the disorder.

To add to the confusion, the ground suddenly began to shake in the area of Michmash and the new campsite and then throughout the land of the Philistines. Men weren't the only beings to panic when the earthquake began. The Philistines' horses frantically lunged free of their tethers and charged in all directions. Some trampled the battling men to death as they bucked and galloped through the throng.

When excited lookouts during the immense earthquake reported to Saul that the Philistines were fighting among themselves, the king could scarcely believe it. (I Samuel 14:15-16.)

"Probably they are staging a show to make us believe that they are destroying each other," Saul observed. "Then if we should go over to investigate, they would fall on us."

"That can't be," the lookouts explained. "Some of us were close enough to see men and horses falling over the cliff!"

"Then some of our men must have gone over there and started some kind of trouble," Saul surmised. "Count my soldiers to see if any are missing. If any are not here, find out who they are."

A little later the news was brought to Saul that Jonathan and his armorbearer were missing and hadn't been seen for several hours. Saul was fearful and puzzled. He knew that his son was ambitious to trouble the Philistines. He could only guess that Jonathan and his companion had gone across the valley and might have started the furore among the Philistines. Not knowing just what to do, he asked Ahiah the high priest to ask God for wisdom and the meaning of the terrible earthquake.

Ahiah lifted his arms skyward and started praying. At the same time the noise of battle -- screams, shouts, groans, the clash of metal and the whinnying of horses -- wafted across the valley in increasing volume. These dread sounds of war were accented by a rumble like that of thunder and a continual shaking of the ground. A huge cloud of dust billowed up from the place of conflict. Perhaps Saul wasn't wise in interrupting the priest's prayer, but he put a restraining hand on one of Ahiah's arms.

Saul Takes Courage

"I think God has already shown us what to do," he said to the priest. "There is indeed confusion among the Philistines, and now is the time to go against them!" (I Samuel 14:17-19.)

Saul and his men set out at once across the valley. Within an hour they crawled up the steep bank on the opposite side. They could scarcely believe their eyes when they came up on the ledge. Dead and dying soldiers lay in heaps, but clusters of Philistines were still savagely fighting among themselves. Saul and his soldiers downed the nearest group with arrows and slings, and began to arm themselves with Philistine swords and spears. Then they moved on to eliminate many more of the enemy. The Philistines at first seemed too occupied in self-destruction to pay much attention to the Israelites. The Israelites who had joined the Philistines and those hiding in nearby mountains came out quickly to join Saul's little army.

By that time the three companies of Philistines who had been sent out to pillage the land had received orders to return. They were in three widely separated areas. So, as soon as they reversed their directions, the Israelites who saw them decided they were retreating. Emboldened by this turn of events, and fighting angry because of the manner in which the Philistines had ransacked their homes, fields, vineyards, barns and corrals, the Israelites swiftly grouped together and set upon the Philistines with their farm implements, axes, pitchforks, mattocks, hoes, ox goads and anything else they could use as weapons.

The Philistines had been ordered to get back to camp on the double. Now they had to choose between disobeying orders by stopping to fight on the one hand, and fleeing shamefully on the other, while being attacked from both sides of their columns and from the rear. In trying to take both courses, the Philistines fell by the thousands and thousands at the hands of irate Israelites who collected a very great number of badly needed weapons in that battle. Those Philistine troops who reached camp unharmed were set upon either by their own soldiers or by Saul's men.

Through God's control of nature and circumstances, Israel had been saved by the destruction of the Philistine army. (I Samuel 14:20-23.)

The battle finally was over, but not all the Philistines had been killed or wounded. Many fled toward their homeland that day. Saul was certain that a great number of enemy troops had escaped. But he finally stopped chasing them because of an unexpected event that happened during the day.

Earlier in the day King Saul had bound the people with an oath not to eat any food until evening. (I Samuel 14:24.) His little army was so outnumbered that Saul felt they needed to spend every minute fighting so as to avenge themselves for all the trouble the Philistines had brought upon them. As the Philistines fled westward, Saul and his growing army battled them all the way to Aijalon. (I Samuel 14:31.) Early in the battle Jonathan and his armorbearer had rejoined Saul's little army -- but too late to hear Saul's edict that the men shouldn't eat till evening.

As Saul's army trudged through the forest, the men saw that during the battle a honeycomb had been knocked from a tree to the ground. Sometimes bees build their honeycombs out in the open on the underside of the limbs of trees, where it is easily dislodged. Seeing honey on the ground was a great temptation to the tired and hungry soldiers, but fearing that something terrible would happen to them if they ate any, they marched staunchly by.

An Accidental Violation

All, that is, except Jonathan. He knew of no reason not to eat it, and so stopped to scoop up some of the honey on a stick he was carrying and transfer it to his mouth. Just then a soldier looked back and saw what Jonathan was doing. He turned and hurried to Saul's son.

"You -- you're Jonathan!" exclaimed the soldier, surprised at suddenly realizing who he was. "Your father has been greatly upset because he didn't know where you were. He would be even more upset if he knew you ate that honey!" (I Samuel 14:25-28.)

"But why?" Jonathan asked. "What's wrong with honey?" "Nothing," the soldier explained, "but your father pronounced a curse of death on any of us who would eat anything before sundown!"

Chapter 85

Amalek is Judged

THE triumphant Israelites had pursued part of the Philistine army for several miles before defeating it. The chase toward Aijalon had required just about all the failing strength Saul's soldiers could muster.

Unwise Fast -- Reckless Feast

Saul's son Jonathan was surprised when he was told, as he ate a piece of wild honey, that his father had pronounced a curse on any Israelite soldier who ate anything before evening. (I Samuel 14:20-28.) At the rate the battle was moving, it would be evening before it was over.

"I have done nothing wrong because I didn't know of such an order," Jonathan explained to the soldier who had seen him eating some honey. "Besides, why should my father tell his men not to eat when they are so tired and hungry? If escaped Philistines should band together in sufficient numbers to attack us, without food we wouldn't have the strength for more fighting. Just that one mouthful of honey has already caused me to feel stronger." (I Samuel 14:29-30.)

It was sundown by the time the Israelites quit fighting and dragged into their camp near Aijalon. The hungry, tired men wasted no time in bathing or resting. Their main thought was of food, and they rushed into slaughtering and butchering the animals they had taken from the Philistines. They didn't even take the time to properly bleed the carcasses, as God commanded (Leviticus 17:10-13), but tossed them immediately over fires or into caldrons of boiling water. A few more impatient ones even gulped down chunks of raw meat. (I Samuel 14:31-32.)

When the high priest saw what the soldiers were doing, he was discouraged that Saul would allow his men to prepare and consume meat in such a careless manner. He went at once to Saul.

"I have learned that the men were very careful to obey your order not to eat till evening," Ahiah pointed out, "but now they are ignoring one of God's health laws by gorging themselves with blood-filled meat!"

Saul immediately ordered the soldiers to come to attention and listen to him.

"You have done wrong by not properly bleeding the animals you have slaughtered," he told them. "Cease the slaughtering. Bring a large stone here to the center of the camp for an altar."

As soon as the stone was laboriously dragged in, Saul spoke again to the soldiers.

"From now on this evening all animals that are to be used for food must be killed and properly bled at this spot. I don't want to hear of anyone else eating meat that isn't rightly prepared." (I Samuel 14:33-35.)

Much more meat was prepared for eating that night, but only according to God's instructions. (Leviticus 3:17; Deuteronomy 12:23-25.) Saul's little army didn't require a huge amount of food, but Israelites who had been freed from the Philistines kept pouring into the camp to ask for something to eat.

Hoping to please God, Saul gave orders that a complete altar should later be erected at the spot where the stone was. It isn't recorded whether or not he sought Samuel's or Ahiah's advice in this matter.

No Answer This Time

Later, when the soldiers were refreshed and rested, Saul felt that the Israelites should seek out and destroy the Philistine troops who had hidden or escaped.

"Now that we have taken from the enemy all the metal weapons that we could carry," Saul asked his officers, "don't you think it would be wise to mop up the scattered Philistine soldiers before they regroup and possibly attack us? If we delay later than tonight, we could miss the opportunity to wipe out about all that is left of their army."

Some of Saul's officers agreed that it should be the thing to do. Others hesitantly made it known that the Philistines had suffered enough defeat, but all left the decision up to their leader.

"This is our opportunity to completely crush the Philistines," Saul pointed out. "Tell our men to prepare to march!"

Ahiah the high priest was present. He had only listened, but now he stepped forward and held up his hands for attention.

"Before we act any further," he broke in, "I suggest that we take the matter to God. It might not be His will for us to strike against the enemy so soon again." (I Samuel 14:36.)

Saul wasn't exactly pleased by Ahiah's interruption, but he knew that it wouldn't be wise to go against the suggestion of the high priest.

"Ask God to tell us what to do," Saul told Ahiah. "Ask Him if He will give us victory over the rest of the Philistines if we go after them."

Ahiah prayed earnestly about this matter. But no sign or indication came from God as to what Israel's troops should do or how successful they would be in another battle. After a little wait, Saul's patience ran out. (I Samuel 14:37.)

"It must be that God hasn't answered us because someone has committed some great sin," Saul announced. "I want the leaders of the tribes to meet with me here as soon as possible. I'll determine who has sinned and caused God to ignore our inquiry. Even if it turns out to be Jonathan my son, I promise that he shall die!"

When the leaders gathered, Saul accused an unknown person of doing some unknown thing so terrible that it was separating the people from God.

He called for the guilty one to come forward, or for anyone to speak out who knew of such a matter.

Not a man spoke out or stepped up.

"If no one will admit guilt, then I'll seek him out by casting lots!" Saul declared resolutely. "My son and I will be on one side, and all the rest of you on the other. Do you agree that handling it that way is fair to start?"

The assembled leaders, soldiers and onlookers nodded and murmured in agreement. Saul then asked Ahiah to request that God make His will known through the casting of lots. Ahiah produced the lot device, and two drawings were made. Saul blinked in surprise when he realized that his lot seemed to indicate that he or Jonathan was guilty! (1 Samuel 14:38-41.)

"According to this, the finger of blame is pointing to me or my son," Saul announced hesitantly. "Now lots must be cast between us."

Each man drew a lot. Saul scowled at seeing Jonathan's, which seemed to point out that the younger man was in some way responsible for God's silence.

"What awful thing have you done to cause God to show you as the offender?" Saul demanded.

"I'm not guilty of any great offense," Jonathan replied. "When my armorbearer and I joined your soldiers during their battle with the Philistines, I ate a little honey I found by the trail. Later I learned that you had pronounced a curse on any soldier who ate before sundown. I wasn't aware you had told your men until ..."

"Then it WAS you!" Saul excitedly cut in. "You ate honey and spoiled my vow to God that no man should touch food until we were safely back in camp at sundown! No wonder God wouldn't answer Ahiah's prayers! The curse I pronounced rests on YOU!" (1 Samuel 14:42-44.)

"You mean you think I should die just because I ate some honey?" Jonathan asked, frowning perplexedly.

"As king of Israel, I have spoken before God that it should be so," Saul replied in a somewhat shaky voice.

Saul was almost overcome with remorse that he should lose his son in this manner. At the same time he couldn't help being angry with him for being the one who had done what Saul had told all his soldiers not to do. Obviously he had no choice but to sentence Jonathan to death.

"Seize my son!" Saul finally ordered some nearby soldiers. "Keep him prisoner until I decide how he shall die!"

God Rescues Jonathan

The soldiers moved reluctantly toward Jonathan, whom they greatly admired and respected. In the next instant a wave of people surged in quickly to surround and protect Jonathan. The soldiers who had been ordered to seize him made no effort to confront Jonathan's protectors.

"I have ordered my son to be taken into military custody!" Saul shouted. "What is the meaning of this interference?"

"We intend to defend your son with our lives!" someone yelled. "We have learned that he and his armorbearer had much to do with the victory God gave us over the Philistines, and that he hasn't committed any great sin. That's why we're not allowing one hair of his head to be harmed!"

"Make the people stand back from Jonathan!" Saul commanded his soldiers.

"We would have to kill our people to do that, sir," one officer grimly observed. "Surely you wouldn't want that."

Even in his anger and embarrassment at being disobeyed, Saul knew that the officer was right. Frowning and red-faced, the leader of Israel gestured curtly for his son to be freed, and strode away to his tent. It was a blow to his ego that his own people and soldiers had taken a stand against him, but after he had calmed down he was thankful that he had been spared the responsibility of sending his son to his death. (I Samuel 14:45.)

God had caused the lots to be drawn in such a way that Jonathan would be presumed guilty so that matters would turn out as they did. The real reasons God hadn't answered Saul's requests through the high priest were that Saul had unwisely pronounced a curse on any man who didn't fast during the battle, and because so many men ate meat that hadn't been properly drained of blood. Saul eventually came to realize these things after thinking about the day's happenings.

Because events turned out as they did, no attempt was made to round up the surviving Philistine soldiers, who fled to their nation on the east coast of the Great Sea. (I Samuel 14:46.) From time to time other Philistine armies were formed to attack Israel, but Saul built up a powerful fighting force with which to keep the Philistines out of Canaan.

During the next several years Saul encountered the same kind of trouble from every direction, but God made it possible for him to protect Israel from all of them. (I Samuel 14:47-52.)

Meanwhile, Saul returned as often as possible from the wars to live with Ahinoam his wife and his several children. During one of the ruler's stays at home, Samuel came to see Saul about a most urgent matter.

"I have a message for you from God!" Samuel told Saul when they were alone. "As the one who anointed you king of Israel and who directed and advised you in many matters, you must believe me and act on what I am about to tell you."

"You know that I respect your wisdom and judgment," Saul said, "but years ago you told me that God would remove me from the leadership of Israel. God hasn't removed me. On the contrary, I have built up Israel's army and have put back this nation's enemies time after time. Israel is at last secure because God has worked through me. You have been wrong in this matter, so how can I be sure that you are right in whatever you are about to tell me now?"

"God did not tell you when He would remove you from your office," Samuel explained. "God is patient. It could be that your place as king of Israel would be ended if you refuse to do this thing that God has told me that He has chosen you to do."

"Have I refused to listen?" Saul asked a little impatiently.

God's Commission

"No," Samuel smilingly replied. "You have had so much experience in battle that you could be most interested in accepting this challenge to destroy an ancient enemy of Israel." (1 Samuel 15:1-2.)

Samuel then reminded Saul of how the Amalekites had so cruelly treated the Israelites when they had come up from Egypt over four hundred years previously (Exodus 17:8-14), and of God's promise to Israel that after the people were settled in Canaan, Israel would return to the land of Amalek to destroy the whole nation. (Deuteronomy 25:17-19.)

"God has chosen this time to punish that nation," Samuel explained. "As king of Israel, it's your duty to take an army down to the land of this enemy and utterly wipeout all the cruel Amalekites, including women and children. No one within sight is to be left alive. No animal is to be taken as booty. Camels, donkeys, cattle and sheep are all to be destroyed!" (1 Samuel 15:3.)

Saul was somewhat surprised at being told that he should direct an army to kill women and even babies. But he also knew how cruel the Amalekites were to their enemies. Saul feared to disobey in this matter of the Amalekites, lest God be angry with him.

"I shall muster men as soon as possible to march against the Amalekites," Saul finally spoke out.

Samuel was pleased that Israel's king should accept this special task without an argument. Saul had little enthusiasm for such a commission at first, but enthusiasm grew the more he considered it. He began to see that wiping out a whole nation could increase his popularity with the people and cause him to be more respected and feared by his enemies.

During the days that followed, Saul built an especially large fighting force at an area south of Gibeah. He didn't set out on his mission until he had two hundred and ten thousand men, all well-trained and well-armed. Then his army moved southward through the territories of Judah and Simeon. (I Samuel 15:4-5.)

Close to the desert city of Arad, Saul delayed his march to contact the leaders of the Kenites, people who had descended from a desert tribe of the Sinai peninsula. When the Israelites were on their way up from Egypt, they had help from the Kenites when they needed guidance across a desert region. Hobab, son of a Kenite who was Moses' father-in-law, helped lead them through the desert. (Numbers 10:29-32.) Because the Kenites liked the Israelites, many of these people went with the Israelites into Canaan, where they were given land with the tribe of Judah in the southwest part of the nation. (Judges 1:16) There they lived just north of the Amalekites. There was considerable intermingling of the two peoples because they had in common a love of the desert.

"We are moving against the Amalekites," Saul informed the chief Kenites. "Your people have been our friends ever since we came up from Egypt, so we are warning you now to separate from the Amalekites at once. Any of you who are with them when we attack might accidentally be killed along with our enemy!"

Within hours most of the Kenites had quietly departed from the country of the Amalekites. (I Samuel 15:6.) It would have been too much to expect that none of the Kenites would warn their neighbors of the approach of danger, though they had been warned by their leaders not to do so. Under the circumstances, Saul knew that it would be a miracle if he could surprise the enemy. He simply continued marching from the valley where his men had shortly rested. As he approached the main city of the Amalekites, he surrounded it swiftly by breaking his army into two parts.

Some of the Amalekites had already left their city. More fled when they saw the attackers approaching, but most were trapped and slain. The Amalekites were proud warriors, but their soldiers could do little against the human walls of power, nearly a quarter of a million strong, surging in on them to avenge Israelite ancestors who had suffered and died because of the cruelty of the Amalekites more than four centuries before.

The Israelites moved on, overtaking most who had fled from the city, and spreading out to pick off the people in Amalekite villages far down the Sinai peninsula. Every Amalekite within sight was killed -- except one. That was the king of the Amalekites, Agag. Saul gave orders that he should be taken back to Canaan alive, so that the people could see what their king had accomplished. (I Samuel 15:7-8.)

But Saul had been plainly told not to spare ANY Amalekite. This disobedience was about to result in grave trouble for him!

Chapter 86

God Chooses David

WHILE Saul and his soldiers were on their way back north following their triumph over the Amalekites (I Samuel 15:1-9), Samuel received a message from God.

"Samuel, I am not pleased with the man I set on the throne of Israel," the Creator informed the elderly prophet. "He has rebelled. At this moment he is returning from the slaughter of the Amalekites. He performed that part of his task well which pleased the people, but he refused to carry out all the things he was plainly told to do on this mission. Go out tomorrow to meet him as he comes from the south. Then you will learn of the manner in which he has been disobedient in recent hours."

Saul's Self-justification

Samuel was grieved at this report. He had a great affection for Saul, and it was discouraging to the old prophet to realize that the time had come for him to inform the younger man that he could no longer be king with such a rebellious attitude, though Samuel realized that this had to happen sooner or later. He was so saddened that he spent all night praying that God would give Saul another opportunity to overcome his willful ways. (I Samuel 15:10-11.)

As dawn approached, Samuel gradually was aware that he was being too sentimental in this matter, and was praying for a lost cause. He ceased his petitions and prepared to go out to meet Saul.

"Saul and his men passed through here very early this morning," Samuel was told by people who had been up and around before dawn. "Some of his soldiers mentioned that they had camped at Carmel, south of here, where Saul had a monument erected as a reminder of his destroying the Amalekites. They said that from there he intended to march straight through to Gilgal." (I Samuel 15:12.)

At first Samuel was puzzled because of Saul's not stopping to report his triumph to him. Then he realized that Saul had done something that he didn't want him to know about. It was God's orders that Samuel contact Israel's king, so he set out at once for Gilgal.

"May God's blessing be on you!" Saul smilingly greeted Samuel when the old prophet approached him in Gilgal that evening.

His smile faded a little as Samuel soberly came up to him.

"I'm pleased that you are safely back," Samuel said in an earnest tone. "I trust that you carried out all the instructions that God gave me to give to you."

"With God's help, I accomplished what I set out to do," Saul replied. "But why are you looking at me with a doubtful expression? As you know, we wiped out the Amalekites. Is it that you expected more than that?"

"I didn't expect to hear the many animal sounds that I am now hearing," Samuel observed. "Why is our conversation being interrupted by so much bleating of sheep and lowing of cattle? There must be some great accumulation of livestock out there in the dark." (I Samuel 15:13-14.)

"Oh -- those are the herds my men brought back from the Amalekites," Saul casually answered. "They picked out the very best animals to bring back to sacrifice to God."

"Rebellion Is as Bad as Witchcraft"

The king evaded the questioning look of the older man, perhaps because at that moment there was a loud braying of donkeys.

"Now listen, Saul," Samuel said, lowering his voice so that others couldn't hear. "Just last night God spoke to me. He reminded me that He had chosen you as Israel's leader when you had a humble attitude and thought of yourself as of little worth. But He is not pleased with you now because you more and more ignore your Creator's instructions and take matters into your own hands. You were sent to destroy ALL the Amalekites and ALL their belongings. Why haven't you obeyed?"

"But I did obey," Saul argued. "I saw that all the Amalekites were destroyed except their ruler, whom I brought back as proof of our victory. It was my men who insisted on bringing back the livestock for sacrificing. I couldn't very well deny them something that had to do with the worship of God."

"With God, obedience comes before burnt offerings and sacrifices," Samuel sternly reminded the king. "You know how God abhors witchcraft. Disobedience is as bad as witchcraft in God's sight, and stubbornness such as yours is as evil as the worship of heathen idols! What your conduct adds up to is rebellion against God. Now I must tell you that God is rejecting you as king of Israel!" (I Samuel 15:15-23.)

Saul stared unhappily at Samuel. He knew that the old prophet spoke the truth.

"It is the people who are to blame," said Saul in a slightly quavering voice. "I was afraid of what they might say. I just couldn't be firmer with my men. Samuel, please go with me to offer sacrifices of repentance to God!"

"I can hardly do that," Samuel explained. "I have already asked God to forgive you. He has refused to heed my prayers because you refuse to repent and do what He commands. He has rejected you as king, and nothing is going to change that." (I Samuel 15:24-26.)

The old prophet turned away in disappointment. Saul quickly stepped after him, reaching out to detain him by seizing his coat. Samuel kept on walking, and to Saul's embarrassment the coat ripped apart. The older man stopped, turned and gazed at the piece of his coat Saul was holding in his hand.

"This should be a sign to you," Samuel pointed out to Saul. "Just as my coat was torn from me, so shall the kingdom of Israel be torn from you at this time. Besides, the rulership shall be turned over to one who lives only a short distance from here,

and be assured that God will not change His mind about this matter!" (I Samuel 15:27-29.)

Saul was shaken by this last remark. He begged the prophet not to forsake him, lest the people receive the impression that the two men weren't in accord. Samuel was greatly respected in Israel, and Saul feared that his own popularity as king of Israel would lessen if the Israelites came to believe that he and Samuel were having some serious differences. He was intent on hanging on as king.

"For the sake of the people," Samuel finally agreed, "I'll appear with you in public from time to time until God removes you from office." (I Samuel 15:30-31.)

Samuel was disappointed and angered by Saul's bringing the king of the Amalekites back as a prisoner. He knew that Saul had done it to build himself up as a national hero. But he didn't discuss the matter at the time Saul had mentioned the Amalekite leader, because he wanted to deal directly and as soon as possible with the enemy king before there could be any interference from Saul, and before any public display of the pagan ruler could be made. Samuel demanded that Agag, the Amalekite king, be brought before him in a private place.

When he was brought in between two soldiers, he appeared rather smug for a prisoner of war. He was wearing an expensive robe on which were fastened the insignias of royalty and power of his nation.

"I understood that I was to have an audience with Saul, the king of Israel," Agag observed curtly. "Who are you?"

"I am Samuel, a friend of the king," the old prophet answered after a pause.

"Then you will see that I am treated with respect, as Saul promised I would be?" the Amalekite king asked hesitantly.

"You shall be treated with all the respect you deserve," Samuel told him. "Men, let go of this man."

The two soldiers stepped back from the prisoner, who hunched his shoulders with relief and grinned weakly at Samuel. He seemed to have little concern about the destruction of his nation. His consuming interest now was to be regarded as a guest.

"There is really no reason to allow our past differences to cause further violence," the Amalekite observed as he shrugged his shoulders. "I can well pay for my freedom by showing you where treasures are hidden that your men didn't find during their attack on my people."

"You misunderstood my motive for telling the soldiers to let go of you," Samuel frowned. "They couldn't very well execute you by standing so close!"

"What do you mean?" Agag snapped fearfully as he whirled to glance back at the two men who had brought him in.

Destroy the Murderer

"I mean," Samuel pointed out sternly, "that too many women have become childless by the sword because of your cruel commands! Now -- as far as you are concerned - - YOUR mother is to become childless!"

At a command from Samuel, the soldiers whipped out their swords and leaped toward the cringing Amalekite. A minute or two later, when Samuel left, he couldn't help viewing Agag for the last time. The pagan ruler had been chopped to pieces, just as he had cut to pieces infants in war. Thus Samuel had given an order for execution that Saul had refused to give. (I Samuel 15:32-33.)

At this point a few overly sensitive readers -- particularly parents who are reading this account to their children -- will be horrified at the bloody ending of Agag. Some will even write letters to protest the printing of narratives of such violence in the Bible. Others will be offended because the illustrations are not all the peaceful, beautiful type that have been shown for so many decades in church publications.

"Why do you use such horrible material?" people ask. "Why not pick the good and the lovely things?"

Again it should be pointed out that the Bible is the source of this account. It shows human nature as it really is. No part of the Bible should be kept from anyone, though many falsely believe that some areas of the Scriptures are unfit to read. That sort of warped thinking has helped to develop and promote the hundreds of so-called Christian sects that exist today. None of these churches can rightfully claim to be God's churches unless they teach ALL of the Bible God inspired, and observe and keep ALL of God's rules for the right way of living.

Samuel returned to Ramah. Greatly displeased by what had been done to Agag, Saul went to his home in Gibeah. From that time on, Samuel never referred to Saul as the king of Israel, though he continued to have a fatherly feeling toward the younger man. (I Samuel 15:34-35.)

How God Selects Another King

"How long must you go on feeling sorry for Saul?" God later inquired of Samuel. "You know he is no longer king in my eyes, so forget about him. Fill your horn with olive oil for anointing and go to Bethlehem. I will send you to a man called Jesse. From his sons I have chosen one who will be the next king of Israel. You are to anoint him as such."

"But Saul is very angry with me," Samuel told God. "If I should be picked up by his men and if they should find out why I am going to Bethlehem, they would probably kill me."

"Don't be concerned," God answered. "Take a young cow with you, and if anyone asks you questions, explain that you are taking the heifer for a sacrifice. When you arrive in Bethlehem, request that Jesse and his sons go with you to sacrifice. After that I shall let you know what to do." (I Samuel 16:1-3)

Samuel reached Bethlehem without being accosted by any of Saul's men. When it was reported to the leaders of the city that the prophet was entering the gates, the chief men hurried to meet him, but not because they were overjoyed at his coming.

"We are honored that you should visit our city," they greeted him nervously. "We trust that you come on some mission of peace."

"I do," Samuel answered, pointing to his young cow. "I have come to sacrifice this animal. Prepare yourselves as you should for sacrificing and come and join me, if you will. But first I must visit the home of a man called Jesse. Kindly tell me where he lives."

The leaders were relieved. Bethlehem didn't have the best reputation for an Israelite city, and they had feared that the prophet had come to pronounce some kind of curse on the people.

Samuel was directed to where he wanted to go. It turned out to be a home at the edge of Bethlehem. Jesse was a rugged, very elderly livestock grower who was surprised and pleased that the prophet had come to visit his family.

"I have been told that you have several very fine sons," Samuel explained to Jesse. "I am looking for a young man to anoint for a special service for Israel -- a position I'll explain later -- and I hope to find the man I need in your family. Would it be possible to meet your sons?"

"Indeed it would!" Jesse answered, wondering why the prophet had come all the way to Bethlehem and to his home to look for help in this special service, whatever it could be. "My sons would be honored to meet you. One of them is working just outside. I'll have him come in."

Moments later a tall, handsome, muscular young man stepped into the room. Jesse introduced him as Eliab, and obviously was quite proud of him. Samuel was greatly impressed by the size and the bearing of Eliab. He concluded at once that this was the man whom God had picked as the next leader of Israel. (I Samuel 16:4-6.)

"Do not be hasty!" a small voice came to Samuel, as if from inside his head. "Don't try to determine what a man is like by his appearance only. I judge men by what is in their minds. This is not the man I have chosen to succeed Saul."

Jesse called in another son, Abinadab, who also impressed Samuel. But again the voice informed him that Abinadab wasn't the one. A third son, named Shammah, was brought in. Samuel was told not to anoint him. Four more young men appeared, but the voice warned that none of them was the right one.

"These are all of your sons?" Samuel asked Jesse. "Not one of them quite fits into the work I have in mind."

"I am sorry to have disappointed you," Jesse said in an apologetic tone. "I have another son, David, but he is my youngest and he is out taking care of our sheep. You wouldn't be interested in him."

"But I am," Samuel insisted. "Send for him. We won't sit down until I see this David."
(I Samuel 16:7-11.)

A little later young David came in, having run in from some distance after being told that he was wanted at the feast immediately. Samuel noticed at once that he was the smallest of Jesse's sons, though the most wholesome and bright-appearing. He was healthy and tanned from his outdoor task of herding sheep.

"This is the one!" the voice came to Samuel.

Samuel walked up to David and regarded him earnestly.

"I am about to perform a brief but very important ceremony," the prophet informed the lad, placing his hands on David's shoulders. "I know this will come as a great surprise to you, but you are now chosen by God to be ordained to a very high office."

The prophet opened his horn of oil and poured some of it on David's head.

"David, in the name and by the authority of the God of Israel, I proclaim you the king of all Israel!" Samuel declared. "May the Eternal guide and protect you in your reign over the nation that God has chosen to use in carrying out His divine purpose!"

There was a long silence as Jesse and his family, startled by Samuel's words, wondered if this could be a fantastic dream. David was the most amazed, inasmuch as he couldn't imagine, at the moment, why he had been made the king of Israel.

"Prepare yourselves to go with me to sacrifice to God," Samuel told Jesse and his family before a spirited conversation could get started. "As for what has happened here, it would be wise to say nothing about it to others. I shall be in touch with you later about the matter."

After Samuel had returned to Ramah and excitement had abated in Jesse's household, a change came over David. Although he had been taught to observe God's laws, a new outlook and special understanding began to come to him. God was imbuing him with a gift of unusual wisdom, as well as with a confident, peaceful state of mind. (I Samuel 16:12-13.)

At the same time a change was taking place in Saul. He became more irritable and worried. He brooded over what Samuel had told him. He had growing periods of depression, and suspected those about him as spies. God was taking from him the comfort of a sound and peaceful mind. (I Samuel 16:14.)

Chapter 87

Goliath Challenges God!

SAUL was very unhappy. He had lately felt a great emptiness, as though the future held only disappointment for him. Nothing pleased him. A distrust of his friends and acquaintances grew in his restless mind. He kept remembering Samuel's remark about God rejecting him as king of Israel, and that made him more depressed. (I Samuel 16:14.)

