

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

April



NORTH FORT WORTH
2011

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

What does the reading reveal about God?

What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?

What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.

He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.

What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.

Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.

Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

April 1 Judges 3:31-6:40

After Ehud's death, the Israelites again did evil in the LORD's sight. So the LORD turned them over to King Jabin of Hazor, a Canaanite king . . . Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help. (Judges 4:1-3)

The book of Judges reveals a discernable cycle or pattern among God's covenant people. It was present in yesterday's reading. It is seen again today and will continue to be observed in the chapters ahead. What is the spiritual cycle?

1) The children of Israel turn away from the LORD. 2) As a result, God allows His people to be dominated by people within the land. 3) The Israelites cry out to God for help and deliverance. 4) The LORD raises a leader to throw off the oppressors. 5) Finally, the people experience God's blessing, enjoying peace and prosperity until the cycle starts again.

Sadly, the pattern is recognizable in today's reading. It starts with the Israelites doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD (Judges 4:1). Their disobedience is followed by the emergence of Jabin—a Canaanite King. The LORD allows this pagan ruler to oppress His covenant people (Judges 4:2). Next, as the cycle portrays, the people cry to the LORD for help (Judges 4:3). God then raises the prophetess Deborah (along with Barak) to lead His people to victory (Judges 4:4-23). Their success results in a season of blessing until God's people rebel against the LORD again.

Let's watch for the cycle as we continue to read. More importantly, let's prayerfully seek to understand what is taking place. Why do God's people repeatedly turn away? Are there safeguards we should adopt to protect our hearts and actions? What will the LORD teach us as we focus upon the slow downward spiral on the part of God's people?

I fear the American Church is also experiencing a downward spiritual descent. Do we see it? Will we be the ones who cry out to the LORD? Could we be the individuals God uses to lead His people back to where they should be? These are sobering questions, but let's take them to heart. Again and again, God responds to the prayers of His people in the Book of Judges. May God hear our cries and send the difference-makers to lead us forward.

May it be so, O LORD. May it be so!

April 2

Judges 7:1-9:21

The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to Me that they saved themselves by their own strength. Therefore, tell the people, ‘Whoever is timid or afraid may leave this mountain and go home.’” So 22,000 of them went home, leaving only 10,000 who were willing to fight. (Judges 7:2-3)

Gideon’s story attracts my attention at several points. First, from yesterday’s reading, Gideon’s request concerning the fleece raises an interesting question. Can we request the same? Can we test the LORD to determine whether or not we will follow His lead? From Jesus’ perspective, God’s sign has already been given (Matthew 12:39-40). Jesus’ resurrection victory should be enough. Indeed, we should follow Jesus because He has already demonstrated Himself to be the Son of God. He deserves our trust and obedience.

As that is so, can we still ask for additional signs to discern God’s leadership about a particular situation or decision? I suggest we humble ourselves before the LORD instead. Prayerfully ask Him to guide your steps by His Word and by the prompting of His Spirit (Colossians 1:9-12, James 1:5). This should be our consistent approach—not putting God to the test.

Yet, a second aspect of Gideon’s experience is also instructive. It involves God deliberately reducing the size of Gideon’s army. They go from 32,000 to 300. There’s a part of me that smiles at this. It’s as if God says, “Gideon, you tested me? Now, I’m going to test you.” Of course, God’s motivation for shrinking the army is for the nation’s sake. God explains, *“If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to Me that they saved themselves by their own strength.”* We should take the same lesson to heart. Pride and self-reliance will always pose a spiritual problem to God’s covenant people. As a solution, God deliberately places the Israelites in what appears to be an impossible situation. And the result? Gideon’s 300 discovers that God is more than able.

My final observation highlights Gideon’s post-victory attitude and response. The people seek to appoint Gideon as their king. How about that rise to fame? We’re introduced to Gideon hiding in a winepress (Judge 6:11), and now he is offered the most powerful position in the land. Gideon’s response, however, reveals a great deal. He declares, *“I will not rule over you, nor will my son. The LORD will rule over you!”* (Judges 8:23) Gideon’s declaration impresses me. Even more, I’m challenged by it. It would have been easy following Israel’s victory for Gideon to elevate himself instead of the LORD. To his credit, Gideon directs the people to the LORD. An example worth noting.

Three considerations. Of course, Gideon is far from perfect. Nevertheless, may his example influence our hearts in beneficial and appropriate ways.

April 3

Judges 9:22-11:28

Then Abimelech attacked the town of Thebez and captured it. But there was a strong tower inside the town, and all the men and women—the entire population—fled to it. They barricaded themselves in and climbed up to the roof of the tower. Abimelech followed them to attack the tower. But as he prepared to set fire to the entrance, a woman on the roof dropped a millstone that landed on Abimelech’s head and crushed his skull. (Judges 9:50–53)

Our journey through Judges may often cause us to shake our heads. Many of the accounts illustrate what not to do. That is certainly the case as we follow the story of Gideon’s son, Abimelech. I think we can agree that Abimelech is not a good person. If you remember from yesterday’s reading, Gideon’s son seizes power by murdering his seventy half-brothers with the help of the leaders of Shechem. Only one of his half-brothers escapes (Judges 9:1-6). It’s a disturbing scene, reminding us of the cruelty of a greedy, sinful heart. Jotham, the surviving brother, warns that Abimelech and the people of Shechem will ultimately get what they deserve (Judges 9:7-21). Today’s reading demonstrates that his pronouncement is true.

