

27. David raises his Ebenezer

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could open our Bibles, please, at page 275, and our reading is 2 Samuel 23.

We're going to read the whole chapter, because I think Helaz the Paltite and Ira the son of Achish deserve their moment in the sun. So we're going to read the whole chapter.

This is the third of those four chapters at the end of 2 Samuel, where the Spirit of God is reviewing the whole of David's life and showing us its significance.

Chapter 23. Now these are the last words of David. The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel.

The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me. His word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken. The rock of Israel has said to me, When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.

[1 : 15] For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure.

For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be taken with the hand.

But the man who touches them arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they are utterly consumed with fire. These are the names of the mighty men whom David had.

Josheb a Shebeth, a Tachmanite. He was chief of three. He wielded his spear against 800 whom he killed at one time. And next to him among the three mighty men was Eliezer, the son of Dodo, son of Ahohi.

He was with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel withdrew. He rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary and his hand clung to his sword.

[2 : 24] And the Lord brought about a great victory that day, and the men returned after him only to strip the slain. And next to him was Shammah, the son of Agi the Hararite.

The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. But Shammah took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and struck down the Philistines, and the Lord worked a great victory.

And three of the thirty chief men went down and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adalim, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim.

David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Philistines were then at Bethlehem. And David said longingly, Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate.

Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and carried and brought it to David.

[3 : 31] But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the Lord and said, Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at risk of their lives?

Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did. Now Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zerui, was chief of the thirty.

And he wielded his spear against three hundred men and killed them, and won a name beside the three. He was the most renowned of the thirty and became their commander, but he did not attain to the three.

And Benai, the son of Jehoiada, was a valiant man of Kabziel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two ariels, that's probably lion-like men of Moab. He also went down and struck a lion in a pit

on a day when snow had fallen.

And he struck down an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand, but Benai went down to him with a staff and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear.

[4 : 39] These things did Benai, the son of Jehoiada, and won a name beside the three mighty men. He was renowned among the thirty, but did not attain to the three.

And David set him over his bodyguard. Asahel, the brother of Joab, was one of the thirty. Elhanan, the son of Dodo of Bethlehem. Shammah of Harod.

Elikah of Harod. Helez, the Paltite. Ira, the son of Achash of Tekoa. Abiezer of Anathoth. Mibunai, the Hushethite.

Zaman, the Ahohite. Mahariah of Natopha. Heleb, the son of Batana of Natopha. Ittai, the son of Ribai of Gibeah, of the people of Benjamin.

Benaiah of Perathan. Hidai, of the brooks of Gash. Abi-albon, the Arbathite. Asmaveth of Bahurim. Elahaiaba, the Shalbanite, the sons of Jason.

[5 : 35] Jonathan. Shammah, the Harorite. Abai, I'm the son of Sharar, the Harorite. Eliphelet, the son of Ashbai, of Maacah. Elime, the son of Ahithophel, of Gilo.

Hezro, of Carmel. Parai, the Arbite. Egal, the son of Nathan, of Zobah. Banna, the Gadite. Zelik, the Ammonite.

Nahari, of Beeroth, the armor-bearer of Joab, the son of Zeruiah. Ira, the Ithrite. Gareb, the Ithrite. Uriah, the Hittite.

Thirty-seven in all. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. All of it. May he bless it to us. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 275.

And before we look at this passage, let's have a moment of prayer. God, our Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us.

[6 : 46] That you will open your word to our hearts and minds. That you will open our hearts and minds to your word. We ask this in the name of Christ Jesus, the living word, to whom the scriptures so fully and faithfully point.

Amen. Amen. On the 8th of June, in the year 1924, two climbers, George Mallory and Andrew Irvin, left a camp high up on the slopes of Mount Everest to make their final bid to reach the summit.

They never returned. But later on, one of their companions said this, They were last seen heading strongly for the top.

They were last seen heading strongly for the top. That seems to me, in many ways, we could almost write this over, these last chapters of 2 Samuel.