David Meets King Saul

Saul didn't fully realize that God had withdrawn from him that wonderful peace and soundness of mind that God imparts to people who humbly and earnestly seek their Creator's mercy and help, and who obey His laws. Such pursuits had been Saul's in his early years as king. But later disobedience changed his character. As a result God had not only deprived him of a peaceful state of mind, but had allowed an evil spirit to trouble and disrupt his way of thinking.

Saul's servants were so concerned over their master's behavior that they diplomatically suggested that he use music to bring him out of his periods of depression.

"Perhaps if good music were available when you're not feeling well," some of the servants told Saul, "it might work wonders for you. Harp music can be very melodic and soothing. Would you like us to find a good harpist for you?" (I Samuel 16:15-16.)

"Suit yourself!" Saul growled. "I'll try anything to relieve me when I feel worst -- and that's when I feel as though invisible hands are wrapped around my neck and trying to choke me!"

The servants were startled at this disclosure. It was something Saul hadn't told them about before. They decided that something should be done as soon as possible.

"I know of a young lad who plays the harp exceptionally well," one servant spoke up. "I heard him perform at Bethlehem, and happened to overhear that he is the son of Jesse, a livestock farmer whose land borders the city. This youngster is a shepherd who has become adept as a musician because he carries his harp with him, and spends much of his time playing as he watches his flock. He is also valiant, handsome and intelligent, and a fine soldier because of his ability to protect his flock from wild animals by unusually skillful use of a sling." (I Samuel 16:17-18)

"Don't waste time by running on any more about this fellow!" Saul commanded impatiently. "Just find him and bring him back with you!"

Saul's servants later confronted Jesse to tell him that Saul wanted David to go back with them to Gibeah to play his harp for him. David's father was troubled. He realized that his youngest son, having been named the next king of Israel, could run into great difficulty with Saul, who didn't want to give up being king.

On the other hand, there might be trouble if he refused to let David go with Saul's men. Much as he disliked doing it, Jesse sent for David to come in from the pastures.

When David heard why Saul's servants were in his father's home, he obediently agreed to go with them willingly. Jesse loaded a burro with provisions of wine and bread, and sent a young goat to Saul as a gift. (1 Samuel 16:19-20.)

Saul saw David coming into his residence. He was a little surprised to learn that he was yet in his teens. He had expected an older person. After he had talked to him a while, he was gratified by the lad's alertness and friendliness.

"You are my guest here," he told David. "My servants will show you where you're to stay, so that you may refresh yourself. I might call for you at any time, night or day. When I do, be prepared to play your harp for me."

Saul Trains His Successor

It was only a few hours later that a servant came to David's quarters to tell him that Saul wanted to see him right away. When the young man was brought to Saul, he saw that Saul was having trouble breathing, and looked very uncomfortable as he sat stiffly in his chair.

"Play your harp!" Saul muttered. "If your music can give me any relief, I need it now!"

David began strumming his harp. It was a light, easy handled instrument fashioned somewhat like a lyre. Everyone in the room was pleased with the soothing music of the skillfully fingered strings. After a few minutes Saul started to relax and stretch out comfortably in his chair.

David continued playing for quite a while, carefully confining his performance to the kind that would be restfully cheerful. Finally Saul stood up. David assumed that this meant that he should stop playing.

"Your music has caused me to feel much better," Saul smilingly told David. "Now I shall be able to sleep. Do whatever you want to do, but be close at hand if I should need you again."

During the next few days David was sent for several times, whenever Saul's miserable malady recurred. Happily for Saul, his trouble gradually went away every time David played for him.

"You have been a great help to me," Saul told David. "I wish you could stay with me for a long time, but if the Philistines stir up another war, I'll have to leave here and suffer through my ill spells without your music."

"Why couldn't I join your army and go with you?" David asked.

"My soldiers must be older men who are experienced in battle," Saul replied. "You are a fine musician -- not a trained fighter."

"Why couldn't I go along as your armor-bearer?" David eagerly inquired. "If you think I would be afraid when the enemy approaches, I promise to always hand you your armor before I start running."

"A great idea!" Saul laughed. "From now on you're my official armor-bearer!"

Saul had developed such a need and liking for the boy that he sent a message to David's father. He requested that David stay indefinitely with Saul. Jesse preferred that his son return home, but he agreed to Saul's wishes. He would have agreed more willingly if he could have known that it was God's plan to keep David for a time where he could learn directly from King Saul something of the government of Israel. It was an odd circumstance that the real king of Israel (in God's eyes) was serving the one who was actually no longer king, but who still considered himself as such. (I Samuel 16:21-23.)

In the weeks that followed, there was no cause for the army of Israel to go into battle. David's function as Saul's armor-bearer was carried out only in army training maneuvers. But David learned much during this military practice. Saul's mental and physical condition improved so much that David was seldom called on to play. Saul more or less forgot about David. Realizing that his use to Saul had greatly diminished, David asked to return to his family. The officer-in-charge let him go with the understanding that David should return any time Saul should send for him.

David's First Big Test

David was glad to return home and his family was happy to have him back. David went back to herding sheep, and months went by without any word from Saul. (I Samuel 17:15.) In fact, Saul never again sent for David, who spent the next several months in the wilderness watching over his father's growing flock of sheep. Meanwhile, he spent much time thinking about Israel's welfare, and about what could be done to improve it. His stay with Saul had made him very conscious of his nation's government, just as God had planned.

As time went by, his skill with his harp increased. So did his ability with his sling. Any animals that tried to attack his sheep almost always lost their lives by well-aimed stones that were catapulted out of David's sling with almost the speed of a bullet.

On at least two occasions the young shepherd came close to losing his life for his sheep.

At one time a lion leaped from behind nearby rocks to seize between its teeth a lamb that had strayed away a short distance. The lions of that land weren't as large and powerful as mature African lions. But they could easily kill a person with one ferocious thrust of a clawed paw, and David knew it. Nevertheless, he leaped after the lion as it tried to scramble over steep boulders. David fiercely struck the beast on its spine with the staff he carried at all times. The dazed animal dropped the lamb and stumbled to the ground. The young shepherd seized the lion by its long chin hair and snapped its head backward with such force that its neck was broken.

At another time a bear dashed into the startled flock to snatch up a lamb. When the bear saw David rushing toward him with upraised staff, it dropped the lamb and came growling to meet him. A swift blow of the staff across a delicate nose sent the bear on its back, howling with pain. David moved in quickly for the kill, while the animal was still flustered. Within a few minutes the bear was dead. (I Samuel 17:34-35.)

Not long after David had grown out of his teens, the Philistine army moved against Israel in the greatest number since the battle at Michmash a few years previously. Saul was informed of what was happening, and gathered his troops to confront the enemy at a lofty point a few miles west of Bethlehem. The Philistine army, having arrived from the west, set up camp at another high area not far from the Israelites. All that separated them was a rather narrow valley dotted with a few trees. (I Samuel 17:1-3.)

For several days neither side took any action except to keep their spies busy. Then one morning two men came down from the Philistine camp and boldly crossed the valley till they were near the slopes leading up to the Israelite camp.

Goliath Bluffs Israel's Army!

When the Israelites saw the men coming, they wondered at their difference in height. One seemed to be nothing more than a boy, but when the two came closer, it could be seen that the smaller one was a powerful man over six feet tall, and that the other towered about twice as high!

This giant's head was encased in a huge brass helmet that resembled a caldron. His coat of mail weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds. Heavy brass semi-cylinders enclosed his lower legs, and a wide brass plate, to protect his chest, was carried on his back except during battle. His entire armor weighed about three hundred pounds, but it wasn't too much of a burden for him, inasmuch as his weight must have been close to five times as much as that of his armor. Added to all this was a large sword and spear. The spear shaft was like a pole, and the head on it was sharpened iron weighing more than eighteen pounds. The armored man with the giant walked a few feet ahead with Goliath's shield. It was his task to protect the larger man from arrows, stones and spears. (I Samuel 17:4-7.)

"I am Goliath, a Philistine from the city of Gath!" the giant shouted to the Israelites in a powerful, hoarse voice that echoed from one side of the valley to the other. "I have come with a plan to make this war a simple and quick one! Instead of our two armies clashing with a loss of many lives, why not settle matters by using just one man for each side? I'll fight Saul or any man who is sent down to me! If he is able to kill me, the Philistine army will surrender to you, but if I kill him, we expect you to surrender to us! Who can say that this plan isn't fair?"

Saul and his officers, who had been anxiously watching and listening, glanced at each other in dismay. Here was a miserable situation that surely wasn't fair to the Israelites. It was embarrassing to Saul, who knew he was no match for the giant, although Israel's leader was a very tall, strong and skillful soldier.

There was no one else among Saul's troops who could possibly stand up to the challenger. (I Samuel 17:8-11.)

It would have been easy for the Israelites to storm down the slopes and do away with Goliath by surrounding and attacking him, but such action would bring the Philistine army charging down into the valley. The Israelites were ready to defend their country in the event of an attack. But they didn't intend to provoke a battle that might mean their defeat.

"Is the mighty Saul afraid of me?" roared Goliath, after he had stood waiting for a few minutes. "Or is he busy combing his ranks for one who will fight for him? I'll come back later to meet the man who has the courage to stand up to me!"

Saul glumly watched the giant stomp back across the valley with his shield-bearer.

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens," he muttered to his discouraged officers.

They didn't have to wait long. Late that afternoon Goliath and his man returned from the enemy camp to a point below the Israelite tents.

"Is the great king of Israel ready to fight me yet?" the giant bellowed. "Or has he fled across the Jordan River by now?"

Saul Is Bewildered

There was agonizing silence from Saul and his men as the laughing Goliath lumbered back to his camp. Next morning, to their continued dismay, he was back again with his shield-bearer to taunt his enemies. He returned in the afternoon, and again the following morning. This kept up day after day. (I Samuel 17:16.)

Every time it happened Saul became more disturbed. More than once he was driven to the brink of commanding his men to charge the obnoxious Goliath. But he was restrained at the last moment by the sobering judgment that a furious and bloody battle would result. On the other hand, it was unthinkable that this ridiculous challenge should go on and on. Saul was trapped between two unfavorable choices.

Meanwhile, David had continued the peaceful pursuit of herding sheep. His three oldest brothers were in Saul's army, and inasmuch as the camping troops depended to some extent on food from their families, David's father prepared to send some special provisions to his sons. (I Samuel 17:12-15.)

"I'm sending you to the army camp with some things for your brothers and to see how they are faring," Jesse told David when he came home that evening. "I'll hire a neighbor to take care of your flock tomorrow. If you get started very early, you can make the fifteen miles to the camp before the day becomes too warm for the food you'll be carrying."

Next morning before sunrise David set out with a burro loaded with a bushel of roasted grain, ten large flat loaves of bread and ten tasty cheeses.

The sun wasn't very high in the sky when he arrived at the Israelite camp to present the provisions to the man in charge of kitchen supplies.

David came to the camp at a time when the soldiers were shouting battle cries and singing songs that were meant to inspire them to battle and impress the enemy. There wasn't much, however, to look forward to except another day of waiting for the Philistines to make a move. David moved among the noisy troops until he found his three brothers, who were happy to see him. (I Samuel 17:17-22.)

After visiting for a while, it seemed to David that his brothers weren't too anxious for him to stay very long. They kept suggesting that he get started back early so that he could reach home before it got too dark.

Suddenly the battle songs of the Israelites ceased. Word was spreading that Goliath was approaching again; this time for the fortieth day. David's brothers tried to hustle him out of the camp, but the young man refused to leave after he had caught sight of the giant and his shield bearer coming across the valley. David could hardly believe his ears and eyes when Goliath challenged the Israelites and added his usual insults. He was dismayed to see some of the men furtively moving back from their front line positions because they obviously feared that the giant might suddenly hurl the massive spear he balanced on his shoulder.

On making inquiries, David learned that this had been going on for weeks, and that Saul had offered various rewards to Goliath's slayer, including money, jewels, cattle, freedom from taxes and army duty -- and his daughter. (I Samuel 17:23-25.)

"Why should anyone need a reward as a reason to do away with this infidel who had defied the army of our God?" David shouted to those about him.

Embarrassed at David's conduct, Eliab, his oldest brother, accused him of coming just to see a battle, and told him to go back home to his sheep. As David was answering him, soldiers came to escort the shepherd to Saul, who had been informed that a civilian was trying to stir up his troops. Saul failed to recognize him as the lad who had played the harp for him in the past. (I Samuel 17:26-32.)

"Why are you troubling my men with your opinions?" Saul asked.

"Because everyone is afraid of that boastful giant," David answered. "But there's no more reason for fear. I'll go down and fight him now!"

Chapter 88

David a National Hero

DAVID was disappointed because of the Israelite soldiers' fear of Goliath -- the giant Philistine soldier. For loudly voicing his opinion to some of the troops, David was taken to Saul. King Saul asked for an explanation. Saul was surprised when David blurted out that he would fight Goliath. (I Samuel 17:20-32.)

Reacquaintance with King Saul

"I admire your courage, young man," Saul told him, "but you would have no chance of coming out alive in a contest with this mountain of a man. You are young and untrained. He has been a professional soldier for years. And according to his terms, Israel would have to surrender after our death!"

"I'm not exactly inexperienced in fighting, sir," David explained. "I herd sheep for my father, and once I killed a grown bear that had stolen a lamb. At another time a lamb was taken by a lion. I killed the powerful beast with my bare hands!"

Some of Saul's officers glanced at each other and exchanged winks. Others grinned, but the grins faded as David continued his appeal.

"God made it possible for me to save both lambs by giving me the ability to slay both beasts. God will also help me slay the defiant, heathen Philistine who has challenged the people of God!"

Saul stared at David. He could see that the strangely familiar young man was quite sincere, though it was difficult for him to believe that David had killed a lion without using a sword or spear.

"You seem so confident," Saul observed, "that perhaps you should be the one to go out against Goliath. Go if you insist, and may God protect you!" (I Samuel 17:33-37.)

"But, sir," a surprised officer said to Saul as he took him aside, "this would mean that there'll be an attack!"

"I know," Saul replied. "But this senseless state of affairs has to end sometime. Have our men ready to follow this fellow. We'll rush in behind him to cut down that Goliath before the Philistines can get across the valley! After that -- who knows?"

Saul insisted that David put on his special armor for protection. Aides quickly outfitted him, even giving him Saul's very fine sword. But the metal equipment was so bulky and heavy that David could hardly walk, and it had to be removed.

There was no time to be lost. Goliath was still lingering at the edge of the valley and shouting occasional affronts at the Israelites in general. Instead of Saul's sword, David took the staff he usually carried and walked down the slopes toward the giant. He had to cross a small stream that trickled into the valley.

From its bed he selected five stones that had been worn smooth and round by the action of the water. These he slipped into the small shepherd's bag he wore attached to his belt along with his sling. (I Samuel 17:38-40.)

When Goliath saw someone approaching, he picked up his huge spear and slowly strode toward David, his heavy armor gleaming and clanking. As soon as the two men were close enough to easily view each other, Goliath came to a halt and let out a roar of disdain. His shield bearer, stalking before him, lowered his shield to the ground to indicate that protection for his champion wouldn't be necessary.

David Against Goliath

"Why has Saul sent out an unarmed youngster to meet me?" the giant bellowed. "Does he think I have no more fighting ability than a dog? What do you plan on doing to me with that stick you are holding? May the gods of my nation curse you for this insult to me!"

Goliath spat toward David, then turned and glared in another direction in a gesture of scorn.

Out of the corner of his eye Goliath could see David moving slowly toward him. His massive hand clenched his spear tighter as he turned to glare at his challenger. David knew that if the spear left the giant's grasp, it would hurtle toward him like a catapulted log!

"That's it, boy!" Goliath taunted, beckoning with his left hand. "Come a little close to me, if you dare, you brainless runt! As long as you're here, I might as well turn you into carrion for the birds and animals of this valley!" (I Samuel 17:41-44.)

"You are too sure of yourself!" David shouted to Goliath. "You have come here to fight with only the help of your sword and spear. You have only your armor and shield to protect you. I come here in the name of the mighty Lord of millions, the God of the armies of Israel -- the same God you have foolishly defied for the last forty days. You trust in your sword, spear, and shield. I trust in the living God. This God will now make it possible for me to bring you to the ground, so that I can cut off your head! Then the birds and the beasts will have more food than they can eat, because today they'll feast on the carcasses of thousands of your fellow soldiers as well as on your own! All who see this thing or hear of it will realize that battles aren't decided by the plans of men and the strength of their arms. The God of Israel decides who shall win, and in this battle Israel shall be the victor!" (I Samuel 17:45-47.)

"Bringing your God into this doesn't frighten me, little fellow!" Goliath shouted back, signaling to his shield-bearer to withdraw to one side. "No God can save you now!"

With surprising speed for one of his size, the Philistine lunged forward, at the same time lifting his great spear from his shoulder and drawing it backward for the thrust. While Goliath had been talking, David had slipped a stone into the leather socket of his sling. He rushed forward and forcefully slung the stone.

The giant's spear was never thrown.

The stone from David's sling hissed into the Philistine's forehead just beneath the rim of his helmet. Goliath's knees buckled, and then his massive body toppled forward like a great tree, crashing to the ground with a loud clang of metal!

David rushed to the fallen giant. The helmet had rolled several yards away, and he could see that the stone was deeply embedded in the huge head, proving that death had been instant. David dragged Goliath's weighty sword from the scabbard, raised it as high as he could, then brought it down on the giant's bullish neck, severing the head from the body. (I Samuel 17:48-51.)

Vanquished in God's Name

David looked up to see Goliath's shield-bearer racing back toward the Philistine army. The foremost ranks and officers could clearly see what had happened to their champion. The frightened Philistines turned and fled.

Soon the first ranks of Saul's shouting army were swarming past David, and took off in swift pursuit of the Philistines as they fled across the valley. The Israelites overtook and killed thousands of them in a wild retreat that covered many miles.

A large part of the army of the enemy managed to get off to a good start toward the homeland. Many troops succeeded in reaching Philistia to seek refuge in their fortified cities, including Shaaraim, Gath and Ekron, but without quite gaining freedom. They were overtaken at the very gates of the cities they almost reached. Hundreds fell by the swords, spears and arrows of the Israelites, who were consumed with vengeful feelings because the Philistines' champion had insulted them for so many days.

There were no enemy troops to come out of the cities against the Israelites, who later safely marched back to their barracks. On their way they took provisions and arms left in the Philistine camp, and destroyed everything they couldn't use. (I Samuel 17:52-53.)

Hours before, when David had gone out against Goliath, Saul had asked Abner, next in command of the Israelite army, if he knew who the young man was and from where he had come. Abner had assured Saul that he had no idea who David was. There was no more time to inquire before the Israelites set out after the Philistines. After the pursuit began, David trudged up to the barracks carrying Goliath's head and the giant's armor. Abner sent some of his aides to carry the armor and bring David before Saul.

"I want to commend you for your bravery and skill," Saul told David. "It's amazing that a young man like you, not even a soldier, succeeded in doing what none of my men would dare try! Tell me about yourself."

"I am David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem," David answered. "I came here today to bring food to three of my brothers who are in your army."

I was angry when I heard the giant speaking contemptible things of Israel. I knew that God would help me silence him, and He did." (I Samuel 17:54-58.)

A Hero's Acclaim

"I salute you, David!" Saul exclaimed. "I should like to have you remain here with me and my officers, so that you can train to become an accomplished soldier." (I Samuel 18:2.)

David thanked Saul, at the same time wondering how Saul could have forgotten the weeks David had spent with him as a musician and armor-bearer. Not wishing to embarrass Saul, David refrained from mentioning these things to him.

One of the first matters David took care of that day was to send a message to Jesse, his father, informing him that he was safe and would be staying with Saul for a time.

In the days that followed, David and Saul's son, Jonathan, became close friends. Jonathan honored David by presenting him with some of his costly military clothing and weapons. David was so useful and well liked by all that Saul made him an officer of high rank in his army. That didn't mean he was to start out by commanding men in battle, but that he had other duties of a lighter nature that nevertheless afforded him great respect. And he would be quickly trained to lead troops into battle. (I Samuel 18:1, 3-5.)

Then an incident took place that destroyed Saul's friendliness toward David. It was part of God's plan to eventually move David into power as king of Israel. Days were required for news of the Philistines' defeat to spread over all Israel. The people were so happily excited that some of the cities sent to Gibeah groups of young women, trained as dancers, singers and musicians, to praise the Israelite army for its victory.

When it was announced that the girls were coming to parade past Saul's royal quarters, crowds gathered along the streets. Saul and his officers, including David and Jonathan, waited on the balcony of the building while thousands of troops stood at attention nearby.

Band after band of young women, singing loudly, banging tambourines, plucking lyres and blowing horns, moved nimbly down the street past the crowds and Saul's balcony. Some marched, some danced and others rode on animals as they played. They shouted tributes to the troops and officers and sang songs that were composed to direct enthusiastic esteem to the victorious warriors. Saul and his men were very pleased by this animated demonstration.

Then, toward the end of the parade, came an especially vocal group of singers whose song was worded rather carelessly:

"OUR THANKS TO SAUL, OUR MIGHTY KING, FOR FACING THOUSANDS ONE CANNOT COUNT; BUT DAVID'S FEAT WAS A GREATER THING -- LIKE FACING TEN TIMES THAT AMOUNT!"

The bystanders, having heard so much of David's heroism, broke into wild applause. Saul's expression of pleasure abruptly melted away to make way for a scowl he couldn't hide. He glanced darkly at David, who was so embarrassed by the singers that he turned away from the balcony. Saul quickly strode off to his quarters.

"That was a most disloyal display!" Saul muttered to himself as he paced irritably back and forth in a private room. "The crowd applauded David's name more than mine. Surely it isn't possible that this young upstart is the one Samuel predicted would take the leadership of Israel from me!" (I Samuel 18:6-9.)

Royal Jealousy Flares

Next morning Saul awakened to find that he was in the same miserable condition that had bothered him in former times. He was wretched and depressed. He felt as though everyone about him were plotting to take his life. It was difficult for him to breathe, as if invisible hands were closing about his throat. He shouted for his servants to help him, but ordered them out as soon as they touched him.

"My father is ill this morning," Jonathan worriedly confided to David. "He acts as though he is out of his mind, but no one knows how to help him."

"Perhaps I can help him if you can find a harp for me," David suggested. "I can play a harp fairly well, and the music might calm him."

Jonathan immediately sent servants to find a harp. When one was brought a little later, David tuned it, went into the hallway leading to the room occupied by Saul, and began playing. Wondering at the source of the music, Saul opened the hall door just enough to be able to see through. When he saw who was playing the harp, he was furious.

This was the first time that David's playing upset the Israelite leader instead of soothing him. All he could think of at the moment was how to get rid of the younger man. He seized the scepter he often kept with him, which was actually a fancifully carved spear, and peered out to see if there were others in the hallway. Assured that David was alone, he opened the door wider.

"I'll put an end to at least some of my troubles by nailing that ambitious young buck to the wall!" Saul murmured to himself.

He drew the spear back, then savagely sent it hurtling toward David's chest. At that precise moment David dodged. The spear zipped close over his shoulder to gouge chips of stone out of the wall behind him. Realizing that it would be foolish to linger, he ran down the hall.

Angered still further by the failure of his effort, Saul leaped out of his room to snatch up his spear and hurl it again at David's retreating figure. The weapon embedded itself in a wooden pillar at the end of the hall only a second after David ducked aside to descend a stairway. (I Samuel 18:10-11.)

Saul Plots Against David

When next Saul and David met, it was as though nothing unusual had happened, David had concluded that Saul's rash behavior was due to a temporary mental upset. He told no one about it. Saul seemingly was as friendly as usual. In fact, he announced publicly that he was making David the commander of a thousand of his trained soldiers. David at first was pleased. But later he began to realize why Saul did this when it was disclosed that the thousand soldiers were stationed several miles from Gibeah. Saul had suddenly come to dislike David, and this was his way of getting the young man out of his sight and at the same time pleasing the many people who admired David.

As the months passed, David proved himself an exceptionally capable leader of the troops given to his command. He conducted himself wisely at all times, at the same interval growing in favor with his soldiers and the people, to Saul's envy. Meanwhile, Saul's suspicion grew that David was destined to be the next king. His dislike for the younger man grew accordingly. He even feared him in that he almost expected that God would act through David to punish him for trying to kill David with a spear. (I Samuel 18:12-16.)

Saul had noticed that there were some signs of affection between David and his daughters. He seized on this circumstance to start carrying out a base scheme.

"Would you care to have Merab, my older daughter, for your wife?" Saul bluntly asked David next time he met him.

"Not unless she prefers me above others for her husband," David answered.

Saul wasn't pleased by this equally blunt reply. When a king offered a daughter in marriage, it was highly irregular for a condition to be mentioned by the one who was to receive her. Saul managed a smile as he continued.

"I can promise you that Merab will prefer you. I'll happily give her in marriage to you within the week as a reward for your outstanding service in my army. Of course from then on I'll expect your men to go first into any battle with the Philistines. The husband of a princess should set an example in valor."

"I am very flattered," David observed, "but I am not from a wealthy or famous family. Your daughter wouldn't be happy to be married to a former shepherd."

Saul had expected that David would eagerly accept his older daughter, and that the younger man's obligation to Saul would mean so much exposure in battle that David would soon be killed by the Philistines. He was so angry at David's polite refusal that he immediately gave Merab away in marriage to another man.

David wasn't disappointed. Michal, Saul's younger daughter, was the one to whom he was more attracted, and Michal had a strong liking for David.

When Saul learned, to his relish, that it was Michal whom David preferred, he started planning again. (I Samuel 18:17-21.)

"This time our overly particular hero can't refuse me," Saul mused sinisterly, "and he'll pay with his life much sooner than I planned!"

Chapter 89

Saul Schemes Again

WHEN Saul was informed that David cared deeply for Michal, Saul's younger daughter, a new scheme occurred to him. He instructed his servants to casually let David know that he was so well-liked by Saul and those about him that it was hoped by all that he would soon marry Michal. (I Samuel 18:17-22.)

Royal Plot Backfires

In the next few days David was surprised at the number of Saul's aides, servants and officers who mentioned to him how much it would please everyone if David would marry Michal.

"I am not a wealthy man," was his usual answer. "It would hardly be proper for one with my humble background to presume to ask a king's daughter to marry me."

David's remarks were carried to Saul, who decided that the only obstacle to David's and Michal's marriage was the inability of David and his family to contribute the costly gifts that would ordinarily be expected from the groom and his parents.

"As soon as the opportunity presents itself," Saul told his servants, "mention to David that I would never expect any son-in-law of mine or his family to contribute gifts when a daughter of mine is married. Being a military man, I would expect instead that my son-in-law be enough of a warrior to approach the enemy and cause the death of a hundred Philistine soldiers. Of course I would require proof of the deed within a few days. If my prospective son-in-law couldn't produce proof of what I expect of him, I wouldn't allow him to marry my daughter." (I Samuel 18:23-25.)

Shortly afterward David was approached by many individuals who gave him the same information. He readily realized that it was something promoted by Saul, and so he gave to all the answer he knew that Saul hoped to receive.

"I'll set out at once to rid the land of a hundred Philistines," David said. "And when you report this to Saul, be sure to add that I'll hold you as witnesses in the event he decides to give Michal in marriage to some other fellow before I get back."

This jibe by David embarrassed Saul's servants, as David intended it to in a bantering way, because Saul and his aides had been so clumsy in approaching David. David knew that none of the servants would incur Saul's anger by reporting David's remarks about Saul giving his daughter in marriage to someone else. They wouldn't have dared to mention such a thing.

Saul was elated when he learned that David was setting out to fulfill the conditions he had established for marriage to his daughter. He was certain that David loved Michal so much that he would try to gain his goal as soon as possible by some youthfully rash action against the well-seasoned warriors of Philistia. He thought his would-be son-in-law would surely lose his life in battle. (I Samuel 18:26.)

Keeping his plans to himself, David secretly marched a company of his troops westward to where there was a small garrison of Philistines. He approached and attacked at night, completely surprising the enemy. His men succeeded in routing all of the Philistines and killing more than two hundred of them.

Saul had set a time when proof of the slaying of a hundred Philistines should be brought to him. He had been generous in this matter, being confident that David wouldn't live to carry out the requirements. It was quite a shock to the Israelite king when he was informed only two or three days later that David and his soldiers had returned victorious. He was even more upset when he was told that David's men had brought back small parts (foreskins) of the bodies of two hundred Philistine troops as proof that twice the required number of the enemy had been slaughtered.

David Marries

"I'll believe it only after I see proper evidence," Saul declared indignantly. "David isn't going to get away with any tricks!"

Saul didn't have to wait long before David appeared before him with two men bearing the evidence in a basket. It was placed provokingly close to the Israelite leader.

"Sir, here is my proof that my men and I have done away with two hundred Philistine soldiers," David declared. "That is twice the number you requested, and so I feel that there should be no doubt that I have more than fulfilled your wish."

"Should I take your word in this matter?" Saul inquired suspiciously. "How do I know what you have in this basket?"

"I don't expect you to take my word or that of anyone else," David replied. "I respectfully suggest that you personally inspect the contents of the basket."

Saul had already seen too much. With a curt and sickly wave of hasty resignation to David, he hurried away to his private quarters.

Later, Saul's servants gave a full, fair account of David's bloody tokens, and Michal was given to David in marriage.

When the Philistines heard what had happened to their slain men, they angrily sent small battalions to launch barbarous attacks on Israelite villages in western Canaan. It was only because David was so alert and active with his soldiers that he constantly outwitted and outfought most of these troublesome invaders. The former shepherd's popularity and fame continued to grow in Israel because of the courageous manner in which he helped protect the people. (I Samuel 18:27-30.)

Meanwhile, Saul had a growing fear, dislike and envy of David. It was increasingly clear to him that God was protecting David, and that he was destined to become Israel's next king. Regardless of what he thought God might do to him, Saul made it known to his servants, aides and officers that they should kill David whenever an opportunity came that would make the killing appear as an accident. He even made this an order to his son Jonathan, who respected and admired David.

Saul should have realized that his son's friendship with David would mean that Jonathan would warn David that his life was in danger.

"Don't sleep at your home tonight," Jonathan told David. "If you do, you could be dead before morning. Take blankets and sleep in the bushes in the field" (I Samuel 19:1-3.)

Next morning Saul took a walk in the same field where David lay hidden. When Jonathan saw his father there, he hurried out to join him.

"Your order to have David killed must surely be quite displeasing to God," Jonathan observed after the two men had exchanged morning greetings.

"And displeasing to you, too," Saul frowned. "Don't think I haven't noticed how friendly you two are."