The passage indicates that God now works against Abimelech. Trouble develops between the ruler and Shechem’s leading citizens. Note: They are the same people who assisted in murdering Gideon’s sons and appointing Abimelech as their king. A partnership between a dark-hearted opportunist and a treacherous band of leaders is not the best combination for peace and security. They soon turn against one another, resulting in their mutual destruction. Admittedly, there’s nothing within the account that inspires us. No one in today’s reading is heroic or worthy of emulation. It’s a story of who not to be and what not to do. It’s a reminder that our sinful actions, if unaddressed, will be our undoing.

Thankfully, we’re told (with little detail) that others would rise and serve more effectively on the nation’s behalf—namely, Tola and Jair. Even so, the story of Abimelech and Shechem’s leaders should warn and instruct our hearts. The wisdom of Proverbs offers an appropriate application,

“Don’t do as the wicked do, and don’t follow the path of evildoers. Don’t even think about it; don’t go that way. Turn away and keep moving. For evil people can’t sleep until they’ve done their evil deed for the day. They can’t rest until they’ve caused someone to stumble. They eat the food of wickedness and drink the wine of violence! The way of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, which shines ever brighter until the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like total darkness. They have no idea what they are stumbling over.” (Proverbs 4:14–19)

Let’s walk in the light, shall we?

April 4

Judges 11:29-15:20

Then Jephthah judged Israel for six years ... After Jephthah died, Ibzan from Bethlehem judged Israel ... After Ibzan died, Elon from the tribe of Zebulun judged Israel for ten years ... Again the Israelites did evil in the LORD's sight, so the LORD handed them over to the Philistines, who oppressed them for forty years. (Judges 12:7-8, 11; 13:1)

Finding something that lifts the heart in our readings in Judges is difficult. One judge after the next reflects the character of the surrounding culture more than the God they serve. From Jephthah to Ibzan to Samson—where are the spiritual leaders? Yes, each of these individuals is empowered by God to deliver and lead His people, but something is noticeably absent. Where is the spiritual zeal of Moses or Joshua? Tragically, the overall quality of leadership is in steady decline.

Sadly, if we look at the situation honestly, the decline in leadership mirrors the nation's general moral and spiritual decline. Remember the repeated cycle that characterizes the book. 1) God's people turn away. 2) They suffer domination by the people of the land, 3) which results in the Israelites crying out to God. 4) The LORD raises a leader to deliver His people, 5) so the nation experiences a season of blessing until they willfully turn away. The pattern is easily recognized.

The problem is that each occurrence produces a greater moral and spiritual decline, evidenced by the quality of the emerging leaders. Think about it. Deborah, in Judges 4, is portrayed as noble and heroic. She is also a woman of faith, as reflected in her song of praise to the LORD. Compare Deborah to Jephthah or Samson. Neither exhibits Deborah's character or faith. Jephthah's foolish vow and Samson's self-centered activities do not reflect God's wisdom or Law. How would their stories have turned out differently if they had been wholly devoted to the LORD?

What's my point? The leadership of a nation will directly reflect the nation's character. If a population declines morally and spiritually, its leaders will mirror the same. Some blame a nation's moral decline on the imperfections of its leaders. I think it works the other way around. When the people themselves lose their way, you can anticipate their leaders will do the same. I do not deny that poor leadership amplifies the problem. I'm simply suggesting that the solution to the downward spiral will require a widespread turning to God on the part of the people. In the book of Judges, we will not see that happen in a lasting way. The negative cycle repeats itself, producing a consistently disappointing group of leaders.

In closing, how would you assess the quality of our current leadership (governmental, business, religious)? What does it suggest concerning the moral and spiritual direction of our country? Are we moving in the right direction? If not, what is the greatest need? Do we need a change in leadership or in the people themselves from which the leaders rise? Do we see the correlation? I pray for a spiritual awakening and revival that will affect both. And you?

April 5

Judges 16:1-18:31

“Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!” When he woke up, he thought, “I will do as before and shake myself free.” But he didn’t realize the LORD had left him. (Judges 16:20)

Every time I read this verse, it disturbs me. Samson didn’t realize the LORD had departed. A life filled with so much potential has been squandered. What went wrong with the strong man of Israel? What might we learn from his self-destructive behavior?

Consider first God’s good intentions. The LORD sets apart Samson with a noble purpose in mind. He is to serve as God’s deliverer on His people’s behalf and would be endowed with extraordinary power to accomplish the task. Tragically, Samson has other priorities. Instead of fulfilling God’s purpose, Samson lives a self-centered, self-indulgent life. He shows little regard for the things of God or His intended purpose. Samson is more interested in doing things his way.

Yet, there’s another contributing factor to Samson’s demise. The chosen servant of God is easily manipulated by those who would harm him. His weakness of will and self-centered pursuits guarantee future failure and shame. He is so preoccupied with pleasing himself and the agendas of others that he forfeits what could have been. The story of Samson is a tragic tale of a person sacrificing God’s activity for something cheap and degrading. And the lesson for us?

When I read the story of Samson, I think about the church of Jesus Christ. We, too, are set apart by God with purpose and design. We are to be the instrument of God’s deliverance as we communicate Jesus’ message of hope. Like Samson, the church is endowed with the spiritual power to change our world. Will we do so? Or, like Samson, will Christ’s church become self-centered and self-indulgent? Will we find ourselves manipulated by those who quietly work against us? Will we forfeit our purpose for that which is empty and dissatisfying? If we do, we should be warned. We may find ourselves like Samson, unaware that the LORD has departed. May we prayerfully consider Jesus’ warning to the church at Sardis.

This is the message from the One who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars: “I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don’t wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief ... Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what He is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 3:1-3, 6)

Do we have ears to hear? Or will we live self-centered and unaware?