David is heading strongly for the top. And this is not here, in chapter 23, an old man wallowing in nostalgia.

[8 : 05] He's not thinking about the good old days, when it was a lot better than it is now. This is a man looking at the far horizons, caught up at the wonder that God has chosen him and his house to be part of his eternal purposes.

He's looking at God's eternal plan. But he's also enormously grateful for past help. Hence my rather odd title for this sermon, David Raises His Ebenezer.

Let me explain why I chose that. Back in 1 Samuel 7, the Lord rescues Israel from the Philistines. And the prophet Samuel sets up a stone, a rock, which he calls Ebenezer, the rock, the stone of help.

And that phrase, that idea has entered into Christian thinking. Raising our Ebenezer, thanking God for the way he has brought us.

Here I raise my Ebenezer. Hither by thy help I've come. As you know, this is not living in the past. This is looking back over our lives. Thank God for the Ebenezer that he's sprinkled so generously and so unstintedly on our lives.

[9 : 23] It's a good thing to sit down sometimes. The old hymn used to say, count your blessings. Name them one by one. Or raise your Ebenezer. Far better than whinging and moaning, isn't it?

So David here is raising his Ebenezer. Thanking God for his steadfast love in the past, which continues into the present. And that steadfast love, which will not fail him until he reaches home. Now these are not literally the last words of David. You read these in 1 Kings chapter 2, where he passes on the charge to Solomon, who is about to take over the kingdom.

What these are is a kind of summing up and a kind of testimonial. This is what it's been about, David is saying. Earlier in the book, Samuel, in chapter 12 of 1 Samuel, had done a similar thing. He had surveyed his life and ministry. He's still some time to go, as has David. Rather like what we'll see when we come to Genesis 49.

[10:29] Jacob's blessing. And then again, of course, Moses in Deuteronomy. And Joshua at the end of the book. These men are raising their Ebenezers. And the spirit is showing the significance of their lives.

But nor is it David's autobiography. This isn't fragments of David's autobiography. Because it points to his greater son. And yet, verse 5, an everlasting covenant, an eternal covenant, where imperfect people are used in God's perfect plan.

So that's the background to this chapter. Now the chapter very obviously falls into two parts. And these will be our two main points. First of all, the king's words in verses 1 to 7.

And then the king's warriors in verses 8 to 39. So let's look first of all at the king's words. Now last week we looked at the great psalm of David.

The rock of Israel. The foundation which everything was built. And you'll notice in verse 3 that David uses that phrase again. The God of Israel has spoken. The rock of Israel has said to me.

[11:47] So in the king's words, there's one or two things I want us to notice. First of all, the God-given message that comes through David. Notice the word used twice in verse 1.

The oracle of David. The oracle of the man who was raised on high. Now oracle is a word that's used of the prophets themselves. A prophetic message.

This is not an opinion. This is a prophetic message that appears to the spirit of the Lord speaks by me. David here is speaking as a prophet.

Indeed, Peter in his Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter 2 calls David a prophet. And indeed, sometimes the whole of the Old Testament can be referred to as the prophets.

Because I'm particularly in 2 Peter 1, where the words of the prophets, that's to say the Old Testament, and the words of the apostles, that's to say the New Testament, are the word of God together.

[12:49] And this is the whole Bible here. Obviously, it mentions particularly his Psalms, the sweet Psalmist of Israel. Difficult phrase to translate, but clear enough that these Psalms are part of the oracle.

In other words, these are part of the inspired utterances of Scripture. But the word, therefore, has become flesh in David.

The spirit of the Lord, verse 2, speaks by me. His word is on my tongue. The word uniquely becomes flesh. Fully, finally, in David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But it becomes flesh in David. And indeed, in a real sense, it has to become flesh in everyone who speaks that word. In the sense that the word is not just words, but living words speaking through a human being.

So it is a God-given message. God has given this man something to say. And since it's an oracle, it's something we need to hear.

[13:52] But secondly, in these verses, the God-given role of David. A few well-chosen words. Who was David? And who did he become?