Saul's Hatred Grows

"I'm concerned about you as well as David," Jonathan explained. "Surely you wouldn't want to be responsible for the death of a valiant young man who has been so loyal to you -- who killed Goliath after he had reproached your army for forty days. I would fear what God would do to me if I were the cause of the murder of an innocent man who has done so much for Israel."

Saul walked along in silence. Although he had become increasingly rebellious as a servant of God, there were times when he went through brief periods of remorse. This was one of those times.

"You are right, my son," Saul finally spoke. "I have acted hastily in this matter. I'll tell my men right away that they are not to harm him. I promise you that David shall remain alive as far as my servants are concerned."

David was so nearby in his place of concealment that he could hear what Saul said, and he was greatly relieved. He was later received in Saul's household as though everyone had always been the best of friends (I Samuel 19:4-7.)

Shortly afterward the Philistines began another series of attacks on the Israelites' western towns. Saul ordered various parts of his army to rout the enemy. As usual, because of careful planning, brilliant battle strategy and brave leadership, David's troops were so successful in driving back the Philistines that David was again hailed as a national hero.

Once more Saul was consumed with envy. He was overcome by the evil spirit that had troubled his mind so often in the past when he had lost control of his emotions. Invisible hands seemed to be trying to cut off his breath. After struggling to free himself from this miserable situation, he fell into a mood of intense depression.

"Send for David!" he barked at a servant. "Tell him to bring his harp!"

When David arrived, Saul scowlingly motioned for him to sit down and play. David obeyed, choosing his most restful tunes.

But the music didn't soothe Saul, nor did the Israelite leader expect that it should. He had a different purpose in getting David to his quarters. After a while he stretched out on his couch, and it seemed to David that he was falling asleep. Suddenly he rolled to his feet, seized his nearby spear and hurled it toward David. The younger man jerked his harp aside and bobbed forward. The spear missed his back only by inches and buried itself into the heavily paneled wall. If David hadn't dodged quickly, the spear would have gone through his body as well as into the wall.

Saul muttered angrily to himself because of his failure, then leaped forward to retrieve his spear so that he could use it again. The only right thing for David to do was run and run fast. When he reached home he told his wife what had happened. (I Samuel 19:8-10.)

"Unless my father's terrible state of mind changes, another attempt will be made on your life tonight!" Michal exclaimed anxiously. "Leave at once and go to Samuel's home at Ramah. You'll be safe there."

"I'll go if you'll come with me," David said.

At that moment there was a noise outside. Michal peeped out an upstairs window to see that several of Saul's soldiers were gathering at the front door of the house.

"My father's men are here!" she whispered to David. "It's too late for both of us to escape. Leave quickly through the window at the back of the house before they surround our home!"

David knew that it would be unwise to stay a minute longer, and that his wife would probably be safe under any circumstance. The window at the back of the building was too high for a safe leap to the ground, but Michal successfully lowered her husband with a rope. David waved to her and slipped quietly into the darkness. (I Samuel 19:11-12.)

Shortly afterward officers pounded on the door. When Michal appeared, they demanded to see David.

"My husband is ill," Michal declared curtly. "What is so important that you should drag a sick man from his bed?"

Ignoring Michal, Saul's men stomped upstairs and into the bedroom. When they glanced at the silent figure in bed, they withdrew from David's home. One of them went to report to Saul that David was ill, and that they had respected Saul's daughter's wish that her husband not be removed from his bed.

"I, too, shall respect her wish!" Saul shouted angrily. "Go back and tell my men to bring David to me at once -- bound to his bed! I'll dispose of him while he's still prone!"

When Saul's men again went up to David's bedroom, they deftly tossed ropes across the bed and quickly bound their victim. Then they discovered, to their embarrassment, that David wasn't there. Michal had cleverly arranged some objects under the blankets to give the appearance of a person in bed, thus giving her husband more precious time for escape. (I Samuel 19:13-16.)

Saul's men were so angry that they seized Michal, even though she was a princess, and forcefully brought her before her father. "What kind of a daughter are you to deliberately let my enemy escape?" he fumed. "Your disloyalty to me could cost me my life!"

Michal didn't know what to say, so in fear of her father she lied: "I had to let him go; he threatened me." (Verse 17)

David Reports to Samuel

Shortly after his escape, David arrived at Samuel's residence in Ramah. He related to the elderly prophet all that had recently taken place between him and Saul.

"Don't worry about your wife or yourself," Samuel comforted the younger man. "Rest here for a while. Then we'll go to Naioth, just outside this town, where my college for ministers is located. You should be safe there for a time."

Next day one of Saul's alert spies happened to see David at Naioth, however, and it wasn't long before a group of military police strode into the college. They arrived just when the students were carrying on a spirited song session. The soldiers were so impressed by the strong devotional manner of this service led by Samuel that they forgot their mission and enthusiastically added their voices to those of the others. (I Samuel 19:18-20.)

It wasn't very far from Gibeah, where Saul was, to Naioth, and so it wasn't very long before Saul heard what was going on. He immediately dispatched more soldiers to seize the first group as well as David, but the second group also arrived during a song service and was moved to join fellow soldiers and the students in hymns of praise to God.

When Saul heard what had happened to the second contingent, he wrathfully sent a third, only to be advised later that it, too, had gone the peaceful way of the others.

"I should have gone in the first place!" Saul stormed, gesturing wildly to his aides to muster more troops.

Later, just as Saul and his soldiers carefully surrounded the building where Saul's first three groups of men were, Samuel paused to suggest that his audience would become more alert if everyone sang. The singing began just as Saul and his men broke into the room. Samuel and his audience continued as though nothing unusual had happened, singing with such fervor and feeling that Saul and his men came to a halt. They stood and listened for a minute or two, and then joined in little by little until they were all expressing themselves as loudly as the others!

Certain onlookers were surprised to see Israel's king at the college. A report later went over the land that Saul was studying to become a minister -- much to Saul's indignation! Just as those sent before him forgot the reason for coming to Naioth, so did Saul forget. Probably they didn't entirely forget, but for a time they didn't care. Saul even felt that he wasn't attired properly for religious services. He removed his armor and commanded his men to do likewise. (I Samuel 19:21-24.) Then he stayed a day and a night with Samuel in a worshipful, friendly mood, not realizing that God had caused this attitude so that David could freely escape again!

Chapter 90

David's Faith Wavers

SAUL and some of his troops had come to Naioth in Ramah. Their intention was to capture David at Samuel's college.

But God made it easy for David to escape by causing a changed and devout state of mind to come over Saul and his men, insomuch that the Israelite leader and his soldiers joined in sacred services and spent many hours at the college in friendly fellowship. (I Samuel 19:18-24.)

Jonathan -- a True Friend

David safely returned to his home to happily surprise his wife, who had been released after having been arrested by some of Saul's soldiers. David hurried to visit Jonathan to try to find out why Saul was so eager to kill him.

"My father falls into a bad mood whenever he has one of those terrible periods of depression," Jonathan told David. "But he doesn't stay that way long. I'm sure he doesn't really want to kill you when he is in his right mind. If he had planned to do away with you, surely I would know about it." (I Samuel 20:1-2.)

"Most of your father's plotting against me has taken place during his sanest hours," David said. "And he doesn't always confide in you, as you'll find out soon when you'll have serious trouble with him because of me. Even tomorrow this could happen. It will be the new moon, and I'll be expected to be present at the monthly feast. Your father will undoubtedly ask you where I am. Tell him that I've gone to be with my parents because of a special annual family meeting. If he is satisfied by that explanation, and isn't perturbed because I'm absent, it will mean that I am wrong in believing that he wants me dead. But if he becomes angry when he learns I'm miles away, then you'll know that I am right because he will be so upset when he learns that I am safe from him."

"I don't understand how you can be so certain," Jonathan commented, shaking his head. "When my father returns from Naioth you'll probably find him friendly."

"Perhaps I've made too many harsh remarks about your father," David said apologetically. "If I have spoken in such a manner that I have made myself out to be your father's enemy, then remain loyal to your father and protect him by running your sword through me!"

"You're becoming a bit dramatic in this matter, David," Jonathan grinned. "Believe me, if I find that my father is truly scheming to take your life, I'll make every effort to inform you at once." (I Samuel 20:39)

"You won't be able to inform me if your father watches you closely," David said.

For an answer, Jonathan led David out into a broad, open field where they could be sure that no one would be listening to their conversation. There Jonathan asked God to witness that he would do what was best for David. He had a feeling that David would succeed his father as Israel's leader, and he asked David to promise him that Jonathan and his descendants would always be considered David's close and loyal friends. David was pleased to make the promise. He realized that Jonathan was willing to give up the prospect of becoming the next king of Israel. At Saul's death, under ordinary circumstances, Saul's son would naturally come into leadership. (I Samuel 20:10-17.)

Continual Bitterness

"After my father returns, we must use strategy in contacting each other," Jonathan told David. "Go visit your family if you wish, but come back in three days and hide among those boulders over there. I'll come out just three days from now for archery practice. After shooting three arrows, I'll send a boy to bring them back. If I shout to him, 'The arrows are on this side of you,' then you will know that my father is friendly toward you, and that you should return at once. If I shout to the boy, 'The arrows are beyond you,' then you will know that it's God's warning to you to leave here immediately. Whatever happens, I trust that we'll always be the kind of friends who are guided by our God." (I Samuel 20:18-23.)

Next day, when Saul and his court sat down to eat as was customary at the beginning of the lunar months of God's calendar, Saul immediately noticed that David's chair was empty. He said nothing about it, nor did anyone else mention the matter. He could only hope that something fatal had happened to David, and that he would never see him again.

The following day there was another special meal. Again David's chair was empty. Though it was one of only four chairs at the main table -- for Saul, Jonathan, Saul's commander-in-chief Abner and David -- no one spoke of David because of realizing that Saul would be irritated by the mere mention of the name. A sudden question from Saul brought a hush to the spirited conversation around the main table.

"Why hasn't David been here to eat with us these last two days?" he asked Jonathan, making every effort to sound casual while he was being consumed with a gnawing curiosity.

"David's people are observing a special annual family meeting," Jonathan replied, also striving to be casual. "You weren't here when he wanted to go, so he asked me for leave. I knew that you surely wouldn't deny his going for a visit to his parents' home near Bethlehem. The meeting with his family was very important to him."

By the time Jonathan had finished speaking, Saul's face had colored with rage. He lunged to his feet and stared angrily down at his son.

"You offspring of a lawless woman!" he shouted. "Why have you become so friendly with David? Don't you realize that he is scheming to take the throne of Israel away from me?"

If I die, you'll never become king if you continue to be taken in by his evil plans! Go find him and bring him here so that he can be executed!" (I Samuel 20:24-31.)

"Why should he be executed?" Jonathan demanded as he stood up to squarely face his father. "Exactly what has he done to cause you to be so unreasonably angry?"

Jonathan's words sent Saul into an even greater rage. He whirled to seize his javelin, a short spear, which was leaning against the wall. With great force he threw it, intending to run it through his son. Jonathan knew that his father was capable of any rash move, and deftly leaped aside to escape what otherwise would have been instant death. (I Samuel 20:32-33.)

David Escapes

Now it was Jonathan's turn to be angry, but with much more reason. He strode out of the building, leaving shocked members of the court and dinner guests glancing in fear and embarrassment at Israel's leader, who was trembling with wrath because David had obviously escaped and because his son would not share his feelings in the matter. (Verse 34)

"Rush men to Bethlehem to seize David if he is at his parents' home there!" Saul growled at Abner, his commander-in-chief.

Several hours later, mounted soldiers returned to report that David was not at his parents' home, and that neither his parents nor his wife could give any information about where he had gone.

"He could be floating down the Euphrates River by now!" Saul exclaimed sourly. "On the other hand, he could be trying to throw us off his trail by hiding in or near Gibeah. Search the whole town for him!"

Next morning Jonathan took his archery equipment and went with a boy out into the boulderstrewn field where he presumed David was hiding under some thicket. He shot two arrows at a target he had set up, and motioned for the boy to go after them. As the lad ran, Jonathan sent another arrow far beyond the target.

"My third arrow is far beyond the other two!" Jonathan shouted to the boy. "Hurry and find it! We don't have much time today for practice!"

Jonathan knew that if David could hear him he would understand that he meant David should get away without delay. He carefully but casually looked around as he walked slowly among the boulders and bushes, but saw no sign of his friend. He had to cease searching when the young helper ran up to him.

"Here are your three arrows, sir!" the boy panted.

"Good work!" Jonathan praised him. "That will be all for today because I have remembered other things I must do. Take my bow and my quiver of arrows back to my quarters, and I'll pay you later today for a full morning's work." (I Samuel 20:35-40.)

As soon as the jubilant boy had departed, Jonathan was happily startled to see David squirm out of some bushes and hurry toward him. David bowed respectfully three times, inasmuch as he regarded Jonathan worthy of the full respect one should show to a prince, even though the two young men were close friends. They spoke only briefly to each other, knowing that they shouldn't risk being seen together, and that it is very dangerous for David to be seen under any circumstances. Both were moved to tears because they had to part, perhaps never to see each other again.

"Hurry away from here before someone sees you!" Jonathan warned. "Remember our pledge that we shall always be friends, and may God protect you!" (I Samuel 20:41-42.)

Help from the Priests

With a final wave David disappeared among the bushes and boulders. Jonathan walked back to the streets of Gibeah to pass groups of soldiers moving from building to building in a frantic search for David.

Moving stealthily southward into the land of Judah by night, David came to the homes of several men who had been his trusted soldiers. There he received food and lodging. Because of their special devotion to David, some of the men joined him in his escape journey so that they might help protect him from those who would be hoping to capture or kill David and earn the rewards Saul was offering. David and his men then headed northwestward.

Three days after he had parted from Jonathan, David arrived with his men at the place called Nob, in the city of Kirjath-jearim, about seven miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was here that the ark rested many years after it was returned by the Philistines -- until David became king. (I Samuel 7:1-2; I Chronicles 13:5-7.)

Hungry and weary when they arrived at Nob, David and his men sought out the place where priests were carrying on their duties before the ark of God. David knew the head priest, Ahimelech, and came by himself to Ahimelech's door. When the priest saw who it was, he wondered why such a prominent Israelite should show up at night alone.

"Welcome to this place," Ahimelech greeted David, "but where are your aides? Surely a man of your renown in Israel is not traveling about without attendants." (I Samuel 21:1.)

David didn't want to tell the priest that he was running from Saul, so he quickly invented an explanation he hoped would be accepted. He was so intent on getting out of the country that he inclined to rely on his wits, in this case, instead of God.

"Saul has sent me on a secret mission," David told Ahimelech in a low voice. "He wants no one to know about it, and I'm asking you to tell no one that you have seen me here. I have men with me on this mission, but they are waiting elsewhere. We are traveling light and rapidly, moving through the country seeking food when we are hungry. We would appreciate anything you can spare -- especially bread. Five loaves would be a great help to us."

"We don't have that much ordinary bread on hand," Ahimelech said. "We have many loaves of bread from yesterday's shew-bread offering, but only we priests are to eat that. However -- perhaps it wouldn't be wrong to give some sacred bread to men who need it to keep alive, provided they have been conducting themselves as godly men."

"My men and I have been hiding for the last three days so that we wouldn't be recognized," David explained. "There hasn't been much opportunity for them to be the kind of rogues you have in mind. And besides, the bread is in a manner common because the day on which it was sacrificed has ended." (I Samuel 21:2-5.)

Ahimelech seemed satisfied. He asked one of the many priests there under his leadership to bring bread for David, who stood off to one side so that he wouldn't be noticed by anyone at the sanctuary. One man, however, having come to the place earlier for a purification ceremony, took notice of David.

In the Enemy's Land

That man was Doeg, Saul's chief herdsman, an Edomite who was in charge of many men who worked on the Israelite leader's cattle ranches. Just then a priest appeared with the bread for David, who took it and hurried out with only the briefest of thanks. Doeg stared after him.

"That man leaving looks just like David, Saul's son-in-law!" he exclaimed to Ahimelech. "What could he be doing here by himself?"

"They say that most everyone has a double," the priest shrugged, being careful to be honest and at the same time trying to protect David. "This man came in desperate need of food. Would David have to do that at a place like this? This man has a short beard, and David is known to be always shaven."

Doeg left without saying anything about the matter, but the priest could tell by his shrewd expression that the herdsman was about convinced that the man was David. A little later Ahimelech was surprised to find David at the door again.

David wanted to leave hurriedly, but couldn't. "We were sent in such a hurry on our mission that I had no time to get weapons for myself," David told the priest. "We need weapons for defense. Do you have any you could let us have?"

"We have no use for arms here," Ahimelech pointed out, "but the sword of Goliath has been brought here as a reminder to worshippers that God delivered our people again from the Philistines through you. If you have need of the sword, you surely would be the one most entitled to it."

"It is a very heavy weapon, as I well know," David said. "But it is a very fine sword and I have great need of it." (I Samuel 21:6-9.)

After obtaining the sword, David returned to his hiding companions, who were still munching on the bread he had brought them earlier.

When they saw that he was carrying Goliath's sword, they were greatly impressed by it, but they felt that it had little value as a weapon because it was so burdensome.

"I have a reason for carrying it," David disclosed to them. "Saul would never think of looking for us in the Philistine city of Gath. We'll go there without danger of being jailed or killed because the sight of this sword should command plenty of respect for us from the people of Goliath's home town. And very likely the king of Gath will befriend us since Saul now seeks my life."

David's men were dismayed at the plan. They remained with him until they reached Gath at Philistia. Then they told him that it would be a risk of life to enter the city.

"I won't ask you to go with me." David told them. "Stay here out of sight and wait to see what happens. If I don't send for you within a day, you'll know that I've been wrong in this matter."

Attired in his best clothes, and with his sprouting beard neatly trimmed, David strode up to the gate of Gath with Goliath's sword over one shoulder. Soon he had attracted a crowd of onlookers, including some city magistrates. To these David announced that he would like to be taken to Achish, the king of Gath. The magistrates knew that the king would be curious to see the bearer of Goliath's sword, and soon David was presented to Achish. Just as the king was beginning to ask questions, one of his officers who recognized David apologetically and excitedly broke in.

"Sir, this man is the Israelite David who killed our champion, Goliath!" the officer declared. "Don't you recall how he was proclaimed a great hero in Israel, and was given more credit for victory over us than even the king of Israel received?"

"This is the man?" Achish muttered, scowling slightly.

Achish's scowl was one of curiosity rather than of anger. The king had no intention of harming his visitor, but David thought that his expression and actions indicated that he was about to order his guards to seize him and put him to death. (I Samuel 21:10-12.) Under the pressure of being sought by Saul, David had lately resorted to deceitful means, but in this situation he almost outdid himself. He was so filled with fear that he could think of only one thing that might save him. He fell to the floor and began to writhe and drool as though mad!

Chapter 91

David Outcast!

DAVID had come to the Philistine city of Gath to escape being killed by Saul's soldiers. He hoped the Philistine king would befriend him. Because he carried Goliath's sword, he was able to gain an audience with Achish, the ruler. Achish intended to treat him civilly, but his manner was a bit gruff. Believing that Achish was about to order his death, David sought a quick way to save himself. He began to act insanely. (I Samuel 21:10-13.)

Achish and the members of his court stared. Then the king settled back in his chair as his mouth tightened and his brows furrowed in irritation.

"Whoever this man is, get him out of here!" he commanded, vigorously waving both arms. "I want an explanation from the ones who brought him here! Why does anyone assume that I need maniacs to entertain me?"

Guards rushed at David to seize him and carry him from the room.

From Palace to Cave!

"Take him outside the gates and see that he doesn't get back through them!" Achish called to the departing guards. "I'll not provide food and shelter for the madman!" (I Samuel 21:14-15.)

While he was being dragged through the streets David continued to pretend that he was crazy by struggling madly and muttering senseless phrases. As he was taken outside the walls he snatched up a sharp stone and made a long scratch on the planks of the gate.

Disgusted with his actions, the guards yanked David off his feet, tossed him into a nearby clump of short bushes and retraced their steps, banging the massive gates shut behind them.

As soon as he was alone, David scrambled out of the bushes and trudged off to where his men were faithfully waiting. Not wanting to add to his embarrassment, they said nothing as he walked up to them.

"Obviously I was wrong to think that I could stay in Gath," David said to them. "But who can say for certain that God had no part in this? Possibly he directed us here so that we would escape being discovered in some other place."

"If we must return to Canaan, I have a suggestion, sir," one of the men spoke up. "There are many pits and caves in the limestone area a few miles east of here across the plain at the base of the mountains. If we could reach one of the more obscure caves, we might be able to hide there for a long time."

David welcomed this idea. At the risk of being seen as they crossed the broad plain, they hurried to the nearby Judean mountains, where they found a good-sized cave, at Adullam, on a steep western slope close to a spring. It was a hideout that afforded them a good view of the surrounding territory, though it couldn't be seen very well from a distance.

The Oppressed Look to David

In the next few days it became increasingly difficult to obtain food. Deer were scarce in that area. And David wasn't in the habit of eating squirrels or rabbits because he knew that God had told the ancient Israelites that people shouldn't eat rodents. (Leviticus 11) A few clean birds and wild goats downed by arrows were about all the men had to eat. Although he didn't want even his family to know where he was, David finally, in desperation, chose one of his men to go to Bethlehem to obtain food from Jesse, his father.

About three days later one of David's group excitedly reported that a party was approaching from the north. David ordered his men to spread out and hide in various spots so that they couldn't be surrounded in the event the approaching figures turned out to be one of Saul's searching parties.

Suddenly David realized that the oncoming group included his father, mother, his brothers' and sisters' families and the man he had sent after food! He leaped out of his place of concealment and ran down the slope to happily embrace them. (I Samuel 22:1.)

"Why are you here?" he anxiously asked.

"Saul has been threatening your family and friends," explained the man who had gone after food. "They insisted that I tell them your whereabouts so that they could join you to escape the death that Saul promised them soon unless they should tell where you are. Saul thinks they have been hiding you, and his men have searched their homes many times."

Several persons had come besides David's family, but each one brought his share of food, clothing and practical utensils. And most had managed to bring a few animals. Working together, the little band of people soon turned the cave and some nearby smaller caverns into a fairly livable area.

David hoped that his family hadn't been followed, but later that day several men were seen approaching from the north. Everyone went into hiding, but the oncoming figures had already seen people near the cave, and boldly kept drawing nearer. At a signal from David, his men rushed out and closed in on the newcomers, who made no move to resist.

"We're friends!" one of them declared. "We're not Saul's soldiers or spies, but oppressed people like yourselves. We followed David's family here at a distance because we guessed that they would be going to join him. We have come along to help make up an army for David! We are helpless without his leadership."

These well-equipped soldiers were obviously sincere. David recognized at least one of them as formerly being among his troops. After questioning them, he was satisfied that it was safe to welcome them to camp in nearby caves. Obviously, word of David's whereabouts had leaked out.

This was only the beginning of visitors. In the next few days all kinds of people arrived, though it was a mystery how they all learned where David was hiding. Some came because they felt that David should replace Saul as the leader of Israel. Some were fleeing from oppressive creditors. Others were seeking refuge from the injustice of Saul's law. Discontent, prompted by many causes, was driving hundreds of men to join David because he was considered an outcast and an underdog of great ability whom they wanted as a leader. (I Samuel 22:2.)

"This can't go on," David told his family and his trusted men. "It's a miracle that Saul hasn't been here with an army before this. We must pack up and move out of here as soon as possible. We will take as many as possible of the people with us, even though a few of them are thieves and murderers and want to use me and my trained men for protection. I'll pick about four hundred men who are of good character, strongest and best trained. Then we'll leave."

One day soon afterward David and his four hundred chosen men, along with their families, quickly packed and moved off to the southeast. The first day's hike into and over the mountains was so difficult that most of the unwelcome and less ambitious dropped out. David's aging parents had the advantage of riding on donkeys. To avoid being trapped by Saul's army, David sent scouts and runners in all directions, to warn him of approaching danger.

Refuge Among the Gentiles

Next night the band hid in a deep ravine and moved on again when daylight arrived. After a few more periods of resting and hiding, the marchers rounded the southern end of the Dead Sea and arrived at a range of low mountains fringing the southeast coast of the Dead Sea. Moving to the top of the range, they encamped at an ancient stronghold called Mizpeh. This spot was so difficult to reach that it was about the safest place they could go to near Canaan.

Leaving most of his men and their families at this hideout, David traveled with his family and a few soldiers a few miles further eastward to the capital of the nation of Moab, where he asked for an audience with the king. (I Samuel 22:3.) The king was puzzled as to why a prominent Israelite leader should be coming to visit him. He couldn't help recalling that bit of his nation's history about 280 years previously when another leading Israelite had come to bring gifts to Eglon, who had been the Moabite ruler and Israel's oppressor at that time. Ehud, the visiting Israelite judge, had planted a dagger deep in Eglon's belly. (Judges 3:12-26)

Nevertheless, the king of Moab graciously welcomed David. He was aware that the young Israelite had earned the reputation of being an honest and dependable man as well as a valiant one.

"I am aware that you consider it strange that I should seek a favor from the leader of a nation that has long been an enemy of Israel," David addressed the Moabite king. "Possibly you know, through your private sources of information, that I'm trying to escape being killed by Saul's men. Even my father and mother have been threatened with death, but they escaped and are here with me now. They are very old and aren't safe anywhere in Canaan, so I've brought them here to ask you to give them refuge till I see how God will settle this matter between Saul and me." (I Samuel 22:4.)

"Ruth, who long ago married your great grandfather Boaz, was also an ancestor of mine," the Moabite king finally spoke after an interval of thoughtful staring at David. "You and I are related, and I am not exactly displeased with that relationship. Bring your parents to me, and I shall see that they are well cared for."

After making certain that his mother and father were comfortably housed, and after expressing his thanks to the king of Moab, David hastily returned to the four hundred men he had left at the hideout. There he stayed for a time, probably for several weeks or months. There were upland meadows to feed their small flocks and herds. Also, clean game was temporarily plentiful in this high ridge country to help keep everyone in good health.

But it wasn't God's will that David should indefinitely remain hidden. Otherwise, Saul might have continued on and on as Israel's leader, and the people would be inclined to think of David as one who had given up because of fear or guilt.

One day it was made known to him, through the prophet Gad, who was close to God, that God didn't want him to stay away any longer, and that he should return to the territory of Judah and camp in a forested region of Hareth a few miles southwest of Hebron. David obediently, but secretly, returned with his four hundred men to the designated place in his homeland. (I Samuel 22:5.)

Ruled by Emotions

By this time Saul was in a growing state of irritation because of David's disappearance. He was hopeful that David was dead, but he knew that he couldn't rest until proof was brought to him. He offered generous rewards for such proof, but all he received were increasing rumors that David was still alive. However, no one could or would say where he was. This was maddening to Saul, who realized more and more that he was contending with an element of people who were in sympathy with David.

Shortly after David's return to the territory of Judah, a report came to Saul that David was hiding in a wooded area between Jerusalem and the Philistine city of Gath. Saul knew that this might be nothing more than false information meant to send him off in the wrong direction. But he was so excited that he ordered a number of officers and aides to assemble before him in a field near Ramah. Here Saul and a detachment of soldiers were camped, ready to go after David as soon as they learned his whereabouts. There Saul reprimanded his men for a supposed lack of loyalty to him.

"Listen, you men of Benjamin!" Saul angrily shouted from within the shade of a tree. "Have any of you ever heard of a thing known as devotion? If you have, probably you're saving it for David. Do you think David will present you with the choice fields, orchards and vineyards of this country, besides putting each one of you in command of hundreds or even thousands of men as I have done! Is there a one among you who has harbored some deep concern for me, or have you all schemed with my son, Jonathan, to lead me into trouble with my enemy, David?" (I Samuel 22:6-8.)

Saul's men stood around in embarrassed silence, realizing that their leader was in one of his reasonless moods, and that his emotional charges were generally groundless. Among those present was Doeg, Saul's chief herdsman, an Edomite, a descendant of Jacob's twin brother, Esau. (Genesis 25:19-26; Genesis 36:1, 8.) Doeg the Edomite saw an opportunity to please his leader, though at the same time he was taking a great risk in offering delayed information.

"I would have reported this sooner to you, sir," Doeg said after stepping before Saul, "but I was never quite sure that I could believe my own eyes. Weeks ago, when I was in the tabernacle at Nob, I saw the priest, Ahimelech, giving bread to a man who could have been none other than David. Later, I saw the priest give him the sword of Goliath." (I Samuel 22:9-10.)

"You tell me now!" muttered Saul heatedly.

For a few moments Doeg felt that all of Saul's wrath would be directed to him. Then the Israelite leader turned away from him and loudly ordered soldiers to hurry to Nob and bring Ahimelech and all his family of priests to Gibeah. Not many hours later these people were herded into Saul's presence.

"Why have you plotted against me by giving food and a weapon to David, my enemy?" Saul demanded of Ahimelech.

Crime of Saul and Doeg

"I wasn't aware that David was your enemy," Ahimelech answered. "I've always thought of him as obedient, loyal and honorable. I trust that you don't feel that I or anyone else with me is responsible for any trouble you are having with David."

"Don't try to squirm out of this!" Saul growled at the priest. "I know that you plotted with David, as have many others, to dethrone me! You are guilty of treason, and the penalty for treason is death!"

Before the astonished priest could say another word in his defense, Saul ordered nearby infantrymen to surround Ahimelech and all those who had been brought with him.

"Kill every one of them here and now!" Saul commanded.

Some of the soldiers reluctantly moved up at the first part of the command, but the order to kill the priests was too much for them. They feared their leader, but they feared God more. Saul's face grew livid as he glowered at his soldiers.

It was all he could do to conquer a savage urge to rush in among them with the spear he clutched. (I Samuel 22:11-17.)

As Saul gazed angrily about, he realized that his chief herdsman, Doeg, was among the onlookers who had come to Gibeah. With Doeg were several of his underlings, all armed.

"Doeg!" Saul thundered. "If you want to live to hold your position, step up here with your men and slaughter everyone who has been brought from Nob!"

Doeg instantly reasoned that if he failed to obey, Saul would do away with him. He jerked his sword out of its scabbard, nodded to his men and all of them rushed to slash down Ahimelech and all those who had accompanied him. Saul's men looked on in dismay while the Edomites accomplished their grisly task, but none of them had the courage to interfere.

Little did Saul and Doeg realize that their hideous crime was the fulfillment of prophecy. God had warned Eli the priest that his family, even in succeeding generations, would suffer greatly for his having defiled the priesthood. (I Samuel 22:18; I Samuel 2:22-36.)

Later, as Saul shamelessly surveyed eighty-five dead priests and the dead of most of Ahimelech's family, another barbarous thought entered his mind.