April 6

Judges 19:1-21:25

*In those days Israel had no king; all the people
did whatever seemed right in their own eyes. (Judges 21:25)*

Are we ready to move on from the Book of Judges? I've decided that Judges may be one of my least favorite books in the Bible. I'm not suggesting that it is unimportant and should not be studied. It is a part of God's revelation to us. And as such, it serves a purpose and is beneficial. Uncomfortably, it reminds us of how disappointing and dysfunctional God's people can still become.

Our final reading is yet another example of the people's moral and spiritual failure. Indeed, the story of the Levite and his concubine provokes such strong emotions—feelings of disgust and disbelief. We recently read through God's Law and His expectations for His people. How could the children of Israel have gotten it so wrong? A part of me cries out, "Who are these people? How could they be so misguided?" Remember what God expresses to His people at Sinai,

"Now if you will obey Me and keep My covenant, you will be My own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to Me. And you will be My kingdom of priests, My holy nation." (Exodus 19:5-6)

Where in Judges do we observe any of this? They have robbed themselves of the privilege and blessing God has graciously bestowed. Again, what went wrong? The final verse of the book explains it all. *"All the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes."* (Judges 21:25) It could not be clearer. The people willfully ignore the LORD, His wisdom, and His promised activity. I often say of the children of Israel, "They foolishly settle for less." Repeatedly in the book of Judges, that is their choice. Is that also descriptive of us?

How frequently do we pursue what's right in our own eyes? Look back over the past few weeks. To what degree did you follow Jesus' teaching and leadership? Did you accept Jesus' word as the final authority, or did you elevate your perspective above His? It is easy to do whatever "feels" right, especially in a culture that emphasizes personal feelings above all things. Let's not fall into that destructive pattern. Instead, seek the LORD and submit to His authority and wisdom. Day by day, let's commit ourselves to doing what is right in His eyes, not our own. Let's not foolishly settle for less.

Will you join me?

April 7

Ruth 1:1-4:12

“Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!” (Ruth 1:16–17)

Life can be unexpectedly harsh and tragically sad. Naomi follows her husband, Elimelech, from Bethlehem to Moab to experience a series of unimaginable losses—the death of her husband and both of her sons. Naomi believes she is abandoned by God, changing her name from Naomi to Mara, which means “bitter.” She feels she has no choice but to return home to Bethlehem, empty and defeated. Yet, a flicker of light would appear amid Naomi’s emotional darkness.

Naomi urges her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to return to their parent’s homes. Perhaps they would discover a new beginning, a better life. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, responds in a way that should encourage and instruct each of our hearts. *“Wherever you go, I will go,”* Ruth declares, *“wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!” (Ruth 1:16–17)*

Ruth is whole-hearted in her devotion to Naomi and joins her in her journey toward the unknown. Ruth’s confession contrasts dramatically with the self-centeredness that characterized so much of the book of Judges. Yet, their story continues, and further distinctions appear. In our reading of Judges, we are hard-pressed to find a noticeable influence of God’s Law among His covenant people. Ruth’s story takes place during that same period, and we observe God’s people applying His instruction in at least two ways—allowing the poor and vulnerable to collect grain from the fields (Leviticus 19:9) and the application of the kinsman-redeemer (Leviticus 25:47–55; 27:9–25).

My heart is bolstered to read of Boaz’s kindness, generosity, and integrity. He reminds us that all is not lost, as God’s people frequently appear misguided and confused. His actions reflect a character that we should seek to display within our lives. However, his role as Ruth’s “goel” or “family redeemer” stands out most prominently. He acts on Naomi and Ruth’s behalf, purchasing the land of Elimelech to preserve the family legacy. More significantly, he marries Ruth to ensure the family’s line of descent. Our Western culture may struggle to understand the application of this principle. Even so, highlighted within the book, Boaz acts as a redeemer on the family’s behalf. The Hebrew terms “redeem” or “redeemer” are found over twenty times in the text. We’ll consider the implications of this further in our reading tomorrow.

For now, let’s take heart. As bad as things became in the book of Judges, there’s a flicker of light in the darkness—Ruth’s devotion and Boaz’s redeeming compassion. May their story encourage us as we respond to the challenges and disappointments surrounding our lives. May our actions offer hope to those who may feel all goodness is gone. Let’s be a light in the darkness.

April 8

Ruth 4:13-22; 1 Chronicles 2:9-55; 4:1-23; 1 Samuel 1:1-8

So Boaz took Ruth into his home, and she became his wife. When he slept with her, the LORD enabled her to become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women of the town said to Naomi, "Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family! May this child be famous in Israel" ... And they named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David. (Ruth 4:13-14, 17)

A redeemer is born in Bethlehem. And his name? We naturally think of Jesus. However, the redeemer in today's reading is the son of Boaz and Ruth. Why is Obed described in this way? He's a "redeemer" because he restores Naomi's future. In Moab, all hope was lost for the grieving wife and mother. As Naomi exclaimed, *"the LORD Himself has raised His fist against me."* (Ruth 1:13) And now, the woman who changed her name to Mara ("bitter") rejoices over her life restored—a redeemer is born in Bethlehem.

Of course, there is so much more to this story. The child born to Boaz and Ruth would become Jesse's father and David's grandfather. Upon Obed's birth, the women in Bethlehem proclaim, *"May this child be famous in Israel."* Little did they realize that their words would prove prophetic, not because of Obed's achievements but because of his grandson, David. That's right, Israel's most notable rulers would be born in Bethlehem.