You notice verse 1. He came from very ordinary beginnings. The son of Jesse. Read back in 1 Samuel 16.

And he wasn't even one of the sons that Jesse thought worth showing to the prophet Samuel. Now, we all come from a human family and from human circumstances.

Some people come from very good families. Other people come from very disturbed families. But the point is this. That whatever circumstances we come from, these are not the final word on any of us.

Heredity, background, upbringing are never the last word. Because you'll notice the second part of the verse.

[14:56] The oracle of the man who was raised on high. The anointed of the God of Jacob. Now, many of us wish, and perhaps all of us wish it sometimes, that our background and circumstances could have been different.

And remember, all families are dysfunctional families without the grace of God. The good, the less good in our background are part of what God has given us, part of what we are.

But they are never the last word. Because this was a man who was anointed and raised on high. There is more of God than of Jesse in David.

That's what's being said here. And that's because the one who anointed him, notice, is the God of Jacob. Now, we of course, well, he's been leading us through the life of Jacob those last Sunday mornings.

And Jacob is a continual reminder of the kind of material God uses, the unpromising material which God uses. Now, if we look into our own hearts and into our own lives, if we're honest, we're going to say that as well.

[16:10] That's what David says in the verse I quoted during the prayer. Who am I? Or my house? Says David. We should have been so blessed. This is where we come from.

That's why scriptures say, remember the rock from which you were hewn. But then it's not just the God of Jacob. Verse 3, the God of Israel. And right through scripture from the early story in Genesis, Jacob, Israel are used over and over again.

The God of Jacob who transforms the most unpromising material. And the God of Israel who is the one who carries out his purposes.

There's the gospel, isn't it? The God of Jacob takes you and me, sinners, unfit for his presence, undeserving of his love, and makes us children of God.

So we have the God-given role of David. And then thirdly in these verses, we have the God-given covenant. Verse 5, for does not my house stand so with God?

[17:14] For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Read again 2 Samuel 7.

That wonderful story of God's covenant with David. That covenant where God pledged himself to David, caught him up in something far bigger than himself.

The covenant which he would never end. His name will last and forever. That changeless name of love. As we sang a moment or two ago.

And which God is it who has pledged himself? The rock of Israel. Verse 3. The covenant stands on solid foundations. On unbreakable foundations.

And this covenant is attractive. Look at verse 4. This beautiful verse. He dawns on them like morning light. Like the sun shining forth in a cloudless morning.

[18:13] Like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth. These beautiful pictures. The early morning sunlight. The fertile land. Reminding us at the very beginning of the Bible of God's covenant with creation.

And also an anticipation of the new creation. As I've often said, what happened during David's reign was a genuine picture of what will happen in the new creation.

It was flawed. David got it wrong. David got it terribly wrong often. People disobeyed. And yet, looking at that story, there is anticipation of the big story.

The story which God has pledged himself to. And notice, there is also the reality of judgment. Worthless men are like thorns that are thrown away.

Exactly what Psalm 1 says, using much the same metaphor. Not so the wicked, they are like chaff. In other words, their lives come to nothing. Not like lives built on the rock.

[19:18] Not like lives which are the morning light, the sun shining, and rain which causes the grass to sprout. The reality of judgment consumed.

What they do and what they are does not last into eternity. Because their lives are not built on the rock. Now you see, these few verses, this little section, hasn't actually told us many of the details of David's life.

Or the history of the times. We have read about that already in the previous chapters in 2 Samuel and back in 1 Samuel. What they do is they show, this is what David is about.

This is what David's kingdom is about. This is what covenant is about. It is attractive. It is secure. This is the gospel. Of God who takes the unlovely and makes them lovely.

Of God who takes the worthless and the hopeless and builds them on the rock and makes them citizens of his kingdom. Beautiful, wonderful little passage.

[20:26] But it is very important to look at the whole of the chapter and not to ignore it, as I said already. Because we go on now to the king's warriors.