"You have done well," he told Doeg, "but this isn't the end of the matter. I want to show what will happen even to the cities, towns and villages where Israelites dwell who are disloyal to me. Go up to Nob with your men and kill every person you find there, no matter how young or how old! Besides, I want you to destroy all livestock! Leave nothing alive!"

"But there are about three hundred people left in that town, sir," Doeg pointed out. "Most of them would escape before my few men could reach them."

"Then pick up more men on the way!" Saul commanded. "I'll supply you with extra weapons, and you do the rest! I'll make it worth your trouble."

That night Doeg, his men and some lawless, money-baited recruits crept silently into the unwallled town of Nob.

Chapter 92

David Vagabond King!

TO TRY to impress on Israel that death would befall anyone who gave aid to David, Saul ordered the execution of the priests of Nob, although only Ahimelech, the high priest, had helped David. Saul then sent the executioners, led by Doeg the Edomite, to kill all the other people in the little priestly town. (I Samuel 22:18-19.)

Slaughter Without Pity

Doeg and the men arrived at night to quickly fall on the unsuspecting families of the slain priests in their homes. After they had cruelly disposed of the people, Doeg's servants and other hired assassins slaughtered all the livestock in or near the town.

Only one man was known to have escaped the barbarous carnage. He was Abiathar, one of Ahimelech's sons who hadn't been taken to Gibeah to be slain with the other priests because he wasn't in Nob at the time. Somehow Abiathar learned where David was hiding and fled there, with sacred objects and vestments, to relate what had happened. (I Samuel 22:20; 23:6.)

"When I was in Nob I well remember Doeg staring at me," David told Abiathar, "and I knew that there would be trouble as soon as he reported my being there to Saul. If I hadn't been so careless as to be seen by him, probably this terrible thing wouldn't have happened. I can't tell you how miserable I feel about it, but at least I can promise you refuge with us. My men and I will guard you with our lives." (I Samuel 22:21-23.)

Shortly before Abiathar joined David, a report had come that the Philistines were making occasional attacks on the town of Keilah in Judah not far from the forest of Hareth. They were robbing the Israelites there of their fall harvest of grain. David didn't feel inclined to idly stand by with his little army while this was taking place. He wanted to help. But before doing anything about the matter he prayed about it, asking if the God of Israel would allow him to undertake such a perilous task.

By some means -- possibly through Abiathar -- David learned that God would permit him to take his men to defend Keilah. But when David informed them of what he intended to do, they showed very little enthusiasm.

"We are in enough danger hiding here in the forest," they pointed out respectfully to their leader. "If we go to Keilah we'll be exposing ourselves to Saul as well as the Philistines. We could end up between two armies and be wiped out."

The men weren't refusing to go, but they felt that they would be so outnumbered and outmaneuvered that the effort would be in vain. Once more David prayed, this time asking the Eternal to help him -- something he probably should have done in the first place. God made it known to him that He would make it possible for David and his men to succeed.

When David told this to his soldiers, who by then numbered about six hundred, their attitude changed so much that they became eager to go after the enemy. (I Samuel 23:1-4.)

David Rescues the Helpless

Keilah was a walled town where the inhabitants could live in comparative safety, but the threshing floors were outside the walls. After the grain threshers had come out and worked a while, Philistines hiding in nearby grain fields would attack the workers, seize the grain and rush away. The marauders would also take any grazing livestock they could catch.

As David and his men cautiously topped a rise on their march to Keilah, they saw the walled town in the distance. But something more interesting was much closer. Camped in a ravine out of sight of Keilah was the company of Philistines responsible for making the hit-and-run attacks!

There wasn't time to make any special preparations for a charge, because Philistine lookouts, stationed at high spots on both sides of the ravines, had already seen the approaching Israelites and were shouting an alarm. David quickly separated his company into two parts and sent them racing down the steep sides of the ravine to block the Philistines from escaping at either end. Bottled up almost before they could move, the hundreds of enemy troops fell before the confident Israelites in a bloody battle that didn't last very long. (I Samuel 23:5.)

Some of David's men carried the stolen grain back to Keilah. Others herded back the livestock. The inhabitants of Keilah were spared from what otherwise would have been a long period of hunger, followed by an eventual attack by the enemy that would have destroyed them and their town. In spite of the help they had been given, they seemed a bit backward in allowing David and his men to come into Keilah. It was plain to David that they were fearful of what Saul would think.

It wasn't long before Saul learned what had happened. He welcomed the news that David and his men were staying in Keilah. This meant that Saul had only to surround the town with his army and close in at will with catapults, battering rams and a vastly superior number of soldiers. It didn't matter very much to Saul if he had to destroy a whole town of Israelites in order to get David.

Realizing that he and his men (weren't exactly welcome, David asked Abiathar, who had accompanied him, to inquire of God if the people of the town would turn against him (if Saul should besiege Keilah). The answer from God was that the people would do anything to save themselves and their town from an attack by Saul. David didn't wait for Saul's army to show up. He wisely left to avoid unnecessary trouble, taking his men southwestward to camp in a forested, mountainous region at Ziph, south of the city of Hebron in Judah. This was just a few miles east of David's old hiding place in the forest of Hareth. (I Samuel 23:7-15.)

Just as Saul set out for Keilah with an army of thousands, he learned that David and his men had left the town. There was no way of knowing, at the time, where he had

gone, and Saul was furious. He sent bands of men into most parts of Judah, but they were unsuccessful in finding the elusive young Israelite.

Jonathan Still a Friend

A few days after departing from Keilah, David was informed that a small group of men was approaching the camp. David sent men to ambush the group and bring the prisoners to him. To his astonishment he found that his soldiers had brought in his friend Jonathan with a few trusted bodyguards. (I Samuel 23:16.)

David was very happy to see Jonathan, who had carefully slipped out of sight of his father's spies to bring encouragement to his friend to whom he had pledged loyalty. (I Samuel 20:42.)

"Don't be discouraged," Jonathan advised David during a long conversation that followed his arrival in the wood. "My father won't succeed in destroying you, no matter how stubbornly he keeps on trying. I realize that you will be the next leader of Israel, and so does he, but his consuming envy prevents him from giving in. Just keep away from him, and with God's help this time of troublesome hiding will soon come to an end."

Having brought hope and comfort to David, Jonathan departed a few hours later to return home to Gibeah by a devious route so that Saul's informers wouldn't have a correct clue as to where he had been. Jonathan wasn't a traitor to his father. He was actually helping Saul by preventing him from harming David. (I Samuel 23:17-18.)

The movements of David and his small army were observed by several people who lived in the rugged region south of Hebron. Hoping to gain a reward by making a report, they went to Saul with their information.

"If you'll follow us," they told Saul, "we'll lead you right to David's camp!"

"Well!" Saul exclaimed a little bitterly. "At long last people show up who want to help me! May God bless you for your efforts, but I'll need more information before I take my army off in pursuit of that crafty fellow again. By the time we would get there, he would probably be elsewhere. Go back and find out more about his movements and his possible hiding places in that area. When I know more about these things, I'll go after him. Meanwhile, I have no intention of chasing him all over Judah." (I Samuel 23:19-23.)

The disappointed informers returned to their homes without the rich rewards they thought they would receive. They had to be satisfied with relatively minor tokens from their king. Their reports would really have been of little value to Saul, because David and his men had already moved south a few miles along a mountain ridge. Saul later learned of this, and though he had said that he wouldn't pursue David by risking a futile march, he ordered his army off to the south.

When David found out that Saul's army was very close, he hid his men on the most obscure side of a mountain. Informers then told Saul where David had gone, and

Saul rushed in pursuit to that particular mountain, but no one was in sight on the side he approached.

"If that foxy rebel is near this mountain," Saul observed, "then he must be on the other side. If that's the way it is, then we'll out fox him by dividing forces and swinging around both shoulders of the mountain!" (I Samuel 23:24-26.)

If Saul's orders had been carried out, David's army would have been trapped between two companies of soldiers. But God didn't intend that such a thing should happen. Just as the troops were about to start out to encompass the mountain from two directions, a messenger arrived to inform Saul that Philistine troops were pouring into Canaan from the west.

Vexed and disappointed, Saul gave the order for his men to rejoin in one company and set off to the northwest to contact the enemy. If he had known for certain that his quarry was on the other side of the mountain, he undoubtedly would have ignored the Philistines, for a time, in order to at last overtake and destroy David. (I Samuel 23:27-28.)

David Spares Saul

When David learned that Saul's army had departed, he led his men northeastward to hide in caves in rough country close to the west shore of the Dead Sea. (I Samuel 23:29.) Several days later, after Saul had succeeded in chasing the invading Philistines back to the west, he was told of David's latest place of concealment. Taking three thousand of his best-trained soldiers, he moved quickly into David's hiding area, stubbornly intent on searching every cave and ravine for his son-in-law.

At one point in the difficult search among hot boulders and gulches, Saul became so weary that he told his officers that he wanted to lie down in some cool spot and refresh himself with a few minutes of sleep. Some of his aides went inside a nearby cave that appeared to be rather small, and having satisfied themselves that it was a safe place, they suggested Saul rest there. Saul went inside by himself, leaving the main body of his troops resting in shaded spots while some of his officers and aides sprawled out not far from the mouth of the cave.

Soon the Israelite king fell into a deep sleep that would have been impossible if he had known that David was so close. The cave was much larger than his light-blinded aides had estimated. It cut far back into the cliff, and in its dark recesses David and some of his soldiers were silently observing Saul!

"This is unbelievable!" some of them exclaimed to their leader. "You have spent months escaping from him, and now he stumbles into your power. Surely God has made this possible so that at last you will be able to treat him as he wishes to treat you!"

Motioning to his men to stay where they were, David walked quietly toward the mouth of the cave and gazed down on the man who had caused him so much trouble. With his sword he could have put an instant end to his persecutor.

Instead, he stooped down and used his sword to carefully slice off the lower part of Saul's robe. (I Samuel 24:1-4.)

"If that's all you're going to do to him," some of David's men angrily exclaimed as he returned to them, "then let us take care of the matter properly!"

"No!" was David's firm but quiet answer as he looked thoughtfully at the piece of cloth. "Suddenly I feel that I have done a childish thing. After all, God ordained Saul as our king, and it was wrong of me to do anything to him -- even to cause him embarrassment."

Then men understood what he meant, and said no more to him about punishing Saul, although most of them would have welcomed the opportunity to vengefully whack the king over the head with a spear. They watched in bitter silence as Saul roused himself, stretched, got to his feet and walked out of the cave. (I Samuel 24:5-7.)

Abruptly David broke away from his men and ran after him.

"King Saul!" he shouted.

Saul turned to see who had addressed him, but he failed to recognize David, who fell to his knees and bowed his forehead to the ground for a few seconds.

Why have you listened to certain men who have told you that I am your enemy?" David loudly addressed Saul. "Today God caused you to go into this cave where I have been hiding, and I could easily have taken your life. Some of my men urged me to kill you, but I told them that I couldn't do such a thing because God had ordained you the ruler of Israel. Look at your robe. I could have slashed you as I slashed off this part of your garment I'm holding. Doesn't this prove that I have no intention of doing away with you?"

Crocodile Tears

Saul looked down at his robe, and for the first time noticed that part of it was missing. He stared back at the piece David held, seemingly too perplexed or surprised to say anything. Behind him his men had leaped up for action, and were poised to rush at David. Saul glanced back and held up a hand to restrain them.

"Why do you go to such trouble to try to take my life?" David continued. "God knows that I haven't schemed to kill you, so what is your reason for being here with your soldiers? Your cause is really no greater than it would be if you were looking for a dead dog or pursuing a flea. Surely God isn't pleased, because He knows that envy has made you this way!"

Not until then did Saul begin to recognize David, who had become stronger and quite tanned. (I Samuel 24:8-15.)

"Are you really David, my son-in-law?" queried Saul a little suspiciously.

"I am David," was the answer.

"You are a better man than I am!" Saul muttered, breaking into tears. "I have treated you miserably and you have behaved toward me without hatred or revenge. You have proved that you aren't my enemy by not taking my life, even though God gave you the opportunity. Any other man in your place would have surely killed me. I trust that God will reward you for your goodness. David, I am aware that you are to become the next king of Israel. I want you to promise me now that you will do nothing to cut off my name in Israel, and that you won't destroy those of my family who come after me."

This was an odd time for Saul to ask favors, what with David having just acted as he did, and with Saul's men ready to lunge at David. Saul's unpredictable behavior was probably due, to some extent, to his fears and confusion of mind, which resulted from being under an influence that troubled him with fits of depression.

David solemnly promised what Saul requested, whereupon the king promptly left. As David watched the men depart, he knew that Saul would continue to trouble him in spite of his expressions of regret. (I Samuel 24:16-22.)

A few days later word came that Samuel had died. David was very grieved, but he knew it would be unwise to attend the funeral because Samuel's death would cause Saul to feel freer to do away with David.

Chapter 93

Vengeance or Repentance?

A GREAT number of Israelites from all over Canaan came to attend Samuel's funeral at Ramah, where the old prophet was buried with appropriate honors. (I Samuel 25:1.)

David wasn't among those who attended. He knew that he would be risking his life to go where Saul was. Instead, he moved his men on southward to the Paran Desert, farther away from Ramah and Gibeah. There his small army moved from place to place, not staying in one spot very long because of the necessity of obtaining food as well as the need to keep Saul guessing David's location.

The Shepherds' Friend

Food wasn't always easy to get. Much of it consisted of wild game, but there were necessities that had to be acquired through other people. David sent bands of mounted men to help farmers with their crops, shepherders with their flocks and cattlemen with their herds, obtaining food and supplies for their services. Often those services entailed offering protection from Arabs who plundered for a living. One group of David's men came upon a small number of herdsmen who were looking after an unusually large flock of sheep, and who were in constant fear of attacks. The herdsmen were relieved and thankful when they learned that it was David's men who had come to them.

"If you are afraid of Arab raids, we'll stay with you until you take your sheep back to the owner," the head of David's group told the herdsmen.

In the days that followed, the small group of David's soldiers successfully drove away several bands of Arabs who never expected that they would meet professional fighting men. Many sheep probably would have been lost if the defenders hadn't been there. When finally the herdsmen took the flock back to the town of Carmel in south Judah for shearing, David's men went on the drive with them for further protection. Then they returned south to where most of their fellow soldiers were camped.

The owner of the protected flock was a man named Nabal. He owned several thousand sheep and goats, and was considered wealthy for a man of that time and region. Regardless of his possessions and his beautiful and intelligent wife, Nabal was a sullen, unfriendly, ill-tempered man whose main interest was in increasing his wealth. (I Samuel 25:2-3.)

When it was reported to David how Nabal's sheep had been saved from marauders, he picked ten of his men to go to Carmel to remind Nabal what had happened, and to diplomatically ask for a modest reward for sparing him such a great loss.

The ten men were very courteous to Nabal. They carefully explained that he would have fewer sheep to shear if their fellow soldiers hadn't been on hand to protect the

flock. Of course Nabal had already heard the story from his men, but he didn't wish to admit it. (I Samuel 25:4-9.)

The King of Selfishness

"You say you were sent from some fellow by the name of David, who is the son of Jesse?" Nabal questioned them sarcastically, trying to create the impression that he had never heard of such men. "Who are David and Jesse? Am I supposed to know them? And why should I believe that you have been sent by this David? There are many hungry servants on the move who have run away from their master. Why have you come to me?"

"Our leader is the one who killed Goliath, the Philistine giant," the spokesman for the ten men patiently explained. "He is in need of food for his soldiers, and he feels that you might be willing to help him in return for the favor a few of his men did for you in saving your sheep."

"Ah! Now it comes out!" Nabal scoffed. "You're hoping to talk me out of the bread, water and fresh mutton I have to furnish for my shearers! Well, I don't know you, and I'm not giving anything to strangers!" (I Samuel 25:10-11.)

"Our leader will be so disappointed in you that probably he'll be back with us to see you again," said one of David's men.

This remark enraged Nabal, who forgot for the moment that he wasn't supposed to know who David was.

"Tell your beggarly David that if he comes around here I'll have King Saul and his army here to meet him!" he stormed. "Now get out of here before I set all my herdsmen and shearers on you!"

David wasn't pleased when he heard of Nabal's attitude, and he decided that the unsociable rancher needed a lesson in courtesy. Leaving two hundred men to guard the camp, he led the other four hundred on a march back to Carmel.

One of Nabal's herdsmen was afraid that something like this would happen. He went to Abigail, Nabal's wife, and told her how angry and disdainful her husband had been with David's men.

"His stubbornness and ill temper could lead to trouble," the herdsman explained. "He refuses to acknowledge what David's men did to save his sheep, though they were like a walled fortress around us. But Nabal says he doesn't believe that wandering outlaws could be honest or helpful. His rudeness and insulting manner could result in David showing up here with enough troops to take over the whole ranch!" (I Samuel 25:12-17.)

Fearing what David might do, Abigail decided to try to meet him before he could reach Carmel. While her husband was busy overseeing the sheep shearing, she had some of her servants load donkeys with food, and sent the servants and the loaded animals off on the main trail leading southward.

They didn't carry enough provisions to feed a small army. But Abigail hoped there would be enough to show appreciation for what David's men had done. There were two hundred loaves of bread, two goatskins of wine, five dressed sheep, at least ten gallons of parched corn, a hundred large clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of pressed figs.

Abigail watched until the servants and animals were safely at a distance, and then mounted a donkey and set out after them. She caught up with them on the other side of a hill that commanded a far view of the region to the south. From there, to both her relief and anxiety, she saw hundreds of men approaching across the semi-arid, rolling plain! (I Samuel 25:18-20.)

The Way of a Good Woman

David's anger, kindled by Nabal's churlish conduct, was out of control almost from the moment he had commanded two thirds of his army to follow him to Carmel. He had made it known to his officers that he wouldn't leave a man alive at Nabal's ranch, thus temporarily lowering himself, by a vengeful state of mind, below Nabal's level of character. By the time he was nearing Carmel he calmed down a little, and began to reconsider his cruel purpose.

Just then Abigail appeared. She hurried ahead of her servants, dismounted from her donkey and bowed her head to the ground before David, who preceded his men by a few yards.

"I know why you are here, sir," she said to David. "I am Nabal's wife, and I can understand how you must feel toward him because of how he has treated your men. He is one who is by nature unsociable, and who can't communicate with others without troubling them. If you will allow me to speak on, I would like to make an apology for him."

"Your husband must account for his own shortcomings and make his own apologies," David solemnly informed Abigail, "but I am interested in what you have to say."

"Thank you, sir," Abigail continued. "I didn't know about how your men were insulted by my husband until a servant reported it to me. Now it is my desire to try to make amends by bringing this gift of food here on these donkeys. It isn't much, but I trust that it will help you realize that we are thankful for what your men have done. I hope that it will help remind you, if you are planning to destroy my husband and his men that it isn't according to your usual fair way of settling matters. For your sake, as well as ours, I trust that you will be merciful to us. I know that your life lately is a perilous one because of being constantly pursued. You are pressed to deal harshly with your enemies, but I know also that God must be your real protection against those who oppose you. One day soon you will be king of Israel. I hope that you won't have to recall how you and your men took the lives of my husband and his men for the mere sake of vengeance. If I am able now to persuade you to be merciful, and if God is pleased by it, please remember, when you are king, that I was a help to you." (I Samuel 25:21-31.)

David was both surprised and pleased by Abigail's understanding words, sincerity and beauty. Here was reason enough to call off the expedition. The gallant move was understood by David's men.

"May God bless you for meeting me here," David cordially addressed Abigail. "I'm happy that I've heard what you have to say to cause me to realize how rash I've been in this matter. If it weren't for your efforts to divert me from my purpose, my soldiers would probably be punishing all the men on your ranch by now. And thank you for bringing food to us. We greatly appreciate it. I shall not forget you for this great favor." (Verses 32-34)

The End of an Ingrate

David's men happily accepted the proffered and needed food while David and Abigail continued in conversation. David told her to return in peace to her home, and promised that he would take his men back to their camp. He parted from her with obvious reluctance, having been suddenly and strongly impressed by her appearance and personality. (I Samuel 25:35.)

When Abigail returned home with her servants, she found it filled with shepherders and their women. Because this was the season of his main income, Nabal had been drinking most of the day. By evening he was in a somewhat drunken condition. But with him it was in some ways an improvement in his character, inasmuch as he became happier, more generous and more sociable. As a result, he invited all his workers and their wives and various other women to a party that turned out to be unusually boisterous.

Abigail said nothing that night about David to her husband. Next morning, when he had recovered his full faculties, she informed him of how close he had come to losing his ranch and his life.

"If I had been only a half hour late in what I did, you wouldn't be here listening to me now," Abigail explained.

At first Nabal wouldn't believe his wife, but after he questioned the servants who accompanied her to meet David, he became so emotionally upset that he became very ill. His fears, frustrations and gnawing hatreds were too much for his heart, and he died about ten days later. (I Samuel 25:36-38.)

When David heard of Nabal's death, he knew that it all had come about through God's planning. He was very thankful that he had been spared from carrying out his own rash plan of vengeance.

David's Marriage

One of David's many disappointments during his time of banishment was to learn that Michal, his wife, had been given by Saul in marriage to another man. It wasn't unexpected, therefore, that David should allow himself to become more and more interested in Abigail.

A few weeks after her husband's death he sent several of his ablest soldiers to Carmel with a message for the young woman. Abigail was pleased to receive them, but she was disappointed because David wasn't with them.

"We're here to take you back to our camp," one of the soldiers told her. "David wants to marry you."

The startled Abigail was both elated and distressed. Although this blunt, assumption type proposal was common in those times, Abigail would have been much happier if David could have come in person to ask her to be his wife. She was for a moment tempted to ask why David should take it for granted that she would agree to marry him, but she controlled herself because such an attitude might have appeared too arrogant for a woman -- and because she wanted to marry David.

"I am pleased and honored that your leader has sent for me," she told the soldiers as she bowed her head to the ground. "Let me instruct my servants, and then allow me to wash your feet."

Abigail's willingness to be so humble as to wash her guests' feet was sufficient. David's men declined with thanks because they knew their leader wouldn't approve. They patiently settled down to what they thought would be a wait of several hours, but were surprised not much later when Abigail emerged from her quarters with five handmaids carrying clothes and supplies. The six women mounted burros and departed with the soldiers for David's camp.

There David and Abigail were married, and there was a great celebration. Abigail had appointed one of her most trusted and capable men to supervise her sheep ranch in her absence, but she returned to it from time to time. Later, when David and his men moved northward to a rugged region not far south of Hebron, Abigail probably spent most of her time on her property, which undoubtedly furnished much food for David's small army. (I Samuel 25:39-42.)

The Bible mentions another marriage of David to a woman named Ahinoam, but when the marriage took place isn't indicated. Perhaps the two marriages overlapped, as it was not uncommon back then to have more than one wife at a time. (I Samuel 25:43-44.) David had to learn the hard way that having more than one wife at a time was not God's way.

When the inhabitants of the country south of Hebron saw David returning to their territory, they again sent men to Saul to report what was going on. This time Saul didn't delay as he had before when informed of David's presence there. He chose three thousand of his best soldiers to go after David's six hundred, unaware that David's lookouts watched him come into the area, and saw where his troops camped the first night out. (I Samuel 26:1-4.)

David Is Still Merciful

When David learned where Saul was, he came to a spot before dusk where he could look down on Saul's camp. After determining how he might reach Saul's rest area, he asked for someone to volunteer to go with him.

Abishai, one of his nephews (I Chronicles 2:13-16), offered to go, and the two men quietly crept to the trench where Saul slept with a few of his officers, including Abner, the commander-in-chief. (I Samuel 26:5-7.)

"There he is!" Abishai whispered to David. "God has given you this chance to destroy the king of Israel!"

"I have no desire to destroy him," David whispered back. "Then let me do it for you," Abishai pleaded. "I'll run my spear into him with such force that no other blow will be necessary to do away with him instantly."

"No!" David said, seizing Abishai's arm. "Saul was ordained by God to be king of Israel. If you kill him, God will surely punish you. If Saul is to die, let God take him. His time will come, and probably in battle with the Philistines. For now, let's be content to take his spear and his canteen."

David and Abishai successfully left Saul's camp and returned to the hill where the other men waited. The daring feat of getting in and out of the camp was possible only because God caused Saul and his men to fall into a deep sleep. (I Samuel 26:8-12.)

Just before sunrise David shouted loudly down to the three thousand slumbering men. His voice carried strongly on the quiet morning air, awakening Saul's army like a call to arms.

"You there Abner!" David yelled to the commander-in-chief as soon as he could dimly see figures moving about. "Answer me, so that I'll know you're listening!"

"This is the commander-in-chief!" Abner shouted back. "Who is it that dares disturb the king?"

"You have the reputation of being the bravest and most alert officer in the Israelite army!" David yelled. "Then why weren't you on your toes last night? Why did you allow some intruder to get so near Saul that he could have killed the king while he slept?"

"What are you talking about?" Abner indignantly roared back. "There were no intruders in this camp last night!"

"Denying a fact makes you even more guilty!" David went on needling the officer, who was growing angrier and more puzzled. "For trying to hide your carelessness, the king could have you executed! Explain, if you can, what happened to Saul's spear and canteen!" (I Samuel 26:13- 16)

Aides scrambled madly to try to find the spear and canteen which Saul hadn't realized were missing till the moment David mentioned them. Abner stared perplexedly at Saul, who stared in bewilderment at the small hole in the ground where he knew he had jammed his spear before he had gone to sleep. He began to realize that something had been going on that was making his fighting force look ridiculous.

Chapter 94

Life Among the Philistines

HAVING taken Saul's spear and canteen while the Israelite king was sleeping with his encamped army, David stood on the top of a hill and loudly lampooned Saul's chief officer for not watching over his leader. (I Samuel 26:5-16.)

When it was discovered that Saul's spear and canteen were missing, the officers and guards were greatly embarrassed. Finally Saul recognized the voice from the hill, and realized that somehow David had again managed to get near him when he was asleep.

Halfhearted Repentance

"This is Saul!" the king boomed out. "Are you David, my son-in-law?"

"I am, sir!" David shouted back. "Please tell me why you and your soldiers are out looking for me again. What have I done to cause you to desire to kill me? If it is God who sent you after me, why hasn't He put me into your hands? You know that God would accept an offering if I had committed an offense against you. If men have talked you into this chase, a curse should be on them for causing me to have to stay away from the tabernacle and go to live among heathen.

"You have pursued me as a hunter who runs after a partridge in the mountains, throwing sticks at the weary bird every time it flies up from a hiding place. You remind me of one who keeps slapping at a hopping flea. And what will you gain if you succeed in shedding my blood before God, who sees all?" (I Samuel 26:17-20.)

Saul stood with his head down. Once more he was made painfully aware of the futility, expense and shamefulness of this ridiculous, drawn-out pursuit. His soldiers stood at attention, waiting for orders to storm up the hill or surround it with bands of nimble archers. After an awkward silence Saul look up at the hill.

"I have been unwise and vengeful!" he shouted to David. "Come back to Gibeah, and I'll see that no harm comes to you, inasmuch as you kept me from harm last night!"

"Then here is your spear -- and your canteen!" David answered, holding them aloft. "Send a man after them! As for what has happened here, God will deal with each of us according to what each of us has done! He made it possible last night for me to take your life, but I couldn't do it because He at one time ordained you as the king of Israel! As I spared you, so do I trust that God will spare me from trouble and death!"

"I, too, hope that you will receive God's protection and blessings!" Saul shouted back in a friendly tone that must have puzzled those of his soldiers who didn't know him very well. "I believe that you shall one day become Israel's ruler, and a successful one!"

David chose to say no more. For a while he dispiritedly watched Saul's army prepare to return to Gibeah, and then he went back to his men.

He was weary of being pursued. In spite of what Saul had said in a time of momentary repentance, he knew that Saul wouldn't let up for long. He wanted to go to a place where he wouldn't constantly be hunted, and where the authorities wouldn't be too unfriendly (I Samuel 26:21-25.)

Although the king of the Philistine city of Gath had put David out of his city when he had previously sought refuge there, David believed that if he returned to Philistia with an impressive number of soldiers, he might be welcomed, especially inasmuch as foreign rulers now regarded him as a strong enemy of the king of Israel.

Refuge Among the Heathen

David sent representatives to Achish, the ruler of Gath, to ask if he could move into Philistia with his band. Achish sent back word that David and those with him would be welcome in Gath. It was obvious that Achish would probably expect a return of the favor by making use of David's well-trained troops. Nevertheless, David and his men and relatives moved into Gath. Included were his two wives, Abigail and Ahinoam. Many of the soldiers had wives, and all these women went with their husbands.

Reports of this state of affairs soon came to Saul. He was angered because David had gone where it wasn't safe to pursue him. Saul's only comforting thought was that the Philistines might do away with David because he was their natural enemy. The Israelite king knew that he would have to patiently wait and see how matters turned out. (I Samuel 27:1-4.)

Having established the news that he was safe in one of Philistia's strongest cities, and being anxious to get away from the Philistines' pagan practices as soon as possible, David asked Achish if it would be feasible for him and his soldiers and families to go to some small country town to live. David pointed out that it wasn't right that strangers should dwell in a royal Philistine city for very long, because the people of Philistia wouldn't understand.

Achish agreed. There was an old walled town called Ziklag, on the border between Philistia and Judah that was in need of skilled soldiers for the benefit of the Philistines.

"Take your people there and occupy the place," Achish told David. "All I'll require in return is that you defend that area of the border from the enemies of Philistia, no matter who they are." (I Samuel 27:5-6.)

After David and the people with him were settled at Ziklag, which was about twenty-five miles south of Gath, David began taking his men on forays in the area to the south, against the tribes who had invaded Israel in previous years. Saul's victory over the Amalekites in that region years previously had broken what remained of their nation into a few wandering bands of Arabs. These had increased in numbers, and were raising herds and flocks at the edge of the desert that extended into the Sinai peninsula.

Every time David attacked one of these groups, all the people were killed. Then the livestock was seized and taken up to Ziklag because David and his men were in great need of more livestock, having had to eat many of their food animals while they were hiding from Saul in the mountains.

Although God had instructed the Israelites to destroy most of the heathen tribes in and close to Canaan (Exodus 23:20-25; Deuteronomy 7:1-5; I Samuel 15:1-3), David's main reason for doing away with the desert people was to prevent information of his raids to the south getting to Achish, who presumed that the forays were against Israelite ranches and towns.

Meanwhile, more men who didn't feel Saul was fair in many matters came to Ziklag to join David. They were well-trained, powerful soldiers from Benjamin, Judah and Gad. A great part of them were clan chiefs and military leaders. All of them were helpful and necessary additions to David's army.