And yet, as we know, there is far more to this story. As great as David would become in the eyes of Israel, a future descendant of Boaz and Ruth would become the true Redeemer of Israel and even the world. Consider Matthew's genealogy of Jesus and be encouraged.

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (whose mother was Tamar). Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Boaz was the father of Obed (whose mother was Ruth). Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of king David. (Matthew 1:1-6)

I marvel every time I read Matthew's genealogy. Focus on the women's names—Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. The Redeemer born in Bethlehem would come from the most unlikely line of descent. The list reminds us that God works through the brokenness of life to bring forth the One who would redeem and restore. God brought Naomi from bitterness to life through the birth of her redeemer. How much more has God done on our behalf by providing our Redeemer, Jesus? Blessed be His Name!

April 9

1 Samuel 1:9-4:11

And the LORD came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Speak, Your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10)

Much of the book of Judges leaves the reader disappointed and discouraged. The question is, "Would things ever change? Would God's people rediscover a right relationship with the LORD?" With the birth of Samuel, there's a whisper of hope. It's worth noting that Samuel's birth is an answer to prayer. One naturally sympathizes with his mother, Hannah. Incapable of having children, in a sense, she symbolizes the spiritual barrenness of God's people. The life that God desired among His people is missing.

In granting Hannah's plea, the LORD supplies a future leader to call His people unto Himself. As highlighted in today's reading, Samuel is dedicated to God as a young child and would grow in favor of the LORD and the people (1 Samuel 2:26). That's significant. Samuel's life starkly contrasts the ungodliness of the High Priest's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Their disregard of the LORD and His commands would provoke God's judgment upon the house of Eli.

What set Samuel apart? Samuel hears and obeys the voice of the LORD. During the period of the Judges, messages from God were rare, and visions were uncommon (1 Samuel 3:1). The people were deaf to God's voice and ignored His past revelation. Young Samuel represents a spiritual change. The LORD calls out to him, and Samuel hears His voice. Of course, the child initially fails to recognize who is calling. He assumes it is the High Priest, Eli, and proceeds to wake him. After three late-night interruptions, the aging priest discerns something more—it is the LORD. He instructs Samuel on the appropriate response. *"Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, 'Speak, LORD, your servant is listening.'"* (1 Samuel 3:9)

Samuel obeys, and his service as God's prophet begins. Is there an application for us? Samuel responds to the voice of the LORD and makes a difference in his day. Are we willing to do the same? I'm not suggesting that we will hear God's audible voice. However, we should discern His Spirit's prompting as we read from His written Word. Will we do so?

Jesus frequently said, *"Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!"* (Matthew 11:15) That applies to you. That applies to me. Will we actively listen to His Word? Maybe we should adopt Eli's helpful advice. Voice his simple prayer as you open your Bible tomorrow, *"Speak, LORD, your servant is listening."*

May God grant each of us ears to listen and understand!

April 10

1 Samuel 4:12-8:22

After the Philistines captured the Ark of God, they took it from the battleground at Ebenezer to the town of Ashdod. They carried the Ark of God into the temple of Dagon and placed it beside an idol of Dagon. (1 Samuel 5:1-2)

The Ark of the Covenant symbolized God's presence with Israel. Within the Tabernacle, God would manifest His presence upon the mercy seat. He would meet with His people, providing leadership and help. Sadly, in their battle against the Philistines, the children of Israel treat the Ark of the Covenant like a magic relic (1 Samuel 4:1-11). They fail to understand that the LORD is the source of their victory, not a sacred object. God's people have neglected the LORD for so long that they no longer appreciate the difference. As a result, the children of Israel are defeated, and the Ark of God is captured.

An unusual series of events occur at this point in today's reading. The Philistines view the ark of the covenant as a trophy. They presume their victory over the Israelites is also a victory over Israel's God. That is not the case. The children of Israel defeated themselves by ignoring and dishonoring the LORD, and they suffered the consequences. The Philistines soon learned they and their gods were powerless against the One True God.

The Philistines placed the ark within the temple of Dagon, and God soon began to teach them a lesson. First, the LORD would not allow a pagan idol to stand above the Ark of the Covenant. He makes that point by knocking over the Philistine god and breaking the lifeless idol into pieces the next day (1 Samuel 5:3-4). Second, the One True God begins to afflict the inhabitants of Ashdod and then Gath with debilitating tumors (1 Samuel 5:6-7). The people recognize that the God of Israel is judging them and seek to return the Ark of the Covenant with an appropriate guilt offering. Though they defeated Israel in battle, they could not contend with their God.

What do we learn? God's people should relate to Him appropriately. Interestingly, after the Ark of the Covenant is returned, seventy Israelites at Beth-shemesh foolishly die because they dishonor the LORD. They disregard the LORD's commands through Moses and glance within the ark. They pay a severe price and are reminded, "*Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?*" (1 Samuel 6:20) Again, what's the lesson? God's people must learn to relate to Him for who He is. For generations, the children of Israel had lost sight of the LORD and were the lesser.

And us? Granted, because of Jesus, how we relate to God has changed. We are afforded greater intimacy and access through His Spirit. However, should we treat Him as less holy? Should we disregard Him and His Word? Do we view our religious activity as magic tricks that guarantee our victory? Or do we actively relate to the LORD as our source of life and seek to follow His lead? Yes, Jesus has changed how we relate to the One True God, and we are grateful. Even so, may we trust and honor Him appropriately. May we do so today!