David's mighty men. Verses 8 to 39. David was the chosen of the Lord.

David was the anointed. David was the sweet psalmist. But he didn't do this on his own. There were those who stood with him. I think it is very important to see that this is not a glorifying of war.

This is not a praise of human effort. Key to these verses is, first of all, verse 10. The Lord brought about a great victory that day.

And then verse 12. The Lord worked a great victory. This is God's work. And indeed, the word translated victory is also translated salvation.

[21 : 26] The Lord brought about salvation. This wasn't just boards or skirmishes with these guys with the strange names. This is the story of the kingdom of God.

God is working his purpose out. And this is one of the many passages where David's stature as a leader comes out very clearly. One of the things we've noticed in these studies in Samuel is that while David has many and obvious and glaring faults, he is also a man who is fit to be king over and over again.

He has the qualities that God, by his grace, has given him. And surely this role of honour is one sign of this. David is not pretending, I did all this and there was nobody else there.

Remember what Paul does, for example, in Romans 16, that list of names, where he honours those who have stood with him in his missionary endeavours.

And here is the time now. David is saying, these men who stood with me, these men who did wonderful things, I'm going to honour them now. So let's look then at these verses.

[22 : 38] And first of all, there is courage in the cause of the kingdom. Remember, ancient Israel was a political state, as well as God's people, and therefore had to defend itself.

We have some great little stories here, particularly the Philistine enemy here, whom you read about earlier. Now these stories are clearly coming from different parts of David's life, some of them when he was in exile, and David had not forgotten.

Eliezer, for example, was with, in verse 9, he rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary.

We've noticed this already, the continual war, the continual hostility to the kingdom of David. Just like today's continual hostility. He struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and the Lord brought about a great victory.

Then we have Shammah. What's so special about a plot of lentils, you may say? Remember, Israel was an agricultural community. A lot of lentils was a vital food supply.

[23 : 54] This is what's happening here. And then particularly, that beautiful little story in verses 13 and following, coming from the time when David and his friends were in the cave country of Adullam, hunted by Saul and by the Philistines.

Verse 13, Three of the thirty chief men went down, came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim.

And David, verse 15, Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from a well of Bethlehem by the gate. So he looked across the valley, longing for those happy, carefree days, perhaps, of childhood came back to him.

And then we have this tremendous story about how the three mighty men broke through the ranks of the Philistines. I wish Nigel Trent had written a novel about this.

It would have been wonderful to have read about the way that the mighty men broke through the serried ranks of the Philistines. Remember, this is a huge exploit. It's one thing to break through the ranks of the Philistines.

[25 : 04] They might have been, you know, the Philistines might have been sleeping. But to bring the water back, that was the real achievement. And David's response, David would not drink it.

He poured it out to the Lord and said, Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Some of the commentators were determined to denigrate David in every possible way.

Say, what a waste. David sends these guys out. They do it a great risk to themselves. And all he can do is pour it out into the sand. But that's simply not true.

David realized that this water was so precious that it was only the Lord himself could receive it. And as Ralph Davis says, he poured it out, not because it was trash, but because it was treasure.

Notice, shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives? And then the others, there's Benaiah, valiant man of Kabzeel, verse 20, a doer of great deeds.

[26 : 11] He struck down two arrials. Nobody quite knows what this means. It's nothing to do with washing powder. I hope you realize that. It probably means something like lion, huge, gigantic men,

like Goliath types.

And now anyone can go down into a pit, even if it's snowing. But anyone can come back out of a pit, especially if there's a lion there. Once again, a gripping story.

Imagine two sets of footprints going down into the pit. There's only one set coming back again.

Fighting for the kingdom. Courage in the cause of the kingdom.

Then another of the ancient enemies, the Egyptian. Benaiah went down and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hands. So we've got these great exploits of the champions, of the warriors, of the mighty men.

And of course, we've got these other guys as well. Whom we know nothing apart from their names here, in the most cases. This is a role of honor, as I say, like Romans 15.