Suspicious Philistine Lords

The bloody raids on the desert tribes continued for several months. Once in a while some of the captured cattle, donkeys, camels and sheep would be herded into Gath, much to the satisfaction of Achish. At such times he would ask where the animals were rounded up, and David would explain that they came from various places in the south part of Judah, so that Achish would be led to believe that David had taken them from Israelites. Gath's ruler was more and more pleased with this state of affairs, never guessing that David was deceiving him. He considered David a traitor to Israel, and one who had such a hatred for his own people that he would long remain a great help to the Philistines. (I Samuel 27:8-12.)

In this matter David was far from honest. Possibly he was inspired by God to take measures to preserve himself and those with him, but his words and actions were too extreme to indicate that God was backing him up in all that he did.

David had been in Philistia for well over a year (I Samuel 27:7) when Achish confided in him that the leaders of the nation were planning an attack against Israel with their combined armies.

"Of course your men will join my men to go with the troops that will very soon rally from all parts of Philistia," Achish told David.

"You can look forward to my soldiers fighting hard against the enemy," was David's answer.

David didn't promise allegiance to Philistia by that remark. The king of Gath assumed that David was talking about the enemy of Philistia, whereas he was really referring to the enemy of Israel.

"I want the very best of your men as my bodyguards," Achish announced enthusiastically, "and I want you to be their captain for as long as you choose to be!" (I Samuel 28:1-2.)

Shortly afterward the Philistine armies began to move off to the north close to the east coast of the Great Sea, boldly going through the territories of Dan and Ephraim into western Manasseh to a spot near the southern end of the valley of Jezreel. (I Samuel 28:4.) This level expanse had been the site of fierce warfare years previously, between the Israelites and the inhabitants of northwestern Canaan. (Joshua 11:1-12.)

Achish's soldiers were the last to move out of Philistia. It wasn't until days later that it became known to all the rulers of Philistia that the famous David of Israel was among their ranks. They sent word to Achish that they didn't approve of this, whereupon Achish replied that David had always been loyal to him, and that there was no reason to distrust him. This reply angered the other leaders, and they demanded that David be sent home with his men, lest they be plotting to attack the rear ranks of the Philistine troops to gain favor with Saul. (I Samuel 29:2-5.)

Although he was disappointed in losing David and his men, Achish had to agree to the demands of his fellow kings. Whether David was really disappointed or relieved isn't indicated in the Bible, though to Achish he gave the impression that he was disappointed. The rear troops were already camped for rest after the third day of march. David and his men stayed that night, and started back for Ziklag next morning as the Philistines moved into battle positions. (I Samuel 29:6-11.)

As David moved southward with his company, he saw a band of men following in the distance. Curious as to the identity of the men and why they trailed behind, David halted his troops and alertly waited for the band to catch up. It turned out to be made up of military officers from Manasseh, who preferred to be in David's growing army rather than in Saul's.

Tragedy at Home

Three days later, as the Israelite troops came within sight of their fortress home, they noticed smoke floating up from inside the stone walls. Weary as they were from marching, they excitedly ran the rest of the way. To their surprise and horror, they found that the inside of the fortress had been burned and that their wives and children were gone!

Frantically they pawed through the rubble, but there wasn't even a dead person to be found. Cattle, sheep, camels and donkeys had been taken, as well as food, clothing and other things of value. All else that was burnable had been consumed by fire. Even the barns, sheds and corrals outside Ziklag had been burned. There was no clue to point to the identity of the spoilers. But their trail led southward. From the jumble of tracks of people and animals, it was obvious that more than a small group of men had been required to take all the women, children and all the animals. But who were these mysterious men? And where had they gone with their captives?

Not knowing what to do to rescue their families, David and his men fell into a miserable state of depression and sorrow. Some sat silently in dejection, but most loudly wept with grief until they were nearly exhausted.

David's distress turned out to be greater than that of any of his men when he learned that some of them blamed him for the situation, and even mentioned stoning him to death. His followers were devoted to him, but the calamity of losing their families temporarily caused them to be seized by a wild desire for revenge, and David was the only object they could find. (I Samuel 30:1-6.)

David couldn't decide if pursuit would be worthwhile. Having had a head start, the invaders could easily have dispersed in several directions, leaving the Israelites searching for weeks or months all over the Sinai peninsula.

David had to look to God for the answer. Abiathar the priest still accompanied the soldiers, and David requested him to pray about the matter, asking God if they should pursue the Amalekites. David prayed also. God made it known to them that the Amalekites should be pursued. To David's relief and joy, God also predicted what would happen. The Israelites would overtake the Amalekites and recover all that had been taken by them!

When David disclosed the message to his men, they were greatly encouraged. They set out with enthusiasm prompted by the desire to rescue their families, but many of them soon lost their little remaining energy because they had lately done so much marching. By the time they had trotted a few more miles, some were too weary to ford a stream, called the Brook Besor, that rushed toward the Great Sea through the deep gully.

"You who are too tired to cross should stay here by this stream," David told his men. Two hundred men stayed behind. (I Samuel 30:7-10.)

God Supplies a Guide

As it developed, David and his remaining four hundred men had only a few more miles to go. A young man was found lying in a nearby field. He was so weak that he couldn't at first tell who he was, but after being given water, bread, figs and raisins, he was soon able to talk.

"The Amalekites burned your town and took your families," he informed the Israelites. "As soon as they learned that the Philistine soldiers had gone north, they came up from the desert to attack Philistine towns. Then they moved eastward into southern Judah, taking everything they could find and burning what they left behind. Yours was the last town they attacked before starting back."

"If you are one of them, why did you stay here?" David asked.

"I am not an Amalekite," the man answered. "I am an Egyptian who fell into the hands of a desert band when I was a boy. I have been a servant ever since. I was brought here to help in the raids, but became ill. My master left me here three days ago with nothing to eat or drink."

"Do you know where the Amalekites are now?" David asked.

"I know which route they took, but they would kill me if they found out that I told you," the Egyptian replied. "I'll tell you only if you will swear by your God that you won't kill me and that you won't take me back to my master." (I Samuel 30:11-15.)

"We have no intention of killing you or taking you back to your master," David firmly told the Egyptian.

Dusk was coming on when they came over a rise to see the well-lit camp of their enemies in a wide hollow below. Confident that David and his men and the soldiers of Philistia were far away, the Amalekites had started celebrating their successful raids before reaching their home territory. Even from where they stood, the Israelites could plainly see that their enemies were happily eating, drinking, singing and dancing.

"Spread out behind the surrounding rises and encircle them!" David instructed his men. "As soon as you're well positioned, wave to me. I'll give the signal for attack!"

When the Israelites rushed down on them from all directions a few minutes later, the Amalekites were so surprised that they had little opportunity to prepare to defend themselves. A great part of them lost their lives by that first onslaught of David and his men, but during the hours of darkness that followed, about four hundred Amalekites managed to escape on camels. All during the night and until evening of the next day the Amalekites struggled to beat off David's soldiers. They would hide behind knolls and then leap out to attack Israelites who came looking for them. After hours of such skirmishes David's men finally wiped out the last stubborn resisters. Then came the joyful rescue of the women and children and others who had been taken from Ziklag. David found his two wives safe and well. Other Israelites wives and their children were discovered to be unharmed by their abductors. (I Samuel 30:16-19.)

David Rules Wisely

When the Israelites turned back to the north, it was with all that had been stolen in both Judah and Philistia by the Amalekites except what had been eaten. Before they reached the stream where two hundred of David's men had been left behind, those men saw them approaching, and excitedly waved and shouted greetings to them. Those who had grumbled because these men had stayed behind began to complain again. This time it had to do with how the recovered property should be distributed.

"Probably these lazy ones will expect a share of what we are bringing back," they observed. "They shouldn't receive a part of what they have failed to fight for."

"They'll receive their share," David sharply informed the grumblers. "At least they watched over the heavy supplies we left with them so that we could travel faster. Those who are left behind in war should receive their just share, and I'll do my best to see that it always will be that way in Israel." (I Samuel 30:20-25.)

After arriving at Ziklag, part of David's men set to work rebuilding the town. David shortly sent out orders to the towns of southern Judah that had been raided by the Amalekites.

These men determined from the residents what had been taken from them, then later returned with what had been taken or things of equal value. And from among the livestock and other property the Amalekites had taken from the Philistines, David afterward sent valuable presents to those friends in Judah who had helped him and his men during their long ordeal of running from Saul. (I Samuel 30:26-31.)

Meanwhile, the Philistines had arrived by the thousands to camp at the west end of the valley of Jezreel. Thousands of Israelite soldiers had come to take up a stand on the east end of the valley near Mt. Gilboa. (I Samuel 28:1-4.) Saul was greatly troubled when he saw the superior numbers of the Philistines. All he could think about was certain defeat. In this time of growing desperation he fearfully looked to God for help.

"Be merciful to the army of Israel!" Saul pleaded in prayer. "Make it known to me what should be done to defeat the enemy!"

Saul hoped that God would answer through a vision or dream, but there was no answer. There was no priest through whom God could be contacted. (I Samuel 28:5-6.)

Saul could think of only one other possibility. Although in the past he had made great efforts to drive wizards, sorcerers, magicians and mediums out of Israel, he was now confronted with what he thought was the necessity of making use of such a person. If he had turned to God in a spirit of repentance, God wouldn't have remained silent.

"Find me a woman who can contact the spirit world!" Saul commanded some of his officers.

Astonished at their leader's request, the officers told him of a sorceress who secretly practiced her forbidden pursuit near a town called Endor a few miles to the north. (I Samuel 28:7.)

"We have heard that this woman has great and mysterious powers," they said. "She is known as the witch of Endor, the one who talks with the dead!"

Chapter 95

"The King is Dead!"

FACED by an army of thousands of Philistines, Saul was desperately anxious to know how to escape what appeared to be certain defeat of Israel's forces. (I Samuel 28:1-6.) Having received no signs from God, he decided to go to a certain sorceress, a woman who reportedly could talk with the dead. He knew that it was wrong to have anything to do with people who had evil powers, but he was so fearful of the Philistines that he was willing to resort to anyone for advice.

Saul Breaks His Own Law!

Not wishing it to be generally known what he was doing, Saul chose only two of his officers to accompany him to the woman who was known as the witch of Endor. Dressed in ordinary clothes so that they wouldn't be recognized, they went by night northward to Mt. Tabor and the town of Endor. At the lonely home of the sorceress Saul was introduced only as one who desired to get in touch with the spirit of a dead friend.

"Who told you that I could help you in such a thing?" the woman asked, suspiciously scrutinizing the three of them. "Don't you know that Saul has driven out of Canaan those who deal with the spirit realm? I could be put to death if a rumor were to start that I am a sorceress!"

"We know that you are," one of Saul's men said. "You will be well rewarded for doing as this man asks, and no harm will come to you because of it. But if you refuse, we'll see that Saul sends men here to end your life!"

The witch, by no means an ugly old hag, stared in fear at the men, and especially at the very tall one who kept his face half hidden with a scarf.

"Come in," she said. "Tell me what you want me to do." "Don't be afraid of us," Saul said. "I promise that no harm will come to you if you will bring the spirit of Samuel, the late judge of Israel, up from the dead!" (I Samuel 28:7-11.)

The woman was startled at this request, but she took them to a dimly lighted back room of her home and went through the pretentious motions and incantations that were mostly to impress those present. She knew that Samuel was dead and couldn't appear in any form, but it was her craft to contact demons who would produce illusions and voices to satisfy people who believed the ancient fable that dead people can travel about in spirit form and manifest themselves to live human beings. This pagan concept is still widely believed today even among people who term themselves Christians, although the Bible plainly states that the dead know nothing (Ecclesiastes 9:5) and that the earliest resurrection of true Christians is to eternal life as spirit beings will not be until Christ returns to Earth. (Revelation 20) Saul must have known that the dead do not communicate with the living, but he was desperate enough to try anything.

"I feel that someone in the spirit world is about to appear!" the woman droned as she sat as though in a trance.

Suddenly she gave a wild shriek and leaped out of her chair. Gazing fearfully into a dark corner of the room, she backed slowly away.

"Now I know that you are King Saul!" she shouted, pointing at Saul. "Why have you tried to fool me?" (I Samuel 28:12.)

"I wanted my visit here to remain a secret," Saul explained. "I have no intention of driving you out or killing you because you deal with spirits. Now tell me how you knew me, and what you saw that frightened you."

A Spirit Imposter

"A voice told me who you are, and at the same moment I saw someone come up out of the Earth who seemed to be like a god or a judge!" the sorceress answered. "I was startled because I didn't expect anything like that. He was a stately elderly man with gleaming white hair, and he had on a beautiful mantle of the kind worn by men of high rank!"

"Then it was Samuel!" Saul exclaimed excitedly. "Can you cause him to appear so that I can see him, too?"

The woman mumbled something. Almost immediately the form of an elderly man began to materialize in patches of gray light against the dark wall. When Saul saw the increasingly glowing eyes staring at him, he shakily dropped to his knees and bowed his head to the floor while his two officers cringed in a corner. (I Samuel 28:13-14.)

"Why have you caused me the trouble of coming up from my peaceful grave, Saul?" a quavery voice called out.

Saul was even more aghast when he heard the voice that was a weak but misleading imitation of Samuel's. Although he had come to try to contact Samuel, it was difficult for Saul to believe that he was actually in touch with the old prophet. Finally he managed to reply to the strangely wavering form.

"I'm calling on you because the Philistines threaten to conquer my army and take over all Israel," Saul hastily explained to the spirit imposter. "I've asked God what to do, but He hasn't answered me in any way. I had to turn to you to advise me how to save the nation from the enemy."

"If God has refused to help you, why do you look to me?" the voice of the glowing figure asked. "By now you should understand that ruler-ship of the kingdom of Israel has been taken from you and will be given to David, the man you have troubled so long. This is because you disobeyed God in many matters, including your refusal to destroy all the Amalekites and their belongings."

"You told me that long ago," Saul broke in impatiently, "but I am still king of Israel. I want to know what I should do to defeat the Philistines."

"You won't defeat the Philistines," the voice continued. "Tomorrow will be the day of battle, and tomorrow you and your three sons will be killed and join me in the state of the dead!"

This shocking statement was too much for Saul, who was already in a weakened condition. He collapsed on the floor even before the glowing figure had faded into darkness. His officers leaped to him. (I Samuel 28:15-20.)

"He hasn't eaten anything for a whole day," one of them said. "He needs food."

"Let me get you something," the woman suggested to Saul as she knelt down by him. "I did as you told me. Now do as I respectfully ask you, and rest while I prepare something for you to eat. Otherwise you won't have strength to leave here."

The Spirit of Despair

"I don't want anything to eat," Saul muttered. "After what I saw and heard, food is the least of my interests."

"But the woman is right, sir. Let her bring food for you," the officers pleaded. "Otherwise you might fail to make it back to camp, and the Philistines could attack at any time!"

"All right! All right!" Saul murmured in a voice that carried both dejection and impatience. The message from that spirit had sapped Saul's will and determination.

Saul's men helped him to bed. While the fatigued man rested, the sorceress worked swiftly in slaughtering and dressing a calf. As the meat cooked over hot coals, she also prepared unleavened bread and baked it. One might think that all this would require several hours, but many people in those times were very skilled in hastily preparing meat dishes all the way from the live animal, so the three men didn't have to wait a long time for the hot bread and steaming meat. (I Samuel 28:21-25.)

Strengthened by the food, Saul was soon able to depart with his officers to return to the Israelite camp near Mt. Gilboa before dawn. Even though he had been told that he and his three sons would be killed within only a few hours, he began to hope that the statement wasn't true. He reasoned that the dead couldn't come to life in spirit form, and that all he saw and heard was an illusion and sound somehow created by the sorceress. Of course, the figure he saw wasn't that of Samuel, physical or spiritual. Samuel was dead and buried about sixty miles away, and wouldn't become conscious until more than three thousand years later when he will be resurrected to meet Christ when the Son of God returns from heaven to begin ruling the people on Earth. (Hebrews 11:32-35; I Corinthians 15:51-52; I Thessalonians 4:14-17.) The sorceress had not created an illusion by her own powers, but she had wrongly contacted evil spirits who were able to impersonate Samuel.

All this, however, was under the control of someone else -- the leader of evil spirits, or demons, who are sometimes referred to as fallen angels. That leader is Satan. But Satan cannot do anything that God does not allow him and his evil spirits to do. (Job 1:8-12.)

God uses His obedient angels for many wondrous purposes. But He also allows the fallen ones, or evil spirits, to promote or carry out certain designs, inasmuch as they are in utter fear of their Creator. Satan and his demons ordinarily go their own evil way, just as many human beings do, but God limits their powers and exerts control over them whenever He decides that it's necessary.

Because Saul looked to evil spirits for advice, God allowed a demon to inform Saul that he would die within a few hours. God doesn't want human beings to seek contact with evil spirits. (Deuteronomy 18:9-13.) Nevertheless, there are people even in these days, called mediums, who claim that they have the power to get in touch with the dead. They cleverly cause illusions and sounds through natural means. They can't contact the dead, but as in Saul's case, they are inviting evil spirits to contact them.

Weary from the exertions and concerns of the past hours, Saul sank into a troubled sleep as soon as he reached his quarters at Mt. Gilboa, but his rest didn't last long. The dreaded alarm finally was sounded that the valley of Jezreel was filled with thousands of Philistines approaching from the west! (I Samuel 29:1.)

His Last Battle

Saul felt more like running than fighting, but he knew that he had to be an example to his soldiers. Within minutes he was marching with his three sons in the foremost ranks of the Israelites as they left Mt. Gilboa to meet the enemy. By this time David had been sent back home by the Philistine lords. As the two armies neared each other, the front ranks of each prepared to hurl waves of spears on command. Before the word was given to the Israelite spearmen, a cloud of arrows hissed up from the secondary ranks of the Philistines and showered down on the foremost Israelites. It was a deadly surprise for Saul and his men, who had no way of knowing that a throng of strong archers were hidden behind the enemy spearmen.

Israelites fell by the scores before they could throw their spears. Then another cloud of arrows came down on them, killing or wounding many more men. This was followed by a murderous wave of spears, and chaos swiftly developed among the Israelite troops. Their thinned front ranks began to retreat, thereby blocking the oncoming soldiers. Within minutes the whole Israelite army was moving back toward Mt. Gilboa with the Philistines in pursuit. (I Samuel 31:1.)

When the Israelites reached the slopes of the mountains, they turned to battle their pursuers, but there was faint hope of holding out against superior numbers. It was then that Saul felt a burning pain in one shoulder. Furiously he jerked out the arrow that was embedded there, opening a lethal flow of blood down across his chest.

"I don't want it to be said that I was killed by a Philistine!" Saul shouted to his armor-bearer. "Run me through with your sword before one of these heathen gets to me!"

His armor-bearer shrank from the order. He couldn't bear the thought of killing his master and king, even in mercy. He also knew that if any of the Israelites should see him kill Saul, they wouldn't believe that Saul had requested it.

"I can't do such a thing," the armor-bearer shouted back above the din of the battle.

"I'm losing too much blood to live much longer!" Saul muttered. "Put an end to me now!"

The armor-bearer shook his head and backed away. In spite of the wound, Saul leaped forward, snatched his sword from him, slipped the hilt to the ground and lunged downward on the upright point. The seven-foot Saul weighed close to three hundred pounds, and his falling weight caused the sword to pierce deep into his body.

Overrun by Heathen

The surprised attendant immediately yanked his sword out of Saul, but the Israelite leader was already dead. Glancing up, he saw with further dismay that Saul's three sons were sprawled on the ground, and that their slayers were closing in on him and Saul's remaining officers. Realizing that there was no chance to fight his way free, Saul's armor-bearer did as Saul had done and lunged to his death on his sword. (I Samuel 31:2-6.)

Those of Saul's army who escaped the Philistines raced off the east. Some even went so far as to cross the Jordan River. When the Israelites who lived in this area south of the Sea of Chinnereth saw the scattered troops hurrying to the east, they assumed that the Philistines would soon be invading the land. They fled in terror along behind the soldiers. The sight of fleeing soldiers, and homeless old men, women and children struck fear into the inhabitants of several towns on both sides of the Jordan. The result was a growing exodus eastward across the territory of Gad and into that of Manasseh. Pursuing Philistines later seized the abandoned towns and took up residence in them. Because Israel had forsaken God's right ways, they no longer had His protection.

The day after the battle, Philistine soldiers set out to strip the dead Israelites of their weapons and valuables. They removed the armor from the bodies of Saul and his three sons, and cut off their heads. The armor was sent to Philistia to show that there had been a great victory over Israel. The heads were taken to be displayed in the temples of Dagon, the most revered god of the Philistines. The headless bodies were fastened to the wall of the town of Beth-shan, an Israelite habitation taken over by the Philistines. (I Samuel 31:7-10.)

Across the Jordan River southeast from Beth-shan was the town of Jabesh-gilead in the territory of Gad. Saul's first outstanding deed as leader of Israel, years previously, was to conscript an army and rescue the people of Jabesh-gilead from the soldiers of Nahash, king of the Ammonites. (I Samuel 11:1-11.) Since then the inhabitants of that town had greatly loved and respected Saul. When they learned what the Philistines had done to the remains of Saul and his sons, the more courageous men of Jabesh-gilead decided that something should be done about it.

Moving westward by night across the Jordan River and the twelve miles to Beth-shan, the armed company of determined Israelites quietly crept close to their objective. Well after midnight they craftily closed in on one guard after another, hastily removed the bodies of Saul and his three sons from the wall and slipped away to return to Jabesh-gilead before dawn.

It wasn't an Israelite custom to burn bodies, but the men of Jabesh-gilead didn't want the Philistines to recover what had been taken from that wall of Beth-shan. After the remains had been burned, the bones were buried under a tree. Satisfied that they had done their best to save their former king from further desecration by their enemies, the devoted men of Jabesh-gilead paid their last respects by fasting for seven days. (I Samuel 31:11-13.)

David Grieves

Thus the unpredictable Saul came to his end. Under his leadership Israel had both good and bad times, but if he had continued from his early kingship to be obedient to God, probably he would have lasted for many more years during which Israel would have prospered in safety. Israel's welfare wasn't completely determined by the conduct of its ruler. But, since the people follow a leader, if a ruler obeys God's laws, the people are more obedient. And obedience to God's ways always leads to happiness, prosperity and protection. (Deuteronomy 28:1-14.)

After David and his men had returned from slaughtering the Amalekites, they set about repairing the burned parts of the fortress city of Ziklag. Three days after they had begun the task, a weary-looking stranger approached from the north and asked to speak to David. His clothes were torn and dirt was on his head -- a sign of mourning in those times. After being directed to David, the young man fell to his knees and bowed his head to the ground. (II Samuel 1:1-2.)

"Stand and tell me where you're from," David said.

"I've come from the camp of the Israelites near Mt. Gilboa," was the reply. "The Philistines have demolished it! Their numbers were superior, and they had thousands of archers who quickly felled a great part of the Israelite army. Most of the Israelites turned back and fled to the east. The Philistines chased and slaughtered many more. Saul and his three sons are among the dead."

David was shocked by that news. He regretted to hear that Saul, his enemy, was dead (Proverbs 24:17), and he was saddened to learn that Jonathan, his close friend, had been killed. Tragic as these events were, the report that the Philistines had triumphed was much more painful. It meant that all of Israel might soon be taken by the enemy. David could only hope that his informer was exaggerating these matters.

"How do you know that Saul and his sons were killed?" David asked as he intently stared at the man. (II Samuel 1:3-5.)

"I was fighting close by, and I saw the sons fall after being deeply pierced by arrows," was the answer.

"But how about Saul?" David demanded. "Did you actually see him die?"

"I did," the man lied, with a strange tone of pride in his voice. "I was the one who killed him!"

Chapter 96

David King at Last

DAVID hadn't heard of the battle between the Philistines and the Israelites in the valley of Jezreel until a young Amalekite came to Ziklag with the news. David was greatly shocked by the report that the Israelites had been defeated and that Saul and his sons had been killed. (II Samuel 1:1-4.)

He was even more startled when he was told by his informer that he, the man who stood before him, had witnessed the deaths of Saul's sons and had himself killed Saul.

The truth, however, was that Saul had killed himself. (I Samuel 31:4.)

An Opportunist Without Scruples

"Explain what you mean by claiming that you killed Saul!" David snapped at the fellow as he moved menacingly toward him.

"Let me tell you what happened!" the young man hastily exclaimed as he backed up and held up his hands. "As the Philistines were pressing in on us with their infantrymen and their chariots, I saw Saul, who seemed to be wounded, leaning on his spear for support. When he saw me, he beckoned me to him and asked who I was. I told him that I was an Amalekite who was fighting in the army of Israel. He informed me that he had been wounded mortally, and he commanded me to kill him before the Philistines could get to him. I did as he asked, and plunged my sword through him. He died immediately."

"You are a stranger," David interrupted. "Do you expect me to believe you without some kind of proof?"

"Indeed not," the Amalekite replied. "I knew that most anyone would doubt my story, so I took the liberty of removing one of Saul's armlets and the king's insignia that he wore on his helmet for identification." (II Samuel 1:5-10.)

He reached into a bag he carried and produced a metal arm band and headpiece. David stared at them. He recognized them as the armlet and helmet insignia he had often seen Saul wear when he had been the ruler's armor bearer. He felt that the Amalekite wasn't being completely truthful, but he couldn't help but believe the report that the Israelite army had been defeated and that Saul and his sons were dead. It was more than enough to send David and the people of Ziklag into a state of mourning. As was the custom then, they tore their clothes, wept, moaned and didn't eat anything until after sundown. (II Samuel 1:11-12.)

David continued the questioning of the Amalekite to learn more of the tragedy that had taken place in upper Canaan.

"Tell me exactly who you are," David demanded.

"I've already told you that I'm an Amalekite," the man replied. "I came from a family you wouldn't know about, living in the desert south of here. I was a captive brought into Canaan and put into the Israelite army."

"Do you believe that the mighty God of Israel put Saul into the high office of king?" David asked.

"Why -- yes," was the reply. "Surely he couldn't have become king unless your God had allowed it."

"Then aren't you fearful of what our God will do to you because you have removed from rulership a man whom God ordained as ruler?"

"Why should I be fearful?" the Amalekite asked a little disdainfully. "I did what I was ordered to."

A Would-be Murderer's Reward

"Our God is to be obeyed before our king," David pointed out, "and we should fear our God more than our king. If you killed Saul, you did a very evil thing."

David motioned to one of his soldiers, and the Amalekite looked up to see the man striding menacingly toward him with a hand on his sword hilt.

"Execute this criminal who claims he killed Saul!" David commanded.

"No! No!" the man gasped, leaping back. "What kind of thanks is this? I raced here to be first to tell you about Saul because I thought that you would be pleased to know that your enemy was killed! I thought that you were a fair man who would reward me for a favor!" This gentile Amalekite assumed that David hated Saul as Saul hated David.

"If you even thought of killing the king, your heart is evil. And your reward is death!" After David's sentence, he then turned away as the Amalekite fell under a swift blow of the soldier's sword. (II Samuel 1:13-16.)

The Bible doesn't disclose whether or not David further investigated the death of Saul. If he did, he had little reason to regret the Amalekite's death, inasmuch as the fellow told what he would have done if he had had the opportunity. The Amalekite had probably witnessed the scene between Saul and his armor bearer, and the notion had come to him to pose as Saul's slayer and try to collect a reward from a man he believed hated Saul.

Although Saul died for rebelling against God and for seeking advice from a woman with a familiar spirit (I Chronicles 10:13-14), David knew it is wrong to rejoice over anyone's downfall. (Proverbs 24:17.)

To express his respect for Israel's ruler and his love for Jonathan, David composed verses through which he lamented the passing of the two men. This song, titled "The Bow," became one of the national anthems of Israel. (II Samuel 1:17-27.)

In the days that followed, David had to make some important decisions. He realized that he was to succeed Saul as king of Israel, and he looked to God, through Abiathar the priest, to show him what to do. God made it known that he and all his men should move their families from Ziklag to Hebron, the chief city of the tribe of Judah. David obediently made the move with his small army of 600 men from the tribes of Benjamin, Gad, Judah and Manasseh. (I Chronicles 12:1-22.) It was a relief to him to at last be able to travel freely in Israel without fear of attack.

David Becomes King of Judah

As soon as David had made Hebron his headquarters, the leading men of Judah met there to hold a solemn ceremony in which they joined with Abiathar the priest to anoint and proclaim David as the king of their tribe. (II Samuel 2:1-4.)

When David learned that the men of Jabesh-gilead had rescued the bodies of Saul and his sons from the Philistines, he sent messengers to the men of that city to carry a letter of commendation for what had been done. David was careful not to give the impression that his praise was coming from one who considered himself as the future king of Israel, though he did make it known that he had been made king of the tribe of Judah. (II Samuel 2:5-7.)

Although David was destined to become ruler of all Israel, the death of Saul didn't completely clear the way for the fulfillment of that event. Abner, commander-in-chief of Saul's former army, had escaped from the recent battle with the Philistines. Hoping to retain some measure of power in Israel, Abner convinced Ishbosheth, another son of Saul who obviously had no part in the war, that it would be possible for him to become the next king of Israel if he would set up a place of operation in the town of Mahanaim on the northeastern border of the territory of Gad. The Philistines hadn't reached that area, and the Israelites there felt a special loyalty to Saul. They would naturally look to his son as his rightful successor.

Although he had no authority from God to do so, Abner proclaimed Ishbosheth king of Israel. All the tribes except Judah accepted Ishbosheth, and he assumed the rulership for the next two years. Meanwhile, in spite of the Philistines, thousands of whom were in their very midst, the Israelites continued to survive. (II Samuel 2:8-10.)

Abner and Ishbosheth were far from pleased that David and the tribe of Judah continued to remain apart from Ishbosheth's leadership. Eventually Abner took a small army westward across the Jordan River and camped close to a large pool near Gibeon, a town about twenty-five miles north of Hebron, in the territory of Benjamin.

When David heard about it he sent Joab, his captain of the military forces of Judah, with soldiers to oppose Abner's men if they should move farther south. Though David wished for peace, he knew many of the tribes of Israel were spoiling for a fight. So Joab and his troops boldly marched to the pool of Gibeon and set up a camp across the water from Abner's army. For a time the men of the two camps restrained themselves to merely exchanging curious and hostile stares. Then Abner, addressing himself to Joab, shouted across the pool.

"Instead of just sitting here, why don't we amuse ourselves with a simple bit of competition between some of our men?" he asked.

"What do you suggest?" Joab inquired.

"How about twelve of your men against twelve of my men?" Abner asked. "If there are more of your men left when the scuffle is over, I'll take my men back to Mahanaim. If there are more of my men left, we want your word that you will take your men back to Hebron."

"Agreed!" Joab shouted back. (II Samuel 2:12-14.)