April 11

1 Samuel 9:1-12:25

Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it over Saul's head. He kissed Saul and said, "I am doing this because the LORD has appointed you to be the ruler over Israel, His special possession." (1 Samuel 10:1)

Saul leaves home searching for the family's donkeys and returns as the man who would become Israel's king. Saul had quite the story to tell. It may not be as dramatic as the fictional Arthur drawing the famed Excalibur from a rock, but it is fascinating. More significantly, it's true. The portion of Saul's story that stands out most notably is the role of God's prophet, Samuel. Samuel is so in tune with God's leading. He anticipates events days before their occurrence. Indeed, Samuel is looking for Saul even before Saul realizes that he will be searching for the prophet.

I smile at God's foreknowledge and how He always sees ahead. As forward-thinking as we perceive ourselves to be, our understanding of the big picture is inadequate. God sees what we do not see. He knows what we do not know and acts to bring us where we need to be. God's foreknowledge doesn't discount the reality of our choices. Instead, it elevates God's capacity to will and work for His good pleasure in the middle of our best and worst days. The story of Saul is a beautiful example of God's activity to bring us to where we need to be.

Of course, Saul's story culminates with Samuel calling the twelve tribes to present themselves before the LORD at Mizpah (1 Samuel 10:17-24). The last time we had a scene like this, Achan was identified by the LORD as the source of Israel's problems (Joshua 7:10-26). This time, however, is different. God intends to elevate, not condemn. Saul would be singled out before the people to become the nation's appointed king and ruler. Samuel attests, *"This is the man the LORD has chosen as your king. No one in all Israel is like him."* And all the people shouted, *"Long live the king!"* (1 Samuel 10:24) The recurring cry for a king in Israel has been satisfied, and Saul fills the role.

Allow me to make one further observation. As joyful as Saul's coronation may have been, a sad element remains. The people's acceptance of Saul as king represents a rejection of the LORD as King (1 Samuel 8:7). It serves as one more example of God's people settling for less than what could have been. Part of me marvels at God's patience and willingness to accommodate the people yet again. Perhaps we should be encouraged by this. God acts with similar patience and love toward us. For that, I am grateful. However, let it be known that I seek one King to rule over my heart, and His name is Jesus. And you?

April 12
1 Chronicles 9:35-39; 1 Samuel 13:1-14:52

Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned for forty-two years. (1 Samuel 13)

The reign of king Saul has begun. The man appointed by God to serve as Israel's ruler would do so for an extended period. Regrettably, the quality of his leadership would prove erratic at best. Yes, Saul would lead the nation to many notable victories. His impulsiveness, however, would create unnecessary problems that ultimately lead to his demise. Consider today's account of Saul's impatience (1 Samuel 13:8-14).

Samuel instructs Saul to await his arrival before confronting the Philistines in battle, but the king acts prematurely. Fearing that his army is dwindling in size, Saul takes matters into his own hands. Why wait for Samuel when he can offer the appropriate burnt offering himself? Or so he thought. His presumption and impulsiveness would be his undoing.

Another example involves Saul's hasty vow (1 Samuel 14:24-46). Saul requires his army to take a short-sighted oath: *"Let a curse fall on anyone who eats before evening—before I have full revenge on my enemies."* (1 Samuel 14:24) The pledge leaves his men weakened as the day progresses and could have resulted in the death of his son, Jonathan—if the people had not intervened. What motivated the king's vow? Was it fear? Pride? And where is the LORD's leadership at work in Saul's life? Of course, that is the problem. Despite Saul's courage and determination, Israel's king lacks true devotion to God. Indeed, the LORD will continue to seek a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:1).

What might we learn from today's reading? We should certainly learn to be patient with the LORD and His timing. I admit that I'm prone to impulsiveness at times. Of course, there are occasions when we should act promptly—but as the LORD leads. Saul appears inclined to act and then hope that the LORD works things out afterward. The better approach is to seek the LORD and then respond accordingly. Saul stood head and shoulders above anyone in the land (1 Samuel 9:2). However, it would have served Saul better to humble himself before the LORD, trusting God's leadership and anticipating His provision moving forward.

May that describe our approach for the day ahead.

April 13

1 Samuel 15:1-17:31

Then the LORD said to Samuel, "I am sorry that I ever made Saul king, for he has not been loyal to Me and has refused to obey My command." Samuel was so deeply moved when he heard this that he cried out to the LORD all night. (1 Samuel 15:10–11)

Yesterday, I noted that Saul is erratic in his leadership. He would frequently act according to his perspective. However, in today's reading, Saul goes one step further. He outright disobeys the LORD, and it will cost him his throne. What went wrong? God commands Saul and the children of Israel to become an instrument of His judgment against the Amalekites. Centuries earlier, the Amalekites attacked God's people as they made their way to Sinai. The LORD pledged their destruction as a result: *"Write this down on a scroll as a permanent reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will erase the memory of Amalek from under heaven."* (Exodus 17:14)

It's a sobering pronouncement, and as I have previously acknowledged, every example of God's judgment leaves me personally unsettled. The destruction and loss of life underscore the seriousness of rejecting the LORD and opposing His purposes. You would think then that Saul would carefully follow the LORD's command as he implements God's judgment. Inexcusably, he fails to do so. Saul chooses to spare the life of the Amalekite ruler and allows his army to plunder the best of the sheep, goats, and cattle. Saul blatantly disobeys the LORD.

