C·H·A·P·T·E·R

11

David's Glory and Shame

2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles, Psalm 32 and 51

David's Righteousness

David knew his holy Dad delighted in him because he was "righteous" and "blameless" (Psalm 18:20-24). But how could David say that about himself when his faults were so glaring that they nearly brought his hard-earned kingdom down around his ears? Simple. "Righteous" and "blameless" in Hebrew did not mean that David obeyed every one of a long list of rules flawlessly. They meant that David was living up to the terms of a covenant relationship. Those terms, expressed at length by Moses, boiled down to loving and serving Yahweh with a passion that consumed one's whole being, confessing failure and rebellion when they occurred, and desiring ardently to turn from and make amends for those wrongs. Even when he committed the most appalling crimes, David remained "righteous" in Yahweh's eyes because, unlike Saul, he never tried to rationalize or evade his guilt. He always felt more horror at offending his Beloved than at being found out.

Jerusalem

After Saul's death, David's own tribesmen were quick to welcome him back from Philistia to reign over Judah. But it took

seven and a half years of civil war, allegations, treachery, and assassination until the ten northern tribes were ready to turn from Saul's family and accept David as king. However, while David ruled Judah as tribal chief by popular acclaim, he governed Israel (the northern tribes) only by treaty: he and the tribal elders made a covenant each to fulfill certain obligations.

The Philistines had left Israel alone as long as it was divided and weak, but once David (whom they knew all too well) was proclaimed king of a united nation, they attacked swiftly, hoping to neutralize him before he got his footing. But in two decades of leading armies, David had learned the same secret that had carried Joshua to victory: Yahweh was his commanding officer. David consulted Him before every battle. On occasion, Yahweh would even sketch the combat strategy.

Once he had subdued the Philistines, David faced his real challenge: governing his unruly people. Because Judah and Israel were rivals, it was difficult to choose a capital that would not make one or the other half of the nation feel slighted. So David cast his eye on a stronghold high in the mountains in the Canaanite territory between Judah and Benjamin. Because Jebus (also called Zion) belonged to neither Israel nor Judah, it would be a neutral site for a united kingdom. The only difficulties were: (1) it was held by about 3,500 Canaanites; (2) its walls were surrounded on three sides by sheer dropoff; and (3) it had a secret water supply that made it invulnerable to siege.

No problem. Yahweh disclosed the entrance to the water shaft, and the Israelite army poured through it.

So David established the fortress of Zion as his citadel and built up the land around it for a royal city. He called it Jerusalem—it was probably the Salem where a Canaanite priest-king, Melchizedek, had once reigned and won Abraham's homage. In the same vicinity was Mount Moriah, where Abraham had brought his promised son to be sacrificed.

Before long, the neighboring nations began to take the new kingdom seriously. The Phoenician city of Tyre was the main seaport of Palestine. Tyre depended on Israel for agricultural products and for the inland trade routes to the rich East, while Israel desired the cedar of Phoenicia and luxury products from

the West. So Israel and Tyre became allies, and the king of Tyre helped David build a regal palace, the Near Eastern symbol of kingly status.

Yahweh's House and David's House

But David felt that if Yahweh was the real Lord of Israel and he himself was only vice-regent, then Yahweh needed a palace as grand as his. His first idea was to bring Yahweh's throne to Jerusalem. David really did mean well. He sulked for three months when one of his men died because he didn't know the ark shouldn't be touched (the writings of Moses had fallen into obscurity during the centuries of chaos). But he got over it and led the final procession that welcomed the ark into the city with shouts and trumpets. Wearing nothing but the skimpy undergarment of a priest, David cavorted with wild abandon to celebrate his King's arrival in His capital. David's wife was disgusted—her father Saul would never have displayed himself with such indignity. Exactly. David didn't care what people thought of him as long as Yahweh was delighted.

He really hoped to please Yahweh with a fine cedar house instead of a tattered tent. But Yahweh sent a message through the prophet Nathan that, far from David building Him a house, He was going to build David a house, as He had already begun to do. David would have a son who would build a palace for Yahweh, but Yahweh would build that son's lineage into a dynasty that would never fail to give Israel a king. Nathan, quoting Yahweh, prophesied, "I will be his father, and he will be my son. . . . Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:14,16).

Alone with his King, David marveled: "Who am I, O Sovereign [Yahweh], and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? . . . Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign [Yahweh]? . . . There is no one like you" (2 Samuel 7:18-19,22)!

That was an understatement. An unending dynasty? Here was a promise to rival Abraham's. But Yahweh had kept His promises to make Abraham's descendants numerous and to give them this land with rest from their enemies. David could hardly

doubt Yahweh's word, since he was sitting here as king having defeated everybody from Syria to Edom and from the Mediterranean to well east of the Jordan. (See map, page 343.)

Lust and Murder

David was flying high. He had been reigning in Jerusalem for some years, he was well over forty, and he was beginning to enjoy palace cushions more than mats in a tent on the eve of battle. So "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war" (2 Samuel 11:1), he didn't. He let his nephew quell an uprising out east, and stayed home to enjoy the cool evenings in his rooftop pavilion at the summit of Jerusalem.