This was a rash agreement. Nevertheless, from those who volunteered, Joab chose twelve of his most athletic and capable young soldiers, who walked part way around the pool to confront the approaching twelve men Abner had selected. At an agreed signal the two sides rushed at each other, swords drawn, free hands extended and every man dodging and weaving to try to escape being seized by the beard or hair of his head. Tragically, all managed to obtain the desired hold, and all became victims of the cruel and bloody contest. (Verses 15-16)

Asahel's Deadly Race

When the onlookers saw their champions go down, the two companies vengefully rushed together in fierce combat. Joab's men proved to be the superior fighters. (II Samuel 2:17.) Abner saw that it was useless to continue facing his opponents. He shouted to his remaining men to retreat to the north. Joab's men set off in pursuit, but Abner and his men turned out to be very able runners. Athletes with strong legs were greatly admired in those times.

There was a man among Joab's soldiers who was especially fast on his feet. He was Asahel, a brother of Joab, well-trained in long-distance running. He set out after Abner, determined to overtake him. In the pursuit he passed some of the other fleeing soldiers, but he wasn't interested in them. When at last he was only a few feet behind Abner, the officer glanced back at him and seemed to be even more perturbed when he recognized who was chasing him.

"Aren't you Asahel, Joab's brother?" Abner panted as he struggled to keep ahead.

"I am!" Asahel gasped between breaths, "and I mean to take your armor back to Joab!"

"You'd stand a better chance of getting the armor of one of my men you've already outrun!" Abner puffed.

"Don't try to talk me out of this!" Asahel panted.

"If you get too near me I'll have to use my spear on you!" Abner warned. "I know your brother Joab well, and I wouldn't be able to face him if I have to slay you!"

"I'll take my chances!" Asahel grunted as he lunged forward to seize Abner. Little did Asahel realize the political intrigue that would come from that decision to overtake Abner.

At that moment Abner jerked his spear backward with all the force he could muster. The partly pointed butt of the weapon rammed into Asahel's chest with such severity that it pierced the fellow's body and protruded from his back. Asahel fell dead and Abner continued his fatiguing flight. (II Samuel 2:18-23.)

Joab and another brother, Abishai, along with the other victorious soldiers, were trying to catch up to Abner and his men. But Abner's retreat had started in the late afternoon and by the time the sun had set, the two groups were still hundreds of feet apart. The chase was still taking place in the territory of Benjamin. When nearby Benjamites heard what was happening, many men of that tribe joined Abner and his scattered troops on a rise being approached by Joab and his men. Thus encouraged, Abner stopped to face Joab and make a plea for peace.

"Why must this killing continue?" Abner called down to Joab. "It will only lead to more misery later on! Now we are prepared with men of Benjamin to stand against you, but we hope that you'll decide now to command your men to cease pursuing their brothers!"

Uncertain Peace Breaks Out

"As surely as God lives," Joab shouted back, "if you had not asked for peace, we would not have stopped chasing you before morning." (II Samuel 2:24-27.)

Joab impatiently motioned to his trumpeter to blow the sound to cease pursuit. The men obeyed and gradually joined him where he stood. When Abner saw that he wouldn't be troubled any more at that time by Joab, he led his men away and walked all that night to cross the Jordan River at dawn and head northward toward the town of Mahanaim beyond the Jabbok River.

Meanwhile, Joab and his men walked back all night to return to Hebron at the break of day. They carried the dead Asahel with them later burying the body in the tomb of Asahel's father in Bethlehem.

Including Asahel, Joab lost twenty of his men in the strife with Abner, whereas Abner lost three hundred and sixty soldiers. It was obvious that God wasn't helping Abner in his efforts to promote Ishbosheth as king of all Israel. (II Samuel 2:28-32.)

For a time there were frequent small battles between David's forces and those of Ishbosheth. These skirmishes didn't settle matters. Regardless of their outcome, respect for David steadily grew with all the people of Israel. (II Samuel 3:1.) Meanwhile, Abner took advantage of Ishbosheth's lack of ability as a leader, and worked to try to obtain more power for himself with the people who continued to remain loyal to Saul.

Ishbosheth and Abner came to a parting of the ways, however, when Ishbosheth accused Abner of being too intimate with a woman named Rizpah, with whom Saul

had lived without a marriage tie. The Bible doesn't relate whether Abner was guilty of what he was accused. In any event, he became very resentful.

"Do you think that you are speaking to a dog?" Abner heatedly demanded as he confronted Saul's son. "If it hadn't been for me, you would long ago have been in David's hands. I have done much to keep you on the throne and the leadership of Israel in the hands of the ones your father would have chosen and yet you decide to belittle me and ruin my reputation by this ridiculous charge!"

Ishbosheth had nothing more to say against Abner because he knew that without Abner he couldn't remain in his questionable position. Very soon he realized that he had said too much for his own good. (II Samuel 3:6-11.) Abner's anger was so great that it led the military commander to decide to forsake Saul's son and try to join David, whom he realized was gradually coming into greater power.

Shortly afterward David received messengers who informed him that Abner had decided against doing anything more to promote Ishbosheth as the leader of Israel, and that he would willingly join David and work to bring all Israel together if it would please David to accept his services.

Abner's Political Switch

David was perplexed at this suggestion. He was certain that Abner was looking out for his own interests, but he had a certain admiration for the military leader because he seemed an honorable man and had such perseverance. He wasn't aware that Abner was angry because of Ishbosheth's accusation.

"I'll welcome your help on one condition," David wrote in a message back to Abner. "Don't come to join me unless you bring Michal, Saul's daughter and my first wife. Saul took her from me a long time ago, but I still want her back."

At the same time David sent messengers to Ishbosheth, demanding that Michal be returned to him. Being without good relations with Abner, Ishbosheth feared that if he didn't comply he would be at the mercy of David's soldiers. He ordered some of his men to go and take Michal from Phaltiel, the man to whom Saul had given her after David was forced to flee from his home. Michal was separated from her weeping common-law husband, who tried to follow her. Abner came on the scene in time to order Phaltiel back to his home and to decide when and how Michal should be returned to David. (II Samuel 3:12-16.)

It was important to Abner that he should first contact the elders of Israel, diplomatically suggesting to them that they would be wise to choose David as their king instead of Ishbosheth. Because Abner was respected in Israel, the opinions of thousands of people, starting with the Israelite leaders, were destined to be switched in favor of David.

Later, Abner and twenty of his picked soldiers took Michal to Hebron. David was pleased, and perhaps even Michal was happy to be returned to her first husband, especially inasmuch as he was obviously about to become the king of all Israel.

Chapter 97

Learning to be a King

To show his appreciation to Abner for helping unite Israel and for bringing Michal to Hebron, David prepared a feast for him and his men. Thus David's first wife was at long last given back to him, and at the same time Abner had the vengeful satisfaction of ruining Ishbosheth's chances of becoming a leader of Israel.

"All I ask is that you allow me to continue in Israel as an ambassador of good will for you," Abner told David.

Abner, former captain of the Ten Tribes, made the mistake of depending more on politics than on God. "I want to make up for any harm I've caused you, now that I realize how wrong I have been in supporting Ishbosheth. If you will allow me, I can do much to cement good relations between you and the people who have inclined to look to Ishbosheth as king."

David approved of this suggestion, and sent Abner and his men out on what was proposed to be a sort of campaign trip in David's behalf. (II Samuel 3:19-21.)

Downfall of Abner

Only a few hours later, Joab and some of David's soldiers returned to Hebron after having pursued and overcome some enemy soldiers. They were jubilant because they had with them many valuable weapons and much food and other spoils they had taken from the enemy. Joab's cheerfully triumphant mood changed abruptly to one of grim seriousness when he heard that Abner had been to visit David, and that the two had come to some kind of agreement after Abner had brought David's first wife to him.

Joab lost no time in setting to David.

Joab disliked Abner because he had killed one of Joab's brothers in battle, and because he assumed that Abner might replace him as David's captain.

"How could you be friendly to Abner?" Joab heatedly asked David. "Have you forgotten so soon that he is your enemy? Don't you remember that he killed Asahel, one of my brothers?"

"Calm down, Joab," David said. "Abner is an opportunist, but he works hard at what he does. He can be of help to me in uniting all the tribes of Israel."

"Abner is a spy!" Joab exclaimed. "He's here to learn all he can from you, and then he'll report to Ishbosheth!"

"Abner is no longer here," David explained. "I sent him northward a short while ago to visit the northern areas for me."

Joab stared silently at David, then stomped away to secretly send messengers to overtake Abner and tell him that David wanted him to return immediately. Later, as Abner and his men came back to enter the north gate of Hebron, Joab and his brother Abishai stepped into the road to greet them in a friendly manner.

"Before you enter Hebron, there is something important you should know," Joab told Abner. "Step off to the side of the road with me so that I may tell you confidentially." (II Samuel 3:22- 27)

Abner motioned to his men to remain as they were, and walked aside with Joab and Abishai. Then he saw Joab's right hand whip a dagger out of his shirt -- but by that time it was too late!

David Mourns for Abner

Abner was stabbed before he could call to his men for help. Abishai held him up for a few moments so that it would appear to Abner's soldiers that the three were holding a confidential conversation. Abruptly Joab and Abishai leaped away and dashed off to conceal themselves in Hebron, leaving the crumpled and dead Abner to his stunned and angry men.

David wasn't aware that Joab, his army captain, had gone to seek Abner.

When news of this brazen murder came to David, he was greatly perturbed. Immediately he made a public pronouncement that neither he nor his kingdom was in any way guilty of Abner's death. He made it clear that the guilt should be on Joab, and pronounced a curse on Joab and his descendants.

"Terrible diseases, leprosy, boils and running sores will come upon Joab and those who descend from him!" David declared. "They will also be crippled, poor, and the victims of fatal accidents, as God sees fit!" (II Samuel 3:28-30.)

David also told the people gathered to listen to him, that there should be proper mourning for Abner, a dedicated officer who deserved respect.

"And I expect Joab and Abishai to be among the mourners!" David stated, knowing that it would be difficult for the two men, as the murderers, to make public appearance behind their victim. "They, too, are to tear the clothes they are wearing and dress in sackcloth!"

David followed Abner's coffin to the burial place in Hebron, and gave a short speech at the funeral. There was much loud weeping because of the vengeful assassination.

David fasted a day, though many of his friends tried to persuade him to eat so that he would not feel depressed. He insisted on fasting a full day, and the people admired him for doing it. At the same time they wondered what he would do to Joab and his brother Abishai. For a man of action, David made a somewhat surprising explanation.

"They have sent a great man to his death," David said, "but even as a king I don't feel that I should deal with them at this time. I shall leave the matter to God, and He will deal with them according to their sins. God shall be their Judge." (II Samuel 3:31-39.)

A Vicious Plot

When Ishbosheth heard that Abner was dead, he and his followers were very troubled. They realized that his future as a leader of northern Israel was very uncertain, inasmuch as success depended so much on Abner. The strongest men next to Abner were Baanah and Rechab, each a captain of a band of soldiers. But Ishbosheth knew he couldn't rely on them or expect very much from them because they were inclined to use the manpower they had, to get as much as they could from other people. If he could have guessed what they had in mind for him, he would have been more than just troubled. (II Samuel 4:1-2.) After seven years in their exalted jobs, these two hatched a plot.

One day about noon, when activity was low because of the heat, Baanah and Rechab came to the supply house, right next to Ishbosheth's quarters. They pretended they were obtaining some wheat from the army kitchen, but quickly turned into Ishbosheth's living area. The two men stabbed Ishbosheth while he was asleep, and after a bit of grisly business that was part of their plan, they hastily escaped to the west and forded the Jordan River that night.

Hours later, at Hebron, the two weary men introduced themselves to patrolling soldiers and asked to see David. When David was told that two of Ishbosheth's captains wished to see him, he went to meet them at once.

"You will be pleased to learn that Ishbosheth, the son of Saul your enemy, is dead," they somewhat proudly announced to David.

"Even if it is true," David observed with a slight frown, "there's no reason for me to feel pleased about it. How did he die?"

"We killed him while he was asleep in his bed," was the abrupt answer. "We have brought proof with us so that you will appreciate that we have avenged you, our king, of the offspring of your enemy!" (II Samuel 4:5-8.)

One of the murderers abruptly opened a sack he had been holding, flicking it so that a head rolled out on the ground! David was startled to recognize it as Ishbosheth's head. But his anger turned out to be greater than his surprise. David realized these wicked men had cunningly murdered their master although he had put great trust in them.

"This miserable kind of situation came to me at a former time," David said, staring sternly at Rechab and Baanah. "A man came to me at Ziklag to tell me that he was the one who had killed Saul. He expected some kind of reward, just as you two now hope to be rewarded. There wasn't any reason for me to be happy when I learned that Saul was dead. In fact, I was so unhappy that I ordered the man to be executed. Neither am I pleased to see Ishbosheth's head before me.

You claim to be his murderers, so you shall be treated as murderers. Murdering an honest man in his sleep can only have one reward."

Baanah and Rechab drew back in sudden, desperate fear. They never would have shown up in Hebron if they had known that David wouldn't gloat over Ishbosheth's death. At a signal from David, soldiers moved in to seize the cowering, whimpering killers to execute them.

To show respect for Ishbosheth, David decreed that the remains should be buried with appropriate honors in Abner's tomb in Hebron. These acts made it plain to the Israelites that David had a strict regard for justice, a fact that created great respect for him. (II Samuel 4:9-12.)

King of ALL Israel

By this time David had been the leader of Judah for more than seven years. (II Samuel 2:11.) Over the years leaders in the various tribes had been turning to David and leading many thousands into allegiance to him. (I Chronicles 12:1-22; II Samuel 3:1.) After Ishbosheth was murdered, the elders of all Israel assembled at Hebron with over a third of a million men. They reminded David that because all the people of Israel were of the same family, and because David had been a wise and fair leader in the past and the chief under Saul, they wanted to acknowledge him king over all Israel. (II Samuel 5:1-3; I Chronicles 12:22-40.)

Thus God caused matters to come about in such a manner, in due time, that David was at last anointed king of all the tribes. He was thirty-seven years old when this happened. Probably he would have been greatly encouraged if he could have known that he would be king of Israel for the next thirty-three years (II Samuel 5:4-5), though he would have been troubled if he could have foreseen certain things that would happen during those years.

The first outstanding act performed by David as king of all the tribes was the moving of an army against the city of Jerusalem. (All Israel in that day -- as today -- trusted in their army, instead of God, to fight their battles.) This populous place was within the territory of Benjamin, and though the Israelites had attacked it and set fire to it years previously, the city was still held by stubborn Jebusites, an ancient Canaanite tribe. It was a thorn in Israel that a great city in the center of their country should still be populated by enemies. Besides wanting to drive the Jebusites out of the ancient holy city, David needed the city because it was well situated in a central spot in the nation, and would be ideal for a capital.

When David and his troops arrived at Jerusalem, the leader sent out a sneering messenger to tell David that Jerusalem's walls were being guarded by crippled and blind people because they were strong and capable enough to hold off even Israelite soldiers indefinitely. This was meant to be an insult to David. He knew that no matter who guarded the walls, Jerusalem would be very difficult to capture because its fortress was built on such a steep summit of a towering hill. Even getting to the base of the walls would be a perilous undertaking. (II Samuel 5:6.)

"To get inside the strongest part of Jerusalem's fortification will require some unusual scheming and action," David told his officers. "Trying to scale or break through the walls would be foolish. There may be another way. I've heard that there's a tunnel running under the city that carries water from springs outside the walls. Somewhere there must be a shaft running up from the tunnel through which water is drawn. If men could get through the tunnel and shaft to make it inside the city, they might be able to open the gates so that the rest of our troops could storm in. If any one of you can succeed in doing this, I'll make that man commander over all my army."

Without David's knowledge, Joab and a picked company searched along the east wall of Jerusalem until they found where spring water flowed into a tunnel chiseled out of solid rock. It was large enough for men to walk through if they stooped over a little. The water in it was only about two feet deep, so that it could easily be forded.

Supplied with torches and other equipment, Joab and his men followed the aqueduct until they came to a point where they found a side opening through which part of the water could flow. The opening was too small for a man to crawl through. Besides, it was under water. At Joab's order, the men chiseled out a larger hole above it, disclosing the shaft through which water was taken up into the city.

One by one the men crawled into the shaft. By means of ropes, hooks and spikes, they managed to ascend the vertical passageway to where there was a platform at one side of the shaft. It was from there that containers were lowered to bring up water. From the platform a stairway led up through the rock to the street level. From the stone platform Joab and his men cautiously crept up the stairway. They met no one because it was very late at night. From the stairway entrance they peered around until they could see the east gates, heavily barred and braced. Several guards stood nearby. At a signal from Joab, his men charged out of concealment and raced to the gate. While some overpowered the bewildered Jebusite guards, others yanked down the gate bars and braces.

The second the gates swung open, a man ran out to go to David and inform him of what had happened. David rushed his troops through the open gates to join Joab and his men, who by that time had been set upon by Jebusite soldiers.

Within a short time Jerusalem was completely taken over by David's army. God made it possible by providing a means of entrance to the city -- the aqueduct and the water shaft. These passageways still exist under Jerusalem. Even the hole in the side of the tunnel, presumably chiseled out by Joab's men, is still very much in evidence three thousand years later.

When David learned who had directed the successful plan, he wished that it could have been someone else. Joab was the man on whom David had pronounced terrible curses because of Joab's murdering Abner. Because this officer was an able military leader, he had been allowed to continue in David's army, though Israel's leader had little respect for him otherwise. Whatever his feelings toward Joab, David kept his promise and put him in command of all the troops that had come against Jerusalem.

The stubborn Jebusites who tried to hold the fortress, built 2,500 feet above sea level, were either killed or they surrendered. (II Samuel 5:6-10.)

Friendly King Hiram

At the eastern edge of the Great Sea there was an ancient city known as Tyre, about a hundred twenty miles north of Jerusalem. When Hiram, the king of Tyre, heard that the Israelites had taken Jerusalem, he was pleased. As a gift to David, with whom he wished to be friendly, Hiram sent a group of expert carpenters and masons to Jerusalem to build a special living quarters for the king of Israel. He also sent a supply of cedar lumber all the way from the coast. (II Samuel 5:11-12.) David appreciated this gesture of goodwill. His citizens weren't as capable of doing fine construction as were the artisans from Tyre. Israel's many years of trouble had prevented their developing the crafts they needed.

Comfortably situated in Jerusalem, and with his nation constantly becoming stronger and more united, David realized even more fully that God had given him the kingship. He was thankful and humble. He put great emphasis on obeying God's laws. He didn't let up on reminding the nation of the importance and necessity of obedience to the Creator.

Nevertheless, even David didn't immediately overcome a desire to increase the number of his wives, and women who lived with him only as the objects of his affection. Many sons and daughters were born to David by his several wives and concubines. (II Samuel 5:13-16.)

During this period the Philistine leaders were receiving worrisome reports of how Israel was becoming more solidly established under David's leadership. They hadn't been very active against Israel in the past few years because they had hoped the civil strife would cause the twelve tribes to fall apart. At last they realized that if they expected to prevent Israel from becoming a strong nation again, they would have to attack Jerusalem before David's army grew too large.

Reports then began coming to David that the Philistines intended to do away with him even if they had to destroy Jerusalem and the whole army of Israel. David didn't ignore these threatening rumors. Instead, he moved a great part of his army to a rugged region just south of Jerusalem. A few days later he was informed that thousands of Philistine troops were moving through Judah and pouring into the Rephaim valley, a plain extending southwest of the city.

Chapter 98

Build a Temple?

WHEN thousands of Philistines poured into the valley just south of Jerusalem, David was uncertain as to what his battle strategy should be. He had to ask God what to do. When he was told that the Israelites would win if they were to attack the enemy, his usual confidence was restored.

Faith and Wisdom

He didn't rush out immediately toward the Philistines just because he knew God could and would help him. He used the good judgment and strategy that God expected of him. Next, he quickly deployed parts of his army out beyond both rims of the valley so that they couldn't be seen by the enemy. He put the Israelites in positions to surround the Philistines, who were gambling that the Israelite army would probably hole up in the strong fortress at Jerusalem.

The sudden attack of the Israelites down the sloping sides of the valley was too much for the Philistines. They realized that such a thing could happen, and they felt that they were prepared. But when David's troops actually came rushing down at them in a squeeze maneuver, they broke ranks and frantically raced back toward the southwest. So many of them were killed by the Israelites that they were utterly defeated without being able to fight in their usually furious manner.

In their hasty retreat they lost much equipment and arms valuable to the Israelites. Even many of their idols -- good luck charms of that day -- were left behind. These were mostly small images of animals carried on the persons of the soldiers, who looked to them for protection and welfare. Ridiculous as this seems, many people today still carry certain small items they seriously regard as their "good luck" charms. These can be anything from coins and crosses to four-leaf clovers and rabbits' feet.

Not all the Philistine soldiers' idols were the kind that could be carried in pockets or bags. Some were so large that they had to be borne on frames or pedestals carried by men. Large or small they were all burned in a roaring fire. They were worthless objects, and David knew that God wanted them destroyed. (II Samuel 5:17-21.) Back when the Israelites were in the fortieth year of their wandering in the deserts, God informed Moses that idols should be burned. (Deuteronomy 7:5, 25) If they weren't, they could end up as souvenirs for the Israelites, some of whom might develop a superstitious attitude toward them.

David was thankful that God had helped defeat the Philistines. But he knew that one defeat wouldn't keep them away for very long. He returned to Jerusalem with his army to enjoy several months of peace. Then the enemy appeared again in Rephaim Valley, this time in even greater numbers. (II Samuel 5:22.) Once more David asked God what to do. God told him that he should wait until the Philistines had pitched camp in the valley, and then take his men, quietly and unseen, to one side of the valley where there was a long, thick stand of mulberry trees.

He was to wait behind the trees with his men until a strong breeze would come up to rustle the mulberry leaves. That was to be the signal for the Israelites to attack.

Later, as David and his soldiers patiently waited after dark behind the trees, a breeze came up after a calm of several hours. At first the gentle movement of air only slightly stirred the leaves. As it grew stronger, the leaves began to rustle in such a way that they produced a suspicious sound. This sound grew in volume until it reached the ears of the Philistines, part of whom were camped close to the trees. To them, as it became louder, it was like many men sneaking through the trees.

Convinced that a tremendous force was coming toward them, the Philistines fell into a state of panic. At the same time, David's men raced through the trees and fell upon their distraught enemies with such force that thousands of the Philistines died in the valley. Thousands more managed to elude the attack by the Israelites, who stubbornly pursued them so tenaciously that they kept picking off the fleeing Philistines as they struggled to reach safety in their native country. The Israelites didn't give up the chase until they had run the remnants of the enemy army all the way to southern Philistia near the border of Egypt close to the Great Sea. (II Samuel 5:23-25.)

David Brings the Ark to Jerusalem

With the Philistines again defeated through God's help, David was for a time free to apply himself to matters other than war. For one thing, he wanted to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem from the hill town of Kirjath-jearim. There it had been left many years before, after the Philistines had fearfully sent it back following their miserable experiences with it. (I Samuel 6)

Traveling with many Israelite leaders and musicians, and with a magnificent procession of thousands of soldiers to put down any possible trouble from the Philistines, David went to the home of a man named Abinadab in Kirjath-jearim, about eight miles west of Jerusalem. (II Samuel 6:1-2.) The ark had been in that home for several decades, where it was watched over by a priest named Eleazar, one of Abinadab's sons. (I Samuel 7:1-2)

The ark was loaded on a cart that had been built especially for the purpose of transporting it, although that was not the means by which God meant it to be carried. (Exodus 25:10-16; Exodus 37:1-5.) Uzzah and Ahio, two of Abinadab's sons, drove the ox team that pulled the cart. (II Samuel 6:3.) To give an air of celebration to the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, David's musicians walked before the cart and played their harps, tambourines, cymbals, drums and psalteries. David marched behind the cart, and behind him came the thousands who had accompanied him to obtain the ark.

As the colorful procession neared Jerusalem, one of the oxen stumbled in a rut. The cart was jerked so severely that it appeared that the ark might tumble over. Without giving a thought to what the result would be, Uzzah reached out to steady the ark with one hand. That was the last act of his life. (II Samuel 6:4-7.) The ark was to be handled only by the poles that were extended through its rings, and touching it was strictly forbidden. (Numbers 4:15)

God made no exception with Uzzah, even though that man's intentions may not have been consciously wrong. Uzzah should have known the consequences, for the Levites had copies of God's Word. They were required to know what they were doing and to keep the Scriptures always before them. (Deuteronomy 17:18-20.)

When David saw that Uzzah was dead, he was very grieved. The happy temperament of the whole procession sank. Thinking that God may have been displeased because of the moving of the ark, David decided not to try to take it any farther. He directed that it should be left at the nearby home of an acquaintance named Obed-edom, who lived on the western outskirts of Jerusalem. (II Samuel 6:8-10.)

As the weeks went by, David became more concerned about the ark. He feared he might be responsible for bringing some kind of curse on Obed-edom by leaving the ark with him. Three months after Uzzah's death, upon inquiring about Obed-edom, David was pleasantly relieved to learn that the man had recently come into a state of prosperity and that everything was going well for all his family. Some members of his family who had been ill were enjoying the best of health because they had been suddenly and miraculously healed. David could only conclude that God had blessed the people in Obed-edom's home because of the presence of the ark there. (II Samuel 6:11.) This caused him to decide to go at once to bring it to Jerusalem.

The Right Way to Rejoice

Having planned and prepared more carefully this time, David and the high priest instructed Levites in how to handle the ark. (I Chronicles 15:2.) They carried it on foot as they should, holding the poles on their shoulders. Musicians and singers went ahead of the ark, and there was constant music and happy shouting. As before, a great throng followed. Occasionally the ark bearers would stop with their load and burnt offerings would be made nearby on temporary altars that had been built along the route into Jerusalem.

As the procession entered the city, David felt constrained to express his happy and thankful emotions by dancing. Tossing aside his royal tunic, he broke into a very strenuous series of surprisingly graceful leaps and gyrations to the accompaniment of the musicians. The crowd was pleased. (II Samuel 6:12-15.) Probably God was pleased, too, because the Bible says that we should praise the Creator by song, instrumental music and proper dancing. (Psalm 33:1-3).

But there was one watching from a window, who was anything but gratified. It was Michal, Saul's daughter, one of David's wives. (II Samuel 6:16.) She hated her husband for what he was doing. She thought it was shameful for David to dance a "Highland fling" as the common people might do.

"What a conceited show-off!" she thought. "He's making a disgraceful fool of himself just to impress all those silly young women in the crowd. He won't feel so much like an athletic hero when I tell him what I think of him when he comes home!"

The ark was brought into the special tent that David had prepared for it. More burnt offerings and peace offerings were made. A great amount of food was distributed to

the crowd, including bread, meat and wine. After all had eaten, David pronounced a blessing on them and they returned to their homes. (II Samuel 6:17-19.)

David was pleased because of the day's events, but he wasn't very happy when he returned to his home to be confronted by Michal's glaring eyes.

"How glorious was the king of Israel today," Michal smirked. "Did you really imagine that the young women were moved by your odd motions? I saw you prancing around out there. You acted as though bees were trapped inside your clothes!"

"I danced only because I was happy that the ark was being brought into Jerusalem," David sternly told Michal. "I did nothing shameful. I could have done much worse and still not be as vile as you seem to think I have been. I'm sure that those who watched me have more respect for my conduct than God has for yours in accusing me of trying to show off before young women!"

Angered because of her husband's rebuke, Michal flounced away. From that day on David had little or no affection for her. As a result of speaking so unjustly to David, she never had any children. (II Samuel 6:20-23.)

Build a Temple?

After David had moved into the building that had been a gift from Hiram, king of Tyre, David began to consider how much better his personal surroundings were than those of the ark, which was housed only in a tent.

"The ark should rest in a more elegant place than that in which I live," David told Nathan the prophet. "What do you think of my planning a fine temple to house the ark?"

"Surely God would be pleased by such a respectful act," Nathan replied. "I should think that He would bless you and all Israel for carrying out such a wonderful idea."

That night, however, God contacted Nathan in a vision to tell him that David's plan wasn't according to what God approved.

"Tell David that I haven't required anything more than a tent or a tabernacle for my presence since the Israelites came out of Egypt," God informed Nathan. "I have never suggested that I want or need any other kind of dwelling for the ark. Years from now, when David is dead, I shall have his son erect a building to be dedicated to me. But there is something more important. Unlike Saul's family, which I put aside because of disobedience, one of David's descendants will rule forever over the kingdom I shall establish. Thus, instead of David building a house for me, I shall build a house for him -- the ancestral line that will be known as the house of David." (II Samuel 7:1-16.)

Next morning Nathan told David of his vision and all that God had said to him. David wasn't disappointed to learn that God didn't want him to build a special house for the ark. Instead, he was happily excited to learn that he would have a son whom God would direct in building a temple that would be dedicated to the Creator, and which

would be an appropriate resting place for the ark. David immediately sought a place of privacy to sit in meditation before God and give thanks for God's wonderful promises and blessings to himself and to Israel (II Samuel 7:17-29.)

Because of David's obedience and because the people were looking more and more to God for the right ways to live, a period of release from surrounding enemies began to dawn for all Israel. Since Israel didn't completely trust God for divine protection, however, this security came about only after furious battles through which David led his troops with God's miraculous help. Even though Israel didn't completely trust God, He kept His promise and delivered them from their enemies.

Little Faith -- Little Peace

One of David's first military accomplishments at that time was to attack the Philistines on the west border of Canaan and force them so far back into their territory that the Israelites seized some of their main cities and occupied them for several years. This reversed conditions for the Israelites who lived near Philistia. They had long been subject to the demanding whims of the Philistines. (II Samuel 8:1.)

After establishing garrisons to keep the Philistines subdued, David took his army to the east border of his nation, where he waged a powerful attack against the Moabites. David's friend, the old king, had died. Under a hostile new king, the Moabites were constantly trying to push over across the Jordan, but this time they hastily withdrew deep into Moab in an unsuccessful attempt to escape. The Moabites were fierce desert fighters, but they were no match for the inspired Israelites. After disposing of them in vast numbers, the Israelites took over most of their cities. Those who were spared were forced to pay a regular tribute to Israel to make up for what they had taken in former raids into Canaan. (II Samuel 8:2.)

There was still another area where Israel was troubled by enemies. It was in the territories of Manasseh, Gad, and Reuben, whose northern and northeastern limits were meant to extend to the Euphrates River. After Joshua's time, this had become a part of the land of the Syrians. (Syrians are called Aramaeans in the original Hebrew Bible.) The chief Syrian kingdom was Zobah. The king of Zobah long since had moved his army southwest across the Euphrates River with the intention of edging on down through the territory of Manasseh.