Israel's king attempts to justify his actions by claiming that the sheep and cattle are to honor the LORD with future sacrifices. Saul pleads his innocence, but Samuel is unswayed. He replies, *"What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to His voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams. Rebellion is as sinful as witchcraft, and stubbornness as bad as worshiping idols. So because you have rejected the command of the LORD, He has rejected you as king."* (1 Samuel 15:22–23)

God's plans for Saul were noble and good, but the first king of Israel squandered his opportunity. He chose to trust in himself more than the LORD. He willfully dishonored the LORD by his disobedience, and now he would suffer the loss of his throne. How often do we do the same? I'm hesitant to compare our decisions to the king of Israel. Even so, his attitude should serve as a warning. Saul seems genuinely surprised that his actions were a problem. He became so insensitive to the LORD that he became comfortable in his disobedience. May we refuse to fall into the same trap. Hear the words of God's prophets again, *"What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to His voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams."*

May we live accordingly!

April 14
1 Samuel 17:32-19:24; Psalm 59:1-17

“Don’t worry about this Philistine,” David told Saul. “I’ll go fight him ... The LORD who rescued me from the claws of the lion and the bear will rescue me from this Philistine!” (1 Samuel 17:32, 37)

The contrast between David and Saul is stark. Saul stands out because of his great stature. David doesn’t even stand out from his seven brothers. Outwardly speaking, he is the least of Jesse’s sons. However, that’s the point. As the LORD explains to Samuel, *“Don’t judge by his appearance or height ... The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)* That’s the key. God is looking for a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

Let’s be clear: being a person after God’s heart doesn’t suggest moral perfection. David will prove to be flawed at many points. With that said—David’s trust and devotion to the LORD will be wholehearted. He will actively seek the LORD and (as sincerely as he knows how) walk in His ways. David’s faith will be visible for all to see—starting with his defeat of Goliath. He would face off against the intimidating giant, not because he is outwardly superior, but because the LORD he serves is superior. David announces to the approaching Philistine, *“This is the LORD’s battle, and He will give you to us.” (1 Samuel 17:47)* His confidence in the LORD is complete.

Can we say the same? We will learn much from David’s experience, both good and bad. However, let’s focus on his heart for now. Allow the beauty of David’s faith and devotion to serve as a measure of our own. Whom do we resemble? Are we more like Saul, who relates to God as a distant spectator? Or do we approach life as if God is in the middle of it all? I suspect we fall somewhere in between. Given today’s reading, I hope we commit ourselves to moving in David’s direction. With that in mind, consider David’s testimony in Psalm 59.

“You are my strength; I wait for You to rescue me, for You, O God, are my fortress. In His unfailing love, my God will stand with me. He will let me look down in triumph on all my enemies ... As for me, I will sing about Your power. Each morning I will sing with joy about Your unfailing love. For You have been my refuge, a place of safety when I am in distress. O my Strength, to you I sing praises, for You, O God, are my refuge, the God who shows me unfailing love.” (Psalm 59:9–10,16–17)

Is that our perspective? Do we want it to be? Remember that God focuses more on our hearts than our stature or ability. He’s looking for a person after His own heart. May we be that person today!

April 15
1 Samuel 20:1-21:15; Psalm 34:1-22

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;
He rescues those whose spirits are crushed. (Psalm 34:18)*

David is God's future king, yet his life is far from comfortable. That is a lesson within itself. How often do we presume that following God's plan places us on the easy path? It didn't turn out that way for David, nor will it turn out that way for us. Life is frequently complicated and characterized by both good and bad. In David's case, the peaks and valleys seem extreme. At one moment, he's a celebrated hero; the next, David is pretending to be a madman, isolated and alone. Don't be surprised by life's ups and downs. If it can happen to David, it can happen to us.

Also, don't overlook the value and necessity of true friendship. The kinship between David and Jonathan stands out prominently in today's reading. How would David have managed apart from Jonathan's protection and help? When life becomes chaotic, we all need a Jonathan to have our back. He models a type of loyalty and support that should inspire and instruct. "A real friend," Solomon writes, "sticks closer than a brother." (Proverbs 18:24) Jonathan is that kind of friend. Let's commit to being the same to another.

Finally, let's learn from David's perspective during his difficulties. Despite the hardships, David maintains his trust in the LORD. He even speaks of the LORD's goodness. David writes, "*Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in Him.*" (Psalm 34:8) It doesn't diminish the severity of David's problems. Instead, it points us toward God's help and support as we navigate life's struggles. God is not indifferent to our woes. David attests that "*the LORD is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.*" (Psalm 34:18) Let's affirm God's presence and faithfulness, even when we feel confounded by the problems. When tested, may David's testimony become our own.

I prayed to the LORD, and He answered me. He freed me from all my fears. Those who look to Him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces. In my desperation, I prayed, and the LORD listened; He saved me from all my troubles. For the angel of the LORD is a guard; He surrounds and defends all who fear Him. (Psalm 34:4-7)

Let's be encouraged as we move through the day. The LORD is with us!

April 16
1 Samuel 22:1-23:12; 1 Chronicles 12:8-18; Psalm 52;
Psalm 57; Psalm 142

So David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. Soon his brothers and all his other relatives joined him there. Then others began coming—men who were in trouble or in debt or who were just discontented—until David was the captain of about 400 men. (1 Samuel 22:1–2)

The contrast between David and Saul continues with our daily reading. David remains in hiding and escapes to the cave of Adullam. However, his supporters are slowly growing in number. People join David for various reasons—some out of loyalty, others because they are in trouble or have grown dissatisfied with Saul, or others simply out of fear. Whatever the motivation, David has become the leader of an army of 400. How does he utilize his new army? Following the LORD's leadership, David protects the people of Keilah.