One evening he noticed a woman—the wife of one of his captains—bathing in a courtyard below. The predictable happened to a bored leader in midlife: attraction, seduction, pregnancy. With uncharacteristic clay feet, David tried to cover up his crime by inviting the captain home for a little "R and R" with his wife. When the man refused to sleep with her out of loyalty to his men in the field (what a slap to David!), the king secretly ordered the commander-in-chief to send the captain to certain death on a frontline combat mission.

After a mourning period, David married the widow, Bathsheba. She had her son, and the gossip would have died down if Yahweh had only cooperated. But He had strong opinions about kings who used their power to get away with murder. So He sent Nathan to finger David. Because He loved him, He would not take away his throne. But so that no one would say that Yahweh's grace meant license to abuse other people, David's son would die, his family would be plagued by violence, and he would suffer the same shame he had inflicted: someone close to him would one day raid his harem. A stiff penalty, but in Yahweh's order, greater honor means greater responsibility and greater cost for rebellion.

David could have had Nathan executed. Or like Saul, he could have made excuses and asked the prophet to hush things up. But instead, he simply admitted with shame that he had held Yahweh up to contempt. Throughout his son's illness he fasted, slept on the ground, and begged Yahweh for mercy. When the

child finally died, he got up. His servants were baffled. But all along David was betting on Yahweh's character: while the boy lived there was still time for the mercy David had received so often, and when the boy was dead, it was time to go on trusting his God as he always had.

Why was David righteous and blameless even though he was a seducer, liar, and murderer? Consider three verses of the song he wrote (Psalm 51) while watching his son die:

> Have mercy on me, O God,
> according to your unfailing love;
> according to your great compassion
> blot out my transgressions. (verse 1)
>
> Against you, you only, have I sinned
> and done what is evil in your sight,
> so that you are proved right when you speak
> and justified when you judge. (verse 4)
>
> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
> a broken and contrite heart,
> O God, you will not despise. (verse 17)

This was not a morbid wallowing in guilt, but a frank facing of truth and a trusting pursuit of restored relationship. Forgiveness. The other nations had no concept of an intimacy with a god that evoked such feelings, nor that a god could forgive a person by accepting the pain of a wrong into his own heart. Forgiveness. Yahweh so obliterated the crime that He was willing to treat David as though nothing had happened. David was blameless. But not proud, not self-confident. He knew he owed a debt to his God payable only in gratitude.

> Blessed is he
> whose transgressions are forgiven,
> whose sins are covered. (Psalm 32:1)

David understood the sweet freedom of forgiveness that meant he could approach his God with confidence.

Consequences

The relationship was restored, but the effects of wrong choices could not be evaded. David's two oldest sons lost respect for him after the Bathsheba affair. Amnon, his eldest and heir, raped his half sister Tamar. David would not discipline his son for doing what he himself had done; like Samuel and Eli, the man who had led Israel to a golden age was a failure as a father, and he would not face it. In disgust, Tamar's brother Absalom murdered Amnon.

And again David did nothing but refuse to see Abasalom for five years so that he would not be reminded of his failures and poor example. Absalom matched David's rejection with contempt: he resolved to wrest the throne out from under his father's backside. The attempt nearly succeeded and left David broken with grief and disgrace: Absalom died miserably, but not until all Israel watched as the son violated his father's concubines on the palace roof.

David's Last Years

It did not bode well for a hereditary monarchy that healthy fathering was such an unknown art. But at about fifty years old, David resolved to try again. He passed over his surviving sons in favor of a new baby of Bathsheba's named Solomon. In his fifties and sixties David could no longer travel to war, so he spent his time preparing for the palace-temple that Solomon was to build for Yahweh. He amassed absurd quantities of gold, silver, bronze, iron, cedar, stone, and workmen of all kinds. He had elaborate plans drawn up, detailing everything from the size of each portico to the weight of gold in the lampstand—all of which, like Moses, he received in consultation with Yahweh.

Since the tabernacle would no longer be used, he organized the Levites as to which would supervise various temple matters and which would serve as judges and officials in the towns of Israel. In particular, he appointed certain families of Levites as temple musicians: they would write and play all sorts of worship music on stringed instruments, trumpets, and cymbals. Our current book of Psalms traces its roots to these musicians, who collected songs written by and/or dedicated to David.[1] They and

successive generations for some six hundred years wrote more songs that ranged from riotous celebration in praise of Yahweh to heartrending prayers for help. David's frank and passionate writing set the tone for the way Israel would worship her God.

At seventy years old, David managed to hand over his kingdom to his barely grown Solomon. Thanks to Nathan the prophet, a coup attempt by David's fourth son was crushed. David exhorted Solomon to do three things: tie up some political loose ends, build the temple, and above all, obey Yahweh. The first two Solomon accomplished superbly. The third, well . . .

NOTE

1. Scholars debate whether the label "of David" in the book of Psalms always means David wrote the psalm, or whether it sometimes means the psalm was dedicated to him. The Hebrew phrase leaves both possibilities open.