Intent on recovering the region occupied by the enemy, David marched his army northward to the general vicinity of Mt. Hermon. Scouts who had gone in advance returned to tell their king that thousands of Aramaean soldiers of Zobah were encamped on a high plain farther on to the north.

"Besides a great army, they have thousands of horses and chariots," the scouts reported. "Most of the ground is fairly level, and they can make terrible use of their bladed vehicles!"

David was far from happy because of this report. But he wasn't discouraged. He was aware that it was God's intention that the Zobahites should be driven out of Canaan, and he was confident that the army of Israel could be the means by which the task

would be accomplished. After moving within sight of the enemy forces, David could see that they were extended over such a wide area that it would be unwise to try to surround them. A close study of the terrain gave him an idea how he might deal with the Aramaean chariots, a matter of deep concern to him. After conferring with Joab, who was now next in command under him, and with his lesser officers, David moved his men to a part of the plateau heavily strewn with small boulders. By this time the Syrians (Aramaeans) had seen the Israelites, and there was feverish activity in their camp.

The Bible doesn't give any details of the battle that quickly ensued. But it is possible that at Joab's command part of the Israelites marched on across the rocky region and out to a smoother part of the ground. A wide cloud of dust swelled up off the plain in front of the Aramaean camp.

It was a welcome sign to David, because it meant that the chariots had been sent out to attack them. Soon the thunder of thousands of pounding hoofs could be heard across the plateau. At another command from Joab the marching Israelites came to a halt. Then, as the chariots came nearer, the troops obeyed another order to swiftly retreat. The men of Zobah, now very close, hoped to race into the ranks of the fleeing Israelites and mow them down with the big, sharp blades that extended from the sides of the chariots.

Chapter 99

Men Trust in Armies

IN a northern region not far from Mount Hermon, David's soldiers -- relying on themselves instead of God -- had baited the Aramaeans into action. They boldly marched out on a flat plain where enemy chariots could easily mow down the Israelites. According to plan, the Israelites suddenly turned and ran to safety among nearby boulders. The chariots raced after them, and ran into an area of rocks that caused the speeding vehicles to bounce and careen wildly. A great number of them smashed together or tipped over, snapping off the deadly blades, throwing the drivers to the ground and yanking the horses onto their backs. Oncoming chariots crashed against the overturned ones. The whole detachment came to a violent halt as it sped into the region of small boulders over which the Israelites leaped in planned retreat. David's scheme to lure at least part of the chariots to their destruction had worked.

But the battle had hardly begun. The Syrian drivers and their armed riders lost no time in dispatching spears and arrows into the ranks of the Israelites, who halted their retreat as soon as the chariots were stopped. They turned on the outnumbered Syrians and wiped them out in a matter of minutes.

Many of the chariots of the rear ranks were turned back when the drivers realized what had happened. These stayed at a safe distance to await the arrival of their infantry, which was moving on the double toward the Israelites. Their morale was seriously shaken when they saw so many of their chariots cracking up. Thousands of foot soldiers on each side collided in the awesome din and frightful action of hand-to-hand combat. The Israelites soon realized that they were fighting men who were already partly conquered by a superstitious fear caused by the tales they had heard of the strange powers of the God of Israel. (II Samuel 8:3.)

Because God was protecting them, almost all the Israelite soldiers escaped the weapons of their enemies. Soon the wide battlefield was scattered with the bodies of many Aramaeans. Hadadezer, the king of Zobah and commander of the Syrian or Aramaean forces, saw that it was useless to continue the fight. He tactfully withdrew a safe distance with some of his men, part of whom he sent on fast horses to nearby Damascus to ask the ruler of that city to send out soldiers as soon as possible against the Israelites.

So great was the defeat of the Zobahites that twenty thousand of their infantrymen were killed or captured by David's men. A large cavalry attack would have been very deadly under ordinary circumstances, but God intervened to cause the horses and their riders to panic during the battle. A thousand chariots and seven hundred horsemen and their horses were slain or taken captive. (II Samuel 8:4.) God had commanded Israel not to accumulate great numbers of war horses, lest they start depending upon war horses instead of upon God for protection. (Deuteronomy 17:16.) For that reason, David ordered the war horses should be killed and all the chariots should be torn apart except a hundred to be saved for use by the Israelites.

Much metal was stripped from the chariots, as well as valuable trappings. (I Chronicles 18:3-4.)

All the rest of the day the Israelites took in the booty of war, including a wealth of items in the camp of Zobah, where they stayed that night. Meanwhile, David wondered where Hadadezer, the Zobahite king, had gone. A questioning of prisoners revealed he had been present until the tide of battle turned to favor the Israelites, and that there were many Syrian troops stationed in and around Damascus. David could only conclude that Hadadezer was away somewhere awaiting the arrival of more soldiers to move against the Israelites, and probably that very night!

Reinforcements Attack

David's expectation turned to reality. During the darkness of the early morning, thousands of Syrians moved silently up to the Israelites, whose inactivity caused the enemy to believe that they were in a state of deep sleep after a day of vigorous action. The Syrians were so certain that they were going to find the Israelites unprepared to fight that they suffered quite a shock when the Israelites leaped up, weapons in hand, and noisily charged into the intruders. The bloody result was that twenty-two thousand Syrians died at the hands of those whom they planned to kill in their beds. (II Samuel 8:5; I Chronicles 18:5.)

Next day David's men gathered more of the spoils of war. Many of the shields, collars and bracelets of the Syrians were made at least partly of gold. These were sent to Jerusalem as an offering of gratitude to God to add greatly to the wealth of Israel. The Israelite army then moved from one nearby city to another to seize from the Syrians thousands of pounds of valuable brass, a metal that was very necessary in both domestic and military use. At the same time David left many of his soldiers in that region to guard the borders of Canaan. As with the Moabites, a regular tribute was demanded from the Syrians, who preferred to pay rather than suffer the indignity of the Israelite troops overrunning their land. (II Samuel 8:6-8; I Chronicles 18:6-8.)

For the time being the Syrians (Aramaeans) had learned their lesson. Their punishment came because they had stolen grazing lands that God had formerly given to three tribes of Israel. (I Chronicles 5:3, 9-11, 18-23.)

It wasn't long before Toi, ruler of the nearby city of Hamath, heard about what had happened. He and Hadadezer were enemies and their armies were often at war. Toi was apparently pleased to know that the Israelites had overcome the Zobahites and Syrians, and to learn that Hadadezer's army wouldn't trouble him anymore. It would have been foolhardy for him to disapprove of Israel's occupation of northeastern Canaan. His only wise course was to cultivate friendship with the king of Israel.

Accordingly, he sent his son, Joram, to head a delegation to visit David and congratulate him on his latest triumphs in battle. To prove his father's friendship for the king of Israel, Joram presented David with a costly array of ornate bowls and vases made of brass, silver and gold. All these David added to the special treasury being built from valuable articles taken from the subdued people of other nations.

He hoped that this wealth would eventually be used to help build the temple for God. (II Samuel 8:9-12; I Chronicles 18:9-11.)

The triumphant wars against the nations pressing in against Israel caused David to be even more respected by his enemies as well as by his people. At last the promised land of Canaan was inhabited and held to all its borders by the people of Israel. Meanwhile, David worked toward establishing a just government. He retained in high offices men who were most capable. He was the kind of king who publicly and privately gave credit to his men when credit was due them, instead of trying to swing the honors his way. (II Samuel 8:15-18; I Chronicles 18:14-17.)

David Teaches Loyalty

Joab, although he had greatly roused David's anger in the past, was kept on as the general of the army of Israel. David had promised that office to anyone who could successfully lead troops into Jerusalem during the attack on that city by the Israelites, and Joab earned the reward. He was a capable military leader, though he was callous and loved violent action. With his brother, Abishai, who became next in rank under him, Joab carried out his duties well.

In the last battle of that particular time when the Israelites cleared out their enemies from southeast Canaan, it was Abishai who handled the troops. Their record was so notable that eighteen thousand Edomite soldiers were slain. (I Chronicles 18:12-13; II Samuel 8:13-14.) God uses all kinds of people to carry out His many plans. But His true servants must be obedient to the Creator's physical and spiritual laws.

David's desire to be fair in matters of government led him to wonder if there were any of Saul's family who were still living. If there were, it was the king's desire to help them for the sake of the memory of Saul's son Jonathan, who was David's closest friend when he was a very young man employed by Saul as a musician and armor bearer. (II Samuel 9:1.)

Eventually a man was brought to Jerusalem who had been a servant in Saul's employ. From him David learned, to his surprise, that Jonathan had a son named Mephibosheth who was living with a kind and hospitable man named Machir in the town of Lo-debar east of the Jordan River.

"How could it be that I have never known that my friend Jonathan had such a son?" David asked the man who had been brought to him.

"He was only five years old when his father died," answered Saul's former servant. "During those years, sir, my master caused you to be an outcast. You could hardly be expected to keep abreast of such matters. Of course Jonathan's son is still only a young man."

"But the grandson of a king can't ordinarily escape the public eye," David observed. "It's difficult for me to understand why I never heard of him."

"Probably it's because his legs weren't normal," was the answer. "Because of childhood injuries, he couldn't take part in games and contests with other youngsters of his age. He doesn't get out in public places very often."

"Send men at once to Lo-debar to bring Mephibosheth here," David instructed some of his servants after a few moments of reflection. "But say nothing to him about why I want him."

Days later, when Mephibosheth was brought to Jerusalem, he limped into David's court and prostrated himself before the king.

"I am your servant, sir!" he muttered fearfully. "I shall willingly do whatever you ask if only you will tell me what I have done to offend you!" (II Samuel 9:2-6.)

"Bring this man a comfortable chair," David whispered to an aide. After Mephibosheth was seated, David spoke to him in an assuring voice, "Don't be afraid. You haven't offended me, nor are you here to be troubled in any way. You were brought here so that I might honor you!"

A Pauper Prince Honored

"What reason would you have to do that?" Mephibosheth asked. "Surely I am nothing more than a dead dog to you."

"You mean much to me," David replied. "I want to show you special respect because Jonathan, your father, was my closest friend. I didn't know till lately that you exist, but now that I've found you, I want you to receive the property that belonged to Saul, your grandfather." David knew one should be loyal to old friends. (Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:10.)

Mephibosheth stared unbelievably at David. All his life he had been dependent on others to support him. His possessions included little more than the clothes he was wearing, but now he was being offered valuable farmland and a fine home!

"Thank you, sir," he said after a pause of several moments, "but I couldn't accept all that. I've done nothing to deserve it. Besides, I'm not able to move about very well, and I couldn't succeed even in taking care of the buildings, to say nothing of farming the land." (II Samuel 9:7-8.)

David turned and said something to an aide. Ziba, the servant of Saul who had disclosed Mephibosheth's existence, soon entered the room.

"Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son," David told Ziba, "should receive Saul's property, and I want you and your family and servants to assume all the duties that should be carried out to make the estate productive for Mephibosheth and for you and all who will live or work there."

Ziba was obviously pleased by these arrangements. He had fifteen sons who were capable of working. He also had twenty servants whom he wished to keep employed.

"It is my pleasure to carry out your will, sir," Ziba said, bowing. "Mephibosheth will want for nothing."

"Now how can you refuse all that?" David smiled at Mephibosheth. "Surely you have no other reason to reject these things."

The young man was overwhelmed. He profusely thanked David, who was pleased at the opportunity to do something for Jonathan's son.

Mephibosheth sent for his wife, and they were very comfortable in their new home. To make life more pleasant, God blessed them with a son whom they named Micha. The three of them were treated as royalty, and were often invited to David's house for dinner and other social occasions. (II Samuel 9:9-13.)

A Friend Insulted

Shortly after the war with the Syrians, David was informed that the king of the Ammonites had died. The Bible doesn't mention what connection David had with this man, but obviously he had in some way befriended David, possibly during the time he had sought refuge from Saul outside Canaan. David wanted the king's son, Hanun, to know that the king of Israel was sorry to hear of the death of his father. Several emissaries were sent with gifts to the land of the Ammonites east of the Dead Sea to deliver David's message of sympathy. (II Samuel 10:1-2; I Chronicles 19:1- 2.)

Hanun graciously received the Israelites, but after they had been taken to guest quarters for a night of rest before starting back to Jerusalem, some of the young Ammonite chiefs who were unfriendly toward the Israelites came to talk to Hanun.

"If the king of Israel ever cared anything about your father, he is only using it as an excuse to send spies here," they told Hanun. "These men with gifts are surely looking our city over so that they can take back information. It means that Israel is planning to attack us soon!"

Hanun was troubled by this opinion. By next morning he decided that the chiefs were probably right, and he gave orders to arrest the Israelites. Each man's beard was half removed, and their robes were whacked off almost to their waists. In that condition they were sneeringly told to go back to Jerusalem and tell David that his attempt to spy on the Ammonites was as ridiculous as his emissaries would look when they returned.

News of this insulting act somehow reached David before the embarrassed emissaries could reach the Jordan River. David sent men to bring them new clothes at the site of the wrecked city of Jericho. The emissaries were told to remain there until their beards were evenly grown out.

Meanwhile Hanun also received some news that caused him to hastily call together the rash Ammonite chiefs who had talked him into mistreating the Israelites. (I Samuel 10:3-5; I Chronicles 19:3-5.)

"I made a deadly mistake when I listened to you men," he angrily told them. "If King David had no previous intention of attacking us, he has reason to now. He is very angry. So are thousands of Israelites, and here we are with hardly enough fighting men to be called an army!"

Chapter 100

David's Temptation

AFTER insulting David's emissaries from Jerusalem, (II Samuel 10:15; I Chronicles 19:1-5) King Hanun of Ammon later learned that he had been most unwise. Reports kept coming to him that the Israelites were so angry that they were almost certain to attack the Ammonites in the region east of the Dead Sea.

A Gentile Plot

The army of Hanun, king of the Ammonites, was very small compared to King David's army. Hanun realized that the only possible way to meet his enemy on anything resembling an equal basis would be to hire troops from nearby Aramaean and Mesopotamian nations.

After much diplomatic bargaining, Hanun managed to secure 33,000 soldiers -- many of them horsemen and charioteers -- from four of those neighboring Syrian kings. This was quite an accomplishment, inasmuch as the Syrians (called Aramaeans in the original Hebrew Bible) had recently suffered great defeat by Israel. The troops assembled around the city of Medeba east of the northern tip of the Dead Sea in the vicinity of Mount Nebo, where Moses died. (II Samuel 10:6; I Chronicles 19:6-7).

Certain members of David's expanding espionage system promptly sent to Jerusalem the news of the Syrian accumulation of soldiers. David was more disappointed than worried. He had hoped that wars could be avoided for many more years, but now he knew that since Israel didn't trust God for protection, Israel's army would have to be sent out again. If it failed to show up against the Syrians, they would be likely to work themselves into the foolish idea of going northward from Medeba into eastern Israel. Or they might cross westward over the Jordan and wipe out some of the Israelite towns. Although the people of Israel and especially David, were angry because of what Hanun had done to the men who had come to the Ammonites for a friendly purpose, David hadn't planned on waging major warfare over the matter. But the Ammonites had now invited attack on themselves for the second time.

The Philistines posed no threat to Israel at that time. So most of Israel's army was sent eastward across the Jordan River to meet the enemy. David remained in Jerusalem, sending Joab as head of the fighting force, and Abishai, Joab's brother, as second in command. (II Samuel 10:7; I Chronicles 19:8.)

When the Israelites came in sight of Medeba, the Ammonites rushed out to station themselves in front of the city. Their intention was to try to cause the Israelites to believe that only the very limited numbers of Ammonites were on hand to fight. This attempted trick momentarily looked successful. But Joab's rear guard saw the thousands of Syrians pouring over a ridge behind them and sounded a warning. The Aramaeans had planned on waiting for the Israelites to close in on the Ammonites, and then to quickly attack the Israelites from the rear.

Joab hastily chose the best soldiers of the army to go against the 33,000 Syrians. The remaining Israelite troops were put under Abishai's command to be used against the Ammonites.

"Your men should be able to rout those Ammonites in front of the gates of Medeba," Joab told Abishai. "I'll take the rest of the troops against these Aramaeans coming toward our rear column. It's up to us to make the very best use of our men to fight for the people and cities of Israel. If the Aramaeans are too strong for me, come quickly with your men to help me. If the Ammonites prove too strong for you, I'll rush back to help you. Don't be concerned about being defeated. If God sees fit, He will help us win." (I Samuel 10:8-12; I Chronicles 19:9-13).

A Trap Turned to Victory

Joab's last remark could be considered a bit odd for one who was an expert soldier who believed in force and violence to settle matters. Nevertheless, he believed in God's great power, even though he wasn't usually inclined to obey God's laws. He never realized to what an extent God was using him to deliver the unbelieving, sinful Israelites from their neighbors.

At Joab's command the stronger part of the army suddenly reformed their lines to face the Aramaeans. When the Syrians realized that they, instead of the Ammonites, were the first objects of attack, they fell into a noisy state of panic. They raced away from Medeba with such frantic haste that Joab commanded his men not to tire themselves in futile pursuit.

About the same time Abishai's troops rushed at the Ammonites, who were so discouraged at the retreat of the Syrians that they fled into Medeba and slammed the gates shut on their pursuers. As Abishai was planning how he could break into the city, Joab joined him after giving up the chase of the Syrians. The Syrians continued their hasty retreat to their homeland.

"The Ammonites have learned that they have no chance of defeating us," Joab told Abishai. "This city is on the border, and we'd probably have to destroy it and the women and children inside in the process of wiping out the soldiers. The Syrians have gone, so the wisest thing to do is return to Jerusalem." (II Samuel 10:13-14; I Chronicles 19:14-15).

Even while the Israelite army was returning home, certain Syrian men were planning to combine their military power into a mighty force intended to sweep into Israel with deadly violence. Embarrassed and angered by the rout of their soldiers from Medeba, Syrian leaders schemed for immediate reprisal. The man who was eager to champion their cause was Hadadezer. He was the Syrian king who previously had lost thousands of men and many horses and chariots to the army of Israel. By this time Hadadezer had rebuilt an army. This, combined with the men of other Syrian kings, made up a sizable fighting machine. But Hadadezer wasn't satisfied until he had recruited many more Aramaean soldiers from Mesopotamia, the ancient land north of the Euphrates river.

Hadadezer sent the army southward under the command of an experienced and able military leader by the name of Shobach. Shobach halted his army for the night at the town of Helam, in the territory of eastern Manasseh. He planned to begin laying Manasseh waste next morning. Then he would ravage every Israelite town and village in his path to the Jordan River and on to Jerusalem. He didn't intend to let anything stand in the way of his great number of men and chariots. (II Samuel 10:15-16; I Chronicles 19:16)

But there was a problem he didn't know about till next morning, when the huge Israelite army appeared on the southwest horizon!

An International Scheme Ruined

Shobach was almost overcome with surprise. He had been told that the Israelite army was in the vicinity of Jerusalem, and that he would meet no opposition until he was almost there. He didn't know that David, through his alert spies, had learned several days before of the movements of the Syrian army. Because this appeared to be such a serious threat to Israel, David decided that he would lead the army, with Joab next in command under him. He ordered the army to move fast and with long periods of marching. It was necessary to meet the Syrians before they could enter and damage any part of Israel.

In spite of being taken by surprise, Shobach felt that he had an advantage in meeting the enemy on fairly flat ground. There his chariots could operate with slaughterous abandon. He sent them off at once to attack.

The approaching Israelites knew they must look to God for help when they heard the growing roar of thousands of horses' hoofs. They saw row upon row of bladed chariots being drawn swiftly toward them. The line of chariots soon curved almost halfway around them from the northwest to the southeast horizons.

As the Syrian foot soldiers were hurrying forward two or three miles from the Israelites, the Syrian chariots disappeared from their view in a mammoth cloud of dust. There was no way for the Syrian foot soldiers to know how much carnage their chariots were causing when they rolled against the Israelites. Later, after the dust had partly settled, Shobach and his men received their second jolting surprise.

Out of the thinning cloud of dust emerged a wide phalanx of Israelite infantrymen with bows, javelins and spears poised for instant action!

As for the chariots that had been sent out against the approaching Israelites, the first lines of vehicles had been stopped by a tremendous shower of javelins and arrows well aimed at the horses as well as the drivers and their companion fighters. Succeeding lines of chariots had piled up against those that were halted or overturned. More and more chariots had charged blindly onward through the choking cloud of dust to pile up in a staggering mass of screeching metal, whinnying horses and yelling, groaning men. The Israelites had scrambled over them, dealing death as they passed, and then had hurried on to surprise the oncoming Syrian infantrymen.

Shobach didn't have time to find out what had happened to his chariots and their drivers. The closest Israelites let their arrows and javelins fly with deadly accuracy and force that almost completely downed the foremost ranks of the bewildered Syrians before they could counteract. Regardless of Shobach's orders to keep pressing ahead, the Syrians who had seen what had happened to their front ranks wheeled around and frenziedly plunged into those behind them in a mad effort to retreat. Within minutes the whole Syrian army was a struggling, screaming, disorganized mass of men, trampling, clawing and hacking at each other in a wild attempt to get away from the oncoming Israelites.

Shobach was killed in the terrible struggle that followed. Even the huge cavalry force, which was to follow the chariots, was made useless when many horses became overly excited and threw and trampled their riders.

Aware of the Syrians' trouble, David told Joab to order the Israelites to make the most of the situation by doubling their efforts to crush their enemies while a state of panic existed. The military strength of Israel was so great against the Syrians that in the next few hours 40,000 cavalymen and foot soldiers lost their lives and hundreds of chariots were destroyed with their drivers. As usual, as in almost any great battle, many escaped. Miraculously, because of God's help, very few Israelites were injured.

Temptation Sneaks In

Following this great contest, a vast wealth of army material was picked up from the vanquished Syrians. Moreover, the subdued nations brought tributes to the Israelites and served them in other ways. Syrian leaders realized how tragic it had been to try to help the Ammonites fight against Israel. They determined that they would never again be drawn into such a foolish alliance, although helping the Ammonites was only one of several reasons why they had come to war with Israel. (II Samuel 10:17-19; I Chronicles 19:17-19.)

The next year, when weather permitted more favorable movement of troops, David planned to send an army against the Ammonites. They had been responsible for much of the warfare the year before. And he felt that they hadn't been dealt with in a manner that would keep them from invading Israel again. David wasn't concerned with vengeance. He wanted to curb the war-loving, ambitious Ammonites before they could build an army strong enough to trouble Israel in the future.

The Israelites easily invaded the land of Ammon and devastated much of the countryside and lesser fortifications. There was little resistance until they neared Rabbah, the capital, about thirty miles northeast of the Dead Sea. The terrain in that area was rugged. Joab and Abishai, the commanders of the Israelite troops, knew that the Ammonites could be very troublesome in such a region. Thousands of Ammonites might charge out of the defiles and gullies before the Israelites could reach Rabbah. (II Samuel 11:1; I Chronicles 20:1.)

Back in Jerusalem, David wondered how matters were going with his army. The last report that had come to him by a special messenger informed him that all was going well. Thus encouraged, David took a late afternoon nap on the private roof area of

his palatial home. It was a warm day, and he wished to rest outside to take advantage of the gentle breeze. He awakened just as dusk was coming on, and got up to stroll around the terrace and gaze out across the city. Oil lamps were being lit here and there.

The starting flares of more lamps on a nearby building below drew his attention. He saw a young woman stepping into a tub to bathe. There wasn't anything very unusual about a person bathing in sight of others in those times. Privacy was something not everyone could afford. A little later, just as David was coming back around the terrace, the young woman emerged from the tub. David looked down to see her again. This time he watched her with more than passing interest as she gracefully draped a robe over her dripping body. He hadn't noticed the first time that she was so beautiful.

On inquiring who the woman was, David learned that her name was Bathsheba, and that she was the wife of a man named Uriah, a Hittite. (The Hittites were living in the region around the headwaters of the Jordan River when the Israelites had come to Canaan.) (II Samuel 11:23.) Uriah was one of the thousands of soldiers in the army of Israel that had gone to attack the Ammonites. And he was one of David's thirty-seven great military heroes. (II Samuel 23:39.) This was disappointing information. David had hoped that Bathsheba was unmarried. Even though he didn't know her, the possibility of taking her for a wife was growing in his mind. He was unwisely allowing himself to be influenced by lust for physical beauty alone.

Resist Temptation!

In spite of his usual ability for fairness and good judgment, David continued to think about Bathsheba. He impulsively decided to do something about it.

"Take this message to the woman named Bathsheba, wife of Uriah," David told a servant.

When Bathsheba opened the sealed message, she was surprised and pleased to find an invitation for her to privately visit the king. When Bathsheba walked up to him at the appointed time, David was captivated even more by her appearance.

Even before sending his message, David had gone too far in allowing his lusts to control him. He became unusually familiar with Bathsheba in the next few hours, and before the light of another day arrived, the familiarity resulted in adultery.

Instead of shoving tempting thoughts out of his mind, David had yielded to them. The result was going to be the start of the most miserable era in his life. He had broken the Seventh and the Tenth Commandments. Now trouble was certain to come. (II Samuel 11:4.)

The first blow came to David when he received a message from Bathsheba informing him that she was going to have a child several months later. David had already started to regret his foolish affair with this woman. Now sudden dismay was added to regret.

The only possible way to escape from this miserable situation, he thought to himself, was to get Uriah back to his wife at once. If Uriah stayed with his wife a few days, he would think the baby was his.

David lost no time in sending a fast messenger to Joab, requesting him to get Bathsheba's husband back to Jerusalem by the swiftest means available to report on the progress of the war. Uriah rushed back and was brought to David.

"Why am I here?" Uriah asked David. "Why am I being singled out?"

David answered: "From time to time I like to pick certain men out of my army, even during a war, to learn from their observations. It's important that I know what my men think."

Uriah was a bit uncertain why the king had sent for him, and he wasn't going to give the wrong answers if he could help it.

"What's your opinion of the attitude of the soldiers?" David began. "Do they feel that they're being fed well enough? Do they think that this drive against the Ammonites is worthwhile?"

By the time the questioning was over, Uriah was still a little confused, but he felt that he had somehow given David the answers he sought.

Chapter 101

"You Are The Man!"

AFTER committing adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, King David tried to cover up his sin. His first thought was to send for her husband.

When Uriah arrived, David chatted with him about the progress of the war in the land of Ammon.

"Thank you for being so observant and informative," David finally said to Uriah. "You have earned a short furlough. I would like to talk to you later, but for now go to your home and your wife." (II Samuel 11:1-8)

David's Scheme Backfires

The king sighed with relief as he watched Uriah stride out the door. The questioning was only an act to disguise the real reason for the Hittite's being returned to Jerusalem. David despised himself for such petty deception.

Added to that was the gnawing feeling of guilt, especially strong in the presence of the heroic and unswervingly faithful officer he had wronged. To try to lessen the uncomfortable feeling, David instructed servants to deliver a special dinner for two to the home of Uriah and Bathsheba.

After an almost sleepless night, David was greeted with an unpleasant surprise. He was informed that Uriah hadn't gone home. Instead, he had spent the time sleeping on a bench in the servants' quarters of the king's house.

"Send him to me at once," was David's gloomy request.

"Why didn't you spend last night at your home with your wife?" the king asked with a weak smile when Uriah was brought before him. "Weren't you anxious to see her after having been away from her for so long?" (II Samuel 11:9- 10)

"I wanted very much to be with my wife." Uriah explained, "but I felt that while my commander and fellow soldiers were having to sleep on the ground and the rocks, I shouldn't be taking advantage of anything better than a bench. I don't deserve better, and I don't prefer to accept the comforts and pleasures of my home until my fellow soldiers can also come back to their homes."

"So be it," David commented in unhappy resignation, though he tried not to look unhappy. "I'll send you back tomorrow to rejoin the army. Meanwhile, I think it would be wise for you to drop in to see your wife for at least a few minutes."

All that day Uriah paced nervously about. Several times he peered out between some columns at his home, only yards away, hopeful of getting a glimpse of Bathsheba.

David was watching him part of the time, and was hopeful that Uriah would see his wife, and be sufficiently moved by her appearance to toss away his resolutions and go home. It didn't turn out that way. (II Samuel 11:11-12.)

That evening David invited Uriah to eat with him. Uriah readily accepted. He couldn't very well point out that his fellow soldiers weren't eating, and that therefore he shouldn't eat. According to the king's instructions, the waiters saw to it that the guest's wine glass was continually filled. By the time the long meal was over, the soldier had difficulty getting to his feet under his own power.

"Go to your home and rest," David whispered to him as he guided him gently but firmly toward the door.

"Follow him and lead him carefully to his house," David murmured to a servant. "Report to me if you don't succeed."

Believing that matters would go his way, David retired to his private quarters. A half-hour passed, and his servant hadn't returned. Now there was reason to feel that Uriah had staggered home, with some help, and that when Bathsheba's child was born, Uriah would naturally be considered its father.

Another half-hour passed. The king was beginning to relax a little for the first time in several days. Then came the particular knock used only by certain servants. At David's permission a servant entered.

"You told me to report to you if I couldn't succeed in getting your guest back to his home," he told David. "I would have come to you sooner, but I and other servants have been trying for an hour to get the man to his house."

"Well?" David snapped loudly. "Where is he now?"

"We couldn't even herd him off your back porch," was the answer. "He's asleep on a bench in the servants' quarters!" (II Samuel 11:13.)

David stared in dismal disappointment.

For a moment it appeared that the king was about to strike his servant. The droll situation suddenly caused him to become very angry, but then he controlled himself and began pacing the floor and wondering what he should do next.

Another Scheme

Causing Uriah to become drunk had been a waste of effort. Even in that condition the resolute-willed Uriah resisted visiting his wife, who was so close at hand. He felt that he shouldn't enjoy any part of home life while his fellow soldiers were enduring hardships in the campaign against the Ammonites.

David was very worried at the thought of what would happen if the public should learn that he was to be the father of a child by another man's wife. In a frantic attempt to escape from the situation, David decided to do a terrible thing.

He sent a sealed letter to Joab, commander of his army, and gave it to Uriah to be the bearer. Uriah hurriedly returned, just as he wished, to where the Israelite forces were encamped northeast of the Dead Sea.

On opening the letter, even the callous Joab was a little moved. He was instructed to place the incorruptibly patriotic Uriah in the foremost ranks in the battle with the Ammonites. Then he was to suddenly withdraw his soldiers and not let them rescue or help Uriah in any way. This loyal soldier had been given his own death warrant by David, and had unknowingly delivered it to the man who had the power to carry out the vicious order. (II Samuel 11:14-15.)

Uriah returned to the Israelite camp just before the Ammonites, who had been bottled up in their city of Rabbah, decided to come out in a surprise foray against their besiegers. Joab assigned Uriah to the most dangerous spot. The gates of the city burst open and yelling soldiers streamed out toward the Israelites.

"Close in on them!" Joab commanded his officers. "Don't let them get around us!"

The Israelites rushed to meet the attackers, but before they could get within the archers' range of them, the Ammonites wheeled about and raced back into the city. The heavy gates slammed shut to keep out the Israelites as they ran up to the walls. Joab, meanwhile, had secretly told the other leaders near Uriah to fall back as soon as danger threatened him. They fell back, but too late to save some of them from the hissing cloud of arrows, spears and stones that came down from hundreds of soldiers who appeared at just the right moment on top of the wall.

Uriah was among those who were first to reach the walls of Rabbah. He was also among those who were killed. Some Ammonite had shot the arrow or hurled the spear or stone that took Uriah's life, but it was David who was responsible for the Hittite's death. (II Samuel 11:16-17.)

As far as the crafty Joab was concerned, this episode provided him with secret knowledge that could be used to his advantage if he ever needed a very special favor from the king. He didn't delay in sending news to David.

"Tell the king exactly what has happened lately," Joab instructed the messenger. "When he hears about how the Ammonites tricked us, he'll probably be angry, and stare coldly at you as though you could be personally to blame because our soldiers moved so close to the walls of Rabbah. He is likely to remind you of a battle that took place almost two centuries ago, during which Abimelech, one of Gideon's sons, was killed by a piece of a millstone tossed down by a woman from the wall at the city of Thebez. If he demands to know why the Israelite soldiers or their commander haven't learned from Abimelech's mistake, avoid answering and quickly mention that I, Joab, regret that some of our men lost their lives in this action. Give the names and ranks of these men, starting with Uriah the Hittite." (II Samuel 11:18-21.)

Joab felt certain that David would appear angry when he heard about his soldiers being lured so close to Rabbah's walls, but he was equally as certain that the king would forget his anger as soon as he heard that Uriah was dead.

Later, when the messenger reached Jerusalem to relate to David what had happened to the army in recent days, the king became very upset. As he was instructed, the messenger tactfully forestalled an outburst from David by naming the casualties. When Uriah was mentioned as having been killed, David's frown faded away. He held up a hand as though he wished to hear no more.

"I know that Joab must be troubled because of how the Ammonites tricked him," he remarked to the messenger. "When you return, tell him not be overly concerned. Remind him for me that certain ones have to die in battle. Tell him that it's my desire that he forget past incidents and put his mind to taking the city of Rabbah, even though months are required to do it." (II Samuel 11:22-25.)

A Stolen Wife

His anxiety somewhat abated, David immediately made it known to Uriah's wife that her husband was dead. After the widow had gone through the usual period of mourning, David had her brought to his home.

"Become my wife now, and we won't have to be concerned about your unborn child," David told her.

Under these adverse circumstances David added another wife, and eventually another son. Life with his other wives was less happy thereafter. It was part of the price that had to be paid for having to divide affections among several wives.

If God had been asleep, David might have lived through this disastrous episode without his people learning of his disgraceful desires, scandalous schemes and infamous deeds. Truth can be withheld from whole nations as well as from individuals.

But God doesn't sleep. He can't be deceived. And God was displeased by what David had done. Even the king of Israel, like anyone else, was certain to run into calamity because of breaking some of the Eternal's commandments (II Samuel 11:26-27.)

Those same laws are still in full effect today, just as is the law of gravity. Nevertheless, thousands of "Christian" leaders keep telling our people that observance of the commandments is unnecessary, impossible, a waste of effort and even improper. Unless they come to realize how much harm they are doing, and wholeheartedly repent, as David later did, they will eventually be burned to ashes in a tremendous heat referred to in the Bible as the lake of fire. (Malachi 4:1, 3)

Secret Sins Exposed

God began David's punishment by instructing Nathan, one of God's prophets, in what he should say to the king. Nathan asked for a private talk with David, and was escorted into a room where even the servants couldn't overhear the conversation.

"I want to report a matter to you that should come to your attention," Nathan said to David. "I have known you to be a man of fair judgment, and I trust you will see fit to do something about this case."

"Tell me about it," David said, giving Nathan his full attention. Nathan told about two men who were neighbors. One was wealthy and the other was poor. The wealthy one had many flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. The poor man's stock consisted of only one lamb that had been raised in his household. It had been a close pet for the children, and was almost like one of the family.

"What was the problem?" David interrupted.

"The trouble came when a friend came to visit the wealthy man," Nathan continued. "Instead of telling his servants to slaughter one of his own animals for food for his guest, he went to the home of his poor neighbor and took and then slaughtered his only animal, his pet lamb. The lamb was served to the wealthy man's guest. Do you feel that this kind of conduct calls for punishment?" (II Samuel 12:1-4.)

"By all means!" David angrily exclaimed. "That man should restore to his neighbor four lambs to replace the one that he took. Furthermore, because he was so miserably selfish and had no compassion for his poor neighbor, he deserves to die. Tell me who this man is and where he lives. I'll see that justice is carried out." (II Samuel 12:5-6.)

"You don't need to go outside your home to find the man who has been so inconsiderate and heartless," Nathan said.

"You mean that this evil man is in my house right now?" David scowled.

"Absolutely!" Nathan replied. "A man very much like him is here, except that the one here has lately performed even baser deeds. You are the man!"

"What are you saying?" David demanded, getting to his feet.

"You have angered God by your vile conduct of late. He protected you many times from Saul and his soldiers. He made it possible for you to have power in Israel, the home and wealth you enjoy and the several wives you have chosen. If there had been need for anything else, God would have given it to you. Considering the wonderful things your Creator has done for you, why have you flouted His commandments. You planned the death of the loyal and trusting man with whose wife you committed adultery! Uriah the Hittite died by your hand through your enemies, the Ammonites. Then you took Uriah's widow to be your wife lest your adultery be discovered." (II Samuel 12:7- 9)

David, by this time, realized God had truly spoken to Nathan about him. Otherwise the prophet couldn't have known about the things David hoped to keep secret.

Suddenly he felt very sick within.

Chapter 102

"I Acknowledge My Sin"

DAVID, KING OF ISRAEL, had allowed himself to fall into a dangerous and miserable state of affairs. He had tried desperately to hide his sins.

But David should have known that God would uncover them. He was astounded when Nathan the prophet told him that God had revealed matters to him, and that he, Nathan, was aware of the wicked things the king had done. (II Samuel 12:1-9.)

God Corrects David

"God further instructed me to tell you what will happen because you have slipped into such deep sin," Nathan went on. "From now on death will be hovering over your house. It will strike at unexpected times. Other evil things will take place in your house. A neighbor will take your wives from you. You did some base things in secret, but the one who takes your wives will brazenly do the same things in the light of day and in full view of the public."

By now David was on his knees. He was bent over, his hands covering his tear-streaked face. Nathan the prophet patiently waited. This was no time for him to step up to the king and pat him consolingly on the shoulder (II Samuel 12:10-12.)

"I acknowledge my sin. I have acted in a depraved and heartless manner," David confessed after a short while. "I have carelessly done these things in God's sight without considering others. I deserve to die!" (Psalm 51 is David's prayer of repentance.)

"Now that you realize how wrong you have been and have repented and made up your mind never to do such things again, God will forgive you, Nathan advised. "He will not take your life. However, because your action will provide God's enemies with reason to point you out as a favored playboy and a murderer, your and Bathsheba's child shall surely die."

Leaving the shaken and miserable king kneeling on the floor, Nathan walked away to his quarters. David was alone for hours after that. He had, during this period, found relief in heartfelt repentance.

But there was a time of greater suffering ahead. It started to take place shortly after his son was born to Bathsheba. The baby suddenly became very ill. In spite of Nathan's prediction that the infant would surely die, David frantically prayed that it would live. That night, instead of going to bed, he lay on the stone floor. (II Samuel 12:13-16.)

When servants came to him in the morning, they found him still on the stone floor. They tried to talk him into going to bed, but he waved them away. He refused the food they brought. Days passed, during which his main communication with others was to ask about his baby son. Apparently he didn't intend to give up praying, fasting and lying on the floor until he could hear a good report.

The baby died on the seventh day of his sickness. Servants feared to tell the king. They reasoned that his behavior had been so extreme while the baby was alive that he would do something very desperate if he were told that the baby was dead. When David noticed them whispering more than usual among themselves, he knew what had happened.

"I can tell by the way you act that the baby is dead," he said, sitting up. "Isn't that so?"

There was an awkward silence for a few moments. Then heads began to nod slowly. One of the servants spoke out, saying that David had supposed rightly. The king sat and stared at the floor for several seconds and motioned for everyone to leave. After they were gone he struggled weakly to his feet and staggered away to bathe, change his clothes and go to the house of God to worship. There he prayed for a while.

His servants were surprised when he returned to his home in a mood that was almost normal. They were pleased to serve him food after his fast, but they were puzzled because he was in a better state of mind after his son had died than he had been in while he was alive. (II Samuel 12:17-20.)

"How can you feel better, now that your child is dead?" someone asked.

"I don't necessarily feel better," David explained. "But now that he is dead, there's no reason to continue fasting and praying for him. I hoped that he would live, but now that he is gone, there is nothing I can do to bring him back."

After regaining his strength, David went to comfort Bathsheba because of the loss of their son. Bathsheba also realized that she had acted foolishly, and she was regretful.

Later, another son was born to David and Bathsheba. Because they were now free to be married, God looked with favor on their marriage by giving them this second child. Nathan the prophet named him Jedidiah, which meant "Friend of God." David named him Solomon, which meant "Peaceable." (II Samuel 12:21-25.) We remember him today as King Solomon.

Meanwhile, from the time that Uriah the Hittite had been killed till after David repented, Joab and the Israelite army had remained near the Ammonite city of Rabbah, waiting for the besieged natives to surrender. The Israelites took the lower city, which was watered by the Jabok River which ran through it. But the upper city was better fortified. Water was available from a reservoir inside the upper city until the Israelites managed to find the conduit through which the reservoir was fed. Rather than die of thirst, some of the Ammonites emerged to try to gain freedom by attacking the Israelites, who slaughtered part of them before they could get very far. Those near the gate managed to get to safety inside.

Strong walls and sealed gates separated the lower city from the upper part, in which was situated the king's palace and other special buildings.

Joab knew that it would be only a matter of days before this part of the city would have to surrender. Although the reservoir in the lower city was dry, Joab reasoned that a supply of water had undoubtedly been taken into the sealed-off section of Rabbah where the Ammonite king and perhaps the remainder of his army were trapped. Unless Joab successfully attacked at once, the unknown amount of water in the city would determine when the city would completely fall to Israel.

Later, messengers from Joab came to Jerusalem to tell David what had happened, and to bring a suggestion from the commander that David should come to Rabbah with additional troops.

"Joab thinks it would be wise for the king of Israel to hurry and take the capital of Ammon," they reported. "It would create a good impression among our people, and the nations around us would have even greater respect for you. Besides, if Joab receives full credit for taking Rabbah, the city might be named after him. He would prefer that you have that honor." (II Samuel 12:26-28.)

Ammonites Finally Subdued

David agreed, and went with several thousand soldiers to join Joab. Now greater in numbers, the Israelites closed in on the fortified sections of Rabbah from all sides.

"We know that there are many thousands of soldiers inside," Joab told David. "We got the information out of several prisoners in return for our mercy. If we approach close enough to throw up wall hooks, the Ammonites will probably show up on the walls and send down a storm of anything they can throw, but it's a chance we'll have to take."

On orders from David, volunteers climbed ropes to the top of the wall, as others protected them with a continuous volley of arrows aimed at the top of the wall. Then a few descended inside the second section of the city under protection from others who remained on the wall. They quickly unfastened the locking beams from the heavily barred gates. As soon as the gates were open, David and his men swarmed inside and spread out along the streets leading up to and around the palace and other buildings.

As they swelled in, armed Ammonites, despite hunger and thirst, came at them from all sides, fiercely defending their capital city.

Some of the Ammonites rushed toward Israel's king, fiercely struggling to get close enough to him to send some kind of weapon through his body. Guards swarmed around David, quickly choking off the assault.

Some of the Israelites fell before the desperate, sword-swinging, spear-thrusting Ammonites. But David's forces were greater in number. They met the attack with such power that the Ammonites were put out of action almost as fast as they came forward. It turned out to be a one-sided battle. Soon no more of the Ammonites remained in the battle. The streets were strewn with the bodies of those who had tried to defend Rabbah.

David wasn't convinced that all of Ammon's soldiers had come out in the open. He sent troops to scour every part of the capital to find any more who might be concealed. Some were discovered who were unable to fight. The water supply had run out, and they were suffering from thirst. The long struggle with the Ammonites was finally finished.

This had been a needless war. David had not yet learned that God is not pleased with war.

Prophesied Troubles Begin

The Bible doesn't say what happened to the Ammonite king. Probably he was captured or slain. There is a scriptural reference to David's taking the crown off the enemy king's head, but it doesn't mean that the king of Israel walked up to the king of Ammon and snatched off his crown. This would have been quite a feat for both rulers, inasmuch as the crown weighed more than a hundred pounds. It had many precious stones in it, and the gold alone was worth an enormous amount of money. Instead of the crown being worn, it was suspended as an emblem of authority above the throne of the Ammonite king.

The crown was only a small part of the wealth taken by the Israelites from Rabbah. There were valuable jewels, objects of gold and silver, weapons of war, livestock, carpets, tapestries, clothing, ornate vases and pots, fur pelts and many other costly things. These were taken back to Jerusalem. Some of it was distributed among the soldiers, and part went into the royal treasury. The heavy crown was hung in David's throne room as a trophy of the victory over Ammon.

As for the people captured in Rabbah, as well as most of the natives of Ammon, they became subject to the Israelites. Some were used as laborers in Canaan and their own country in mining, handling cultivating equipment, making bricks and cutting wood.

Matters went fairly well for David during the next several months. Then an unpleasant event developed. As usual, it was because of breaking some of God's laws -- and was part of the penalty Nathan had foretold. Amnon, one of David's sons, fell in love with Tamar, one of David's daughters, but by another mother. Tamar was therefore a half-sister to Amnon. It was a blood relationship that was so close that it was a sin for either one of them to consider marriage or any of its privileges. Nevertheless, Amnon had a great desire for his half-sister, and brooded about it so much that friends wondered what was troubling him.

One of those friends was a crafty fellow by the name of Jonadab, a cousin of Amnon. When he found what was bothering Amnon, he suggested a scheme by which David's son could be alone with Tamar.

"Go to your home and pretend to be ill," Jonadab whispered, grinning smugly. "When your father comes to visit you, he'll probably ask what he can do for you. Tell him that you would like to have Tamar bring some food and serve it to you. He'll undoubtedly ask Tamar to carry out your wish. What you do after that is up to you." (II Samuel 13:1-5.)

Amnon's desire to be with Tamar was so great that he eagerly put Jonadab's suggestion into action. When David heard that his son was sick, he immediately went to see him. The king was distressed to see Amnon lying in bed so motionless, apparently weakened by his sickness.

"Would you care to have Nathan the prophet come and pray for you?" David asked.

David is Deceived

"Don't bother him," Amnon muttered feebly. "I can pray for myself. There is something I would like to have you do, though. I haven't seen Tamar for quite a while. I think I would feel better if she would come here and prepare one of her special meals for me. Would you send her?"

"I'll see that she comes shortly," David promised.

Amnon was soon pleased to see Tamar arrive with the food he had requested. Despite his excitement, he managed to appear weak and ill. The girl talked to him while she prepared the special meal he had told his father about. When the food was done, she took it out of the baking pan and put it on a serving plate. But David's son refused the food.

He grunted angrily. "I want Tamar to come in here and serve me! Everybody else get out of the house!" (II Samuel 13:6-9.)

Perplexed by Amnon's rudeness, everyone left except Tamar, who hesitantly entered her half-brother's room with the food. As she placed the plate before him, Amnon jerked himself up to a sitting position and seized her by an arm. The plate clattered to the floor. Tamar's eyes widened in surprise.

"You're not ill!" the girl exclaimed. "You've been pretending!"

"Now don't get excited and raise your voice," Amnon warned. "It was just a little plan to see you alone."

"Let me go!" Tamar murmured angrily. "You're acting like a fool. If you want me for your wife, speak to the king, and he'll arrange our marriage!" (II Samuel 13:10-13.)

Tamar knew that David wouldn't do that. But it was the only thing she could think to say in those frenzied moments to try to persuade Amnon to release her. Like too many girls today, instead of screaming for help, Tamar continued to reason with Amnon -- hoping to convince Amnon not to commit fornication. He raped her anyway.

Amnon had hoped that Tamar would have as much ardor for him as he had for her. But when he found that she didn't, his sexual lust for her suddenly turned to hate. To add insult to injury, he demanded that she leave immediately.

When Tamar hesitated, because she didn't want to run out of the house in an undignified manner, he yelled to a servant to get her out of the building and then lock

the doors to make certain that she wouldn't return. Obviously Amnon was trying to give his servants the deceitful impression that Tamar had such an attraction to him that extreme measures should be taken to keep her away. To Tamar's great embarrassment, the servant came in and escorted her outside.

God put this experience in the Bible as a lesson for every young person never to get involved in fornication.

A short time later Absalom, Tamar's brother, looked out from his home to see his sister approaching. She was trying to hide her face with one hand. As she came to the doorway, he noticed that there were ashes on her head, and that she was crying. He leaped forward to put his arms around her. (II Samuel 13:14-20.)

"What is the matter with you? " he asked. "Where have you been?"

Chapter 103

An Undisciplined Son Rebels

AMNON one of David's sons, had cruelly forced Tamar, his half-sister. After Tamar had escaped from him, she hurried in anguish to the home of Absalom, her brother, who opened the door for her. (II Samuel 13:7-19.)

A Plot for Revenge

Sobbing, Tamar jerked off her coat, a colorful and expensive garment such as was worn by a virgin in the royal family, and vigorously ripped it. Absalom knew that something tragic had taken place when he saw this demonstration. Then he remembered that his father had sent a message to Tamar that she should visit Amnon because of his sickness.

"Have you been with Amnon just now?" Absalom asked.

Tamar nodded and went to a chair to sit down and try to hide her tear-filled eyes. Knowing Amnon, Absalom didn't have to try very hard to understand the reason for his sister's misery.

"Don't worry about this," Absalom said, putting his arm about her. "And don't tell anyone about it. If you do, the scandal would harm you as well as our family. Stay here in my home for a while and try to put it out of your mind." (II Samuel 13:20.)

His father David was the last person Absalom would have wanted to learn about this matter. But the most secret things have a way of coming into the open. It wasn't long before the king found out what Amnon had done. He was grieved and angry, but he unwisely didn't apply any punishment to Amnon because Amnon was his first son, and he had a special liking for him. One of David's weaknesses was his failure to properly discipline his children. (I Kings 1:6.)

As for Absalom, he also said nothing to Amnon, although he hated him for what he had done. He felt that an opportunity would come when he could cause Amnon to pay for the crime against his sister. (II Samuel 13:21-22.)

He waited two years for that opportunity. It was sheep-shearing season, a time when there were special gatherings of friends and relatives to celebrate the wool harvest. Absalom wanted to make this a very special occasion, so he invited his father to a gathering at Absalom's estate a few miles northeast of Jerusalem. David declined with the explanation that the entertainment of royalty, such as the public would expect, would entail too much expense, and that he didn't want Absalom to be burdened with such a heavy bill.

"But I would be very pleased and honored to have my father the king at my home as the guest of honor on this occasion," Absalom persisted.

"Thank you, my son," David said, "but it would be better that I should not be there. I am sure that the celebration will be most enjoyable without me."

"If you can't be there, then I would like Amnon to be my special guest," Absalom stated.

"Why Amnon?" David asked suspiciously, remembering what had happened to Tamar.

"Because he is your firstborn son," Absalom quickly replied. "I trust that you will encourage him and all your sons to be there." (II Samuel 13:23-27.)

Later, when all the guests were assembled at his home, Absalom issued a ghastly order to his servants.

"When we go in to dine," he told them, "give Amnon plenty of the strongest wine. Make sure that he drinks so much that he will become dull and careless. Then, at a signal from me, do what I have planned for you to do. Don't hesitate. I'll bear the responsibility. Anyone who fails to do his part is lacking courage, and must leave my employ."

Aftermath of Revenge

The Bible doesn't reveal whether Amnon was killed by a spear, a dagger or a sword, but he died suddenly at the table while he was too befuddled to be aware of his assailants. The other guests were so shocked and frightened by his murder that they fled from Absalom's house without so much as attempting to find out who was guilty. (II Samuel 13:28-29.)

Even before the horrified people had reached their respective homes, a wild rumor somehow reached David that all his sons had been massacred at Absalom's home by Absalom and a bloodthirsty group of servants. There was no way to prove or disprove this report. David was inclined to fear the worst. He went into a state of mourning, which included tearing the clothes he was wearing and sprawling on the floor. His servants also believed the rumor, and joined him in the strange, ancient custom by ripping their clothes, too.

Jonadab, the crafty fellow who had been partly responsible for starting this trouble, and who knew what had really happened at Absalom's home, came to David. He informed him that it wasn't true that all his sons had been slain, but that Amnon had been the only victim. David knew that Jonadab wasn't always to be trusted, so he wasn't sure what to believe until Jonadab pointed out a large group of people approaching. The king looked closely at them, and saw that they were his sons and their families. Only Absalom and Amnon were missing. (II Samuel 13:30-36.)

Meanwhile, Absalom was fleeing for his life with his family and servants. He knew that it wouldn't long be safe for him to remain at home, nor would he very long be welcome in any of the cities of refuge in Israel. The only possible safety was in the land of Geshur, an area to the northeast in Syria. (II Samuel 15:8.) Talmai, king of Geshur, was Absalom's grandfather on his mother's side.

Being not too friendly toward Israel, he nevertheless welcomed Absalom because of being related. For the next three years he was pleased to harbor his grandson from those who would try to avenge Amnon's death.

During that time David never quite recovered from the loss of his firstborn son. But as his sorrow decreased, he thought more and more about Absalom, finally forgiving him for what he had done to Amnon, and even desperately hoping that Absalom would return to Jerusalem. (II Samuel 13:37-39.)

Joab, David's hardhearted, crafty but loyal general, became aware that the king longed to see Absalom. He sensed that David wanted to send to Geshur for his son, but that he feared what the public reaction would be to his pardoning a murderer in the royal family. Joab had a plan by which he hoped to cause David to decide to have Absalom returned to Jerusalem. He arranged for a wise elderly widow, a stranger in Jerusalem, to obtain an audience with the king. He instructed her what to say. When she came before David she told him that she was a widow, a mother of two men who had fallen into a fight in which one was killed. She said that angry relatives were demanding that she turn her only son over to them so that they could take his life for what he had done to his brother.

The Sprouting of Vanity

"If they kill my only remaining son, then my dead husband's name and family will come to an end," the woman murmured sadly.

"Don't worry about this matter," David told her. "I'll see that your son is pardoned and that no one will harm him." (II Samuel 14:1-10.)

The woman pretended that she was very relieved and thankful. Then she said that she would like David to explain something to her.

"If you so readily can pardon my son, why haven't you done the same thing for your son, who has been banished for so long? Saving my son is a vital thing only to me and my husband's family, but saving your son is important to the welfare of all Israel."

Suddenly the woman felt very uncomfortable under David's steady gaze. Uneasy seconds dragged by while he said nothing.

"I would like YOU to explain something to ME," he finally said. "Did Joab, my army commander, have anything to do with your being here?"

"He did," the embarrassed and fearful woman hesitantly confessed. "It was he who told me what to say so that you might decide to take steps to bring your son back home. Forgive me for having some part in this thing. You must have the wisdom of an angel to have perceived that I was scheming." (II Samuel 14:11-20.)

"It's not that I'm so wise," David observed. "I've known Joab long enough to recognize his schemes."

"Did you think that sending a woman to me with a wild tale about a murderous son would cause me to decide to pardon Absalom?" David asked Joab after summoning the army commander.

"I had hoped it would," responded Joab, maintaining his military dignity.

"I know a way in which you can help even more," the king declared.

Joab noted David's stern expression. He expected to be told that he could help by keeping out of the king's business from then on. Respectfully he waited for his superior to continue.

"You can assemble the necessary attendants and equipment for going to Geshur to bring Absalom back," David grinned.

Joab stared in momentary disbelief, then prostrated himself before the king.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed. "I am happy to find favor in your sight so that your son might be restored to Israel!"

A few days later Absalom was back in his home in Jerusalem, but he wasn't taken to see his father. David felt that it was enough, for the time being, that he should be pardoned. Although he wanted to see his son, he didn't choose to allow a big happy reunion that might seem to indicate to the people that Absalom was being regarded as blameless because he was the king's son. (II Samuel 14:21-24.)

Absalom received much public interest, but not just because he was a royal person who had returned from the protection of another nation. He was a very good-looking, well-proportioned, muscular man whose unusual appearance gained for him the reputation of being the most handsome man in Israel. There were no blemishes on his skin. His hair was so exceptionally thick and heavy and so admired that he became very vain about it. He let it grow very long and then every year he would have about six pounds of it trimmed off.

He was the object of admiration of many women and the cause of jealousy in many men, but his interest was in his wife and children. He had three sons and a daughter. He named his daughter Tamar, after the sister who had been involved in the reason for his plotting Amnon's death. (II Samuel 14:25-27.)

Vanity Begets a Plot

Two years passed without Absalom seeing his father. The younger man couldn't understand this lack of contact. He considered Joab a friend who could help build relations between himself and his father. So he sent a message to the army commander, asking him to try to get him in touch with the king. Joab didn't reply. After sending a second message and again receiving no reply, Absalom decided to resort to a more effective method of gaining Joab's attention.

"See that field of barley just beyond mine?" Absalom pointed out to his servants. "Go set it on fire."

The servants considered this a most unusual order. But they faithfully did as their master ordered. After the field was burned, the owner quickly showed up at Absalom's home, just as Absalom knew he would because the field belonged to Joab.

"My barley field has been burned, and I've been told that your servants set fire to it," Joab angrily said to Absalom. "Why have you allowed such an outrageous thing?" (II Samuel 14:28-31.)

"You are very alert to what happened to your field, but you paid no attention to the messages I sent you," Absalom replied. "I had to do this thing to get you here. Please go to my father and ask him why I was brought back from Geshur. Tell him that I would prefer to still be there if I can't be allowed to see him. If he still regards me as a criminal, he should have me killed. It might be better than living here as an outcast from my own family."

Joab was quite upset because of the loss of his barley. Probably Absalom paid for it, but he managed to get a message to his father. When David heard from Joab how disquieted Absalom was about not seeing him, he was moved to send for his son immediately. Absalom happily came to the palace. When he saw his father, he sank to his knees and bowed his forehead to the floor. David pulled him up to embrace him for the first time in five years. (II Samuel 14:32-33.)

It wasn't long after Absalom was welcomed at the palace that he began; to change. Because Absalom had not been properly disciplined, he was self-willed and self-centered. He began to lust after his father's throne. Amnon's death led Absalom to believe he would be the one to succeed his father on the throne of Israel. The very thought of coming into that rank and power spurred him with ambition to try to hasten the time when it would happen.

Absalom's vanity increased with his ambition. He equipped himself with fancy chariots in which he rode haughtily about, sometimes preceded by as many as fifty men to herald his approach and to clear the streets and roads. To many people Absalom was a more exciting and interesting figure than the king, and they were quite impressed by the manner in which he conducted himself.

Often he went to the main gate of the city to mingle with the many people who brought problems and grievances there to be settled. He was always anxious to have some part in helping make decisions. He tried to make the decisions in favor of parties to whom he could look for support in the day when he might need support from as many people as possible. He was building up a following that would be necessary in the near future.

By these back-slapping, favor-performing methods, together with his unusual appearance and manners, David's son soon became very popular in Israel. At the same time, he became so impressed with that popularity and the way in which he was able to influence people, that he soon decided that it was the time for him to try to wrest the rulership of Israel from his father David! (II Samuel 15:1-6.)

Absalom Leads Revolt

To do this, he had to go away to organize his political and military forces. As an excuse to leave Jerusalem, he told his father that he had made a vow, when he was in Geshur, that if ever he could return to Jerusalem, he would make a special thank offering and would thereafter serve God.

"I want to go to Hebron, the ancient sacred city of the priests, to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving," Absalom told David.

"Indeed you should," David agreed, pleased that his son had such inclinations. "Take two hundred of my soldiers with you, and may your sacrifice be pleasing to God."

Unknown to the king, Absalom took many conspirators with him, besides the two hundred, who weren't aware that they would turn out to be something more than just impressive guards for the king's son. Absalom had already secretly arranged to send men out to all parts of the nation to help swing the people over to support him as king. Because David was getting old and because he had made what people thought were unwise and unpopular moves, Absalom's campaigning helpers had some effective tools to use in promoting David's son for king. The people were becoming more agitated by the day, and far more than David was told or suspected. (II Samuel 15:7-11.)

Even Ahithophel, David's chief advisor and prime minister, went over to Absalom's side. (II Samuel 15:12.) Perhaps his reason for deserting the king was that he was Bathsheba's grandfather. (II Samuel 11:3; 23:34) He could have harbored some secret ill will against David because of the way he had treated her.

It was a grave shock to David when he was informed by a loyal subject that the state of affairs in Israel had changed almost overnight. Not until then did he learn that Absalom was seeking the throne and that he was planning to make a surprise attack on Jerusalem in a sudden effort to gain control of the nation by taking over the seat of government. (II Samuel 15:13.)

David could have ordered soldiers to occupy every foot of the wall around Jerusalem, but he didn't want to make the city the site of a possible battle that would mar the capital. Instead of taking defense measures, he called together only his family, servants and palace guards.

"Prepare to leave Jerusalem at once!" he warned. "Absalom has turned against me, and might attack us here with an army he has raised!"

For a time there was confusion and fearful excitement, but then the women and children became calmer. The servants declared their loyalty to David, and assured him that they were eager to go with him anywhere.

Leaving ten women to take care of the palace, David and his family, servants and guards left with a few hastily collected provisions. The party included the six hundred men David had brought from the Philistine city of Gath years before, and who were still loyally attached to him.

David was very moved that these people were intent on staying by him at a time when so many in Israel were switching their devotion and allegiance from the king to Absalom. David suggested to Ittai, who commanded the palace guards and others from Gath, that he and his men and their families remain in Jerusalem, but Ittai made it evident that he wanted to stay with the king no matter what happened. David consented to Ittai's going with him. (II Samuel 15:14-24.)

Not far outside the city David paused to watch the loyal lines of people move on toward safety. He was suddenly quite perturbed when he saw that the ark of the covenant was being carried from Jerusalem.