Saul, in comparison, is becoming increasingly paranoid. He fears his support is waning. He questions the loyalty of his officers, accusing them of siding with Jonathan in his pact with David. Saul is delusional. He sees assassins where there are none and lashes out irrationally. The king even condemns Ahimelech and the priesthood for conspiring against him when no disloyalty existed. He orders his bodyguards to execute the priests, but they refuse. Saul then turns to Doeg the Edomite. He carries out the ruler's command with tragic results—the death of 85 priests and their extended families. How does Saul use his position as king? Saul punishes the innocent.

The difference between David and Saul is more and more distinct—most notably in their response to the LORD. David turns to the LORD consistently, following His lead. Saul displays little or no interest in the LORD's counsel. He acts impulsively, often to the harm of others. Whom do we resemble more?

In closing, David writes two psalms while taking refuge in a cave. He's honest about his emotions, but more significantly, David affirms the character and faithfulness of God. The question is: what do we do with our cave experiences? Do we slip further toward discouragement and despair, or do we turn honestly in faith to the LORD?

Let's conclude today's reading with a spiritual exercise. Write out a prayer of your own. David's psalms are frequently his prayers to God amid life's troubles. Let's do the same. Write down your emotions and fears but move quickly to acknowledge the LORD's presence, faithfulness, and support. Allow the writing of your psalm to calm your mind and refocus your heart as you actively turn to the LORD for help. Your psalm can be as long or short as it needs to be, but choose to renew your trust in the LORD in a tangible way.

Will you do it? It may be just what your heart needs.

April 17
1 Samuel 23:13-25:44; Psalm 54

But Nabal, a descendant of Caleb, was crude and mean in all his dealings. (1 Samuel 25:3)

What would you want your testimony to be if your name found its way into the Old Testament? Would you desire to be renowned for your courage? Or would you seek to be known primarily for your faith in God? I hope to be described as a man who trusted the LORD, honored Him, and treated others with kindness and respect. Or expressed another way, I would hope to be the opposite of Nabal.

Reading today's description of Nabal, I couldn't help but notice how this descendant of Caleb is portrayed. Simply put, *"Nabal was crude and mean in all his dealings."* How sad is that? The New Living Translation is mild in its Hebrew translation. It could also be translated that Nabal was cruel and outright evil. In other words, Nabal was not a good man. What went wrong?

We're told that Nabal was a man of great wealth. We're also informed that his wife was both discerning and beautiful. It looks as if Nabal had all that a person might desire on the surface. He is even a member of the famed Caleb family line. Why, then, did Nabal become such an unlikeable person? Sadly, he appears blind to the goodness of the life before him. He selfishly squandered it away. Indeed, his cruel, uncaring disposition would result in his premature death. God would judge Nabal for his cold actions toward David. In my mind, the name Nabal could be synonymous with "a squandered life." That within itself is truer than many realize. The Hebrew name Nabal means "foolish or senseless." I suppose we can conclude that Nabal lives up to his name.

So again, I ask, "What would you want your testimony to be if your name found its way into the Old Testament?" Let's agree that we do not want to be like Nabal. So, let's approach the day by pursuing the qualities that matter—faith, integrity, and kindness. Our names will obviously not find their way into the Old Testament, but the testimony of our lives is being written each day. It is impressed upon the minds and hearts of those around us. What, then, will our testimony be?

With God's help, let's live honorably today—worthy of His praise.

April 18

1 Samuel 26:1-29:11; 1 Chronicles 12:1-7, 19; Psalm 56

But I praise God for what He has promised; Yes, I praise the LORD for what He has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 56:10–11)

Where do we focus when life's circumstances are uncertain? Do we focus on the challenges and problems that surround us? Or do we direct our hearts to God and His Word? David's situation remains precarious. He's forced to dwell outside of Israel as Saul's irrationality persists. Even when David could have ended Saul's life, he refuses to do so (twice). He would not be guilty of attacking the LORD's anointed. He would place his situation in the LORD's hand instead.

I admire David's trust, but that doesn't mean it is easy for the future king. There are points along the way when David is admittedly afraid. I appreciate his honesty in Psalm 56, as David expresses as much. Yes, there are occasions when the giant slayer of Israel is fearful. We should be encouraged by that thought. David's response should also instruct us. *"But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. I praise God for what He has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?" (Psalm 56:3–4)*

David's approach is straightforward. When he's afraid, he directs his heart to the LORD. He recognizes that God is the One who makes the difference. His attention, however, is not toward God in general but to His promises. Even more, He praises the LORD for such promises. That, too, is instructive. By praising God for His promises, David is anticipating their fulfillment. He's focusing on what God will do, not simply on the difficulties or problems surrounding him. Let me be the first to say, "That is easier said than done." For that matter, I don't think it was easy for David. After sharing his response to fear, he recounts everything going wrong. But David knows that God is not indifferent to his hurts or sorrows. Indeed, the LORD collects his tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). God is very aware. David again affirms his approach,

"I praise God for what He has promised; Yes, I praise the LORD for what He has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?" (Psalm 56:10–11)

Do we get the point? Psalm 56 has been a great help to me through the years. I have often turned to David's testimony when my heart is afraid. I even developed the following plan of action accordingly.

WHEN I AM AFRAID: 1) Take responsibility for my thoughts — to the degree I can. 2) Acknowledge the fear for what it is — identifying its source. 3) Focus upon God's presence and help. 4) Praise God for His promises — anticipating their fulfillment. 5) Step forward in faith — do the next good thing. 6) Be patient with the situation and my emotions. 7) Allow for the support of others.

May God strengthen your heart as you put the plan into action.

April 19

1 Samuel 30:1-31:13; 1 Chronicles 9:40-10:14;
1 Chronicles 12:20-22; 2 Samuel 4:4

So Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD. He failed to obey the LORD's command, and he even consulted a medium instead of asking the LORD for guidance. So the LORD killed him and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse. (1 Chronicles 10:13-14)

Our contrast between Saul and David ends with Saul's self-inflicted death. Fearful that the Philistine army would capture him, the first king of Israel fell upon his sword and died. There's a sadness to this account. Saul had so much potential but refused to relate to God as God. He chose to do things his way, and it cost him. As 1 Chronicles explains, *"Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD."* (1 Chronicles 10:13) The historian's assessment could not be more direct. Saul's unfaithfulness would also result in the death of his three sons—Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malkishua. We should be reminded that our actions (good or bad) will affect those we love.

Yet, today's reading further highlights how David is noticeably different. Unlike Saul, David actively seeks the LORD's guidance and acts accordingly. He's determined to follow the LORD. Of course, we'll later observe that David is not perfect in his obedience. However, his heart is undeniably the LORD's. He will submit to God's leadership more times than not. Can we say the same?

There's one further contrast that should be noted. In today's reading, God honors David and gives him victory against superior forces. Saul dishonors the LORD, and his army is overwhelmingly defeated. Don't miss the correlation. God is the key to one's future victory or success. That is not to suggest that a faithful follower will not suffer hardship. Sometimes God's greatest demonstrations of grace are evident when God sustains His servants amid life's struggles. Paul's thorn in the flesh is a helpful reminder (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). The question is: will we follow God's leadership regardless of the situation?

My final thought takes us back to Saul's repeated failure. What contributed to his unfaithfulness? Consider two possibilities. First, Saul fails to see the LORD for who He is. We never read about Saul actively praising the LORD, expressing trust in the LORD, or spontaneously celebrating God's faithfulness. There's not a single psalm in the Bible attributed to Saul. Compared to the younger David, Saul displays an inadequate view of God, which works against him.

Second, Saul also displays an inferior view of himself. He is God's anointed but fails to reflect as much. David sometimes possesses a higher opinion of Saul than even Saul himself. Our perceptions of God and ourselves matter. They will inevitably influence how we respond positively or negatively. In Saul's case, the latter. May we learn from Saul's negative example one final time. May God enable us to see Him for who He is and appreciate who He has made us be.

April 20
2 Samuel 2:1-5; 1 Chronicles 3:1-4; 2 Samuel 23:8-39;
1 Chronicles 11:10-47

*Then the men of Judah came to David and
anointed him king over the people of Judah. (2 Samuel 2:4)*

David is anointed king over the tribe of Judah but not the whole nation. Loyalty to Saul's son, Ishbosheth, remains strong among many. Indeed, Ishobosheth (not David) would be recognized as king by most remaining tribes (2 Samuel 2:8-11). Additional time would be required before God's anointed would ascend the nation's throne. David would need to wait—to patiently trust the LORD.

Can we agree that patience is sometimes a challenge? That's especially true when we are waiting for a long-desired outcome. We want things on our timetable, which means quickly. David, however, submits to God's timing, not his own. Please note: we're talking about years, not weeks. David demonstrates trust and patience as he waits for an extended time.

Meanwhile, David assembles a formidable army. His reputation and popularity grow, particularly among a group of renowned warriors. David's so-called "mighty men" are utterly loyal to their courageous leader. Their devotion is exemplified by the actions of three such men who risk their lives to secure David a drink from his beloved well in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 23:13-17). Their heroic effort would humble David. As a tribute to his men, David pours out the water as a public act of worship before the LORD. By doing so, David acknowledges God's goodness in surrounding him with such noble and brave men.

Yet, not everything is ideal. David marries multiple wives, producing multiple children (2 Samuel 3:2-5). God's anointed disregards God's instruction, which will cost him. God's Word is clear: *"The king must not take many wives for himself, because they will turn his heart away from the LORD."* (Deuteronomy 17:17) Whether David's marriages are motivated politically or romantically, it doesn't matter. David disobeys the LORD, and his family will pay the price. How many of David's future problems could have been avoided if he had embraced God's wisdom?

I pray we learn from David's strengths and weaknesses. May we reflect his trust and patience in the LORD as we move through our circumstances. May we also avoid the pitfalls of rationalizing away God's wisdom regarding our decisions. God provides His instruction for our benefit. He understands the complexity of life in ways that we cannot. As the old hymn expresses, we should "trust and obey." Will we do so? May God help us to reflect both into the day.

April 21
2 Samuel 3:6-4:12

Meanwhile, Abner had consulted with the elders of Israel. “For some time now,” he told them, “you have wanted to make David your king. Now is the time! For the LORD has said, ‘I have chosen David to save My people Israel from the hands of the Philistines and from all their other enemies.’” Abner also spoke with the men of Benjamin. Then he went to Hebron to tell David that all the people of Israel and Benjamin had agreed to support him. When Abner and twenty of his men came to Hebron, David entertained them with a great feast. Then Abner said to David, “Let me go and call an assembly of all Israel to support my lord the king. They will make a covenant with you to make you their king, and you will rule over everything your heart desires.” (2 Samuel 3:17–21)

Transitions between kings and kingdoms are often chaotic and complicated. That is certainly reflected in today’s reading. Ishbosheth alienates himself from his general (Abner) because he accuses the influential general of sleeping with one of his father’s concubines. Enraged, Abner makes overtures to David to unite Israel’s tribes under his reign. David then requests that Ishbosheth return Michal (David’s first wife and Ishobosheth’s sister) to him, which causes tremendous heartache and distress to her current husband, Palti. Does this sound like an episode of Jerry Springer?

Yet, there