[27 : 22] In that role of honor, there are many people that are only mentioned by their names. Our brother Quartus, for example. No idea who Quartus was, or what significant role he had played in Paul's life and ministry.

But he's there. And similarly here. Now, probably, the list is, primarily, at least, begins with those who came from Judah.

David's, the men who had joined David first, in his exile. The interesting thing, though, is to look at the old enemies who were there as well. Example, verse 37, Zedek, the Ammonite.

Now, if you read through the Pentateuch, you'll find Ammon was a thorn in the flesh of God's people. Ammon, Ammon and Moab, the two boys born from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters.

Read about this in Genesis 19. And yet, they're swept up into the kingdom. And if you look at these names, you'll find many others like this. There's also one striking omission in the list.

[28 : 31] Joab, David's general, does not get mentioned. His brother is mentioned, verse 24.

Abishai, the brother of Joab, and his armor-bearer, even as mentioned in verse 37, Nahariah of Beeroth, the armor-bearer of Joab, the son of Zerui.

You see, Joab may have been a big noise in the world. He may have strutted and fretted his hour on the stage. But in God's kingdom, he simply doesn't count because he was not on the side of God's champion.

Joab never loved David's God. Joab supported David when it was political to do so, when it was expedient to do so.

He never loved David's God. Any Joab is the kind of man we read about in verse 6. Worthless men are like thorns that are thrown away.

So we have this courage in the cause of the kingdom, commendation in the service of the kingdom. There's one other thing I want to mention, though, which I'll call the complete grace of the kingdom.

[29 : 39] Look at the last name in the list. Verse 39, Uriah, the Hittite. Where did we read about him before?

Back in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. A reminder of David's terrible sin. A reminder to David that it was not he and his efforts that would bring about the kingdom.

A reminder of David not to think more highly of himself than he ought to. Reminds me once again of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, 9-10.

Not worthy to be called an apostle because I have persecuted the church of God. We can all look back in our lives and remember incidents, remember people, remember circumstances over which we can write Uriah, the Hittite.

We all have these moments in our lives prone to wander. Lord, I feel I prone to leave the God I love.

[30 : 54] So a reminder at this late stage, David is a sinner. He is the Lord's anointed, but he's a sinner. And whenever we become tempted to think too highly of ourselves, whenever we think we're going to achieve the kingdom by our own authority, by our own efforts, by our own goodness, remember the Uriah moments.

Surely there's something more, isn't there? It's not just the fact that Uriah is a reminder of David's sin, it's that Uriah is a reminder of God's grace.

And in the final story, even Uriah is swept up in this great story. Paul goes on to say in that 1 Corinthians 15 passage, by God's grace, I am what I am.

Uriah and the sin will keep us humble, reminder of God's grace, that it is indeed the Lord who brings about a great victory.

That's why I believe the list culminates with Uriah the Hittite. It's there to remind us, it's there to remind us, once again to use the phrase from the it's there to remind us of the Jacobs in us. [32 : 20] It's also to remind us of the God of Israel who transforms the God of Israel whose grace saves us. The grace which not only keeps us humble but encourages us to go on.

You've heard me saying this often enough, we are not David but we have David's God. We are part of that great kingdom if we've given our lives to him and nothing, not our own weakness, not our own failure, not our own sinfulness can prevent that grace bringing about the kingdom, can prevent the humblest of God's people reaching glory, whether their great David, whose name reverberates down the scripture, indeed into eternity, read the book of Revelation, but even these men mentioned at the end, and of course there are many others who are not even mentioned here, many brave men who no doubt fell in the cause of the kingdom, and this God, the God of Jacob and the God of Israel is our God.

Amen. Let's pray. Oh to grace, how great a debtor daily I am constrained to be.

Father, we thank you for the God of Jacob who raised us from death and sin and all our inadequacy and all our worthlessness and has made us sons and daughters in his kingdom.

Pray indeed that this may continue to shape our lives day by day as we trust in God, the rock, the one on whom we can build our lives.

[34 : 15] And we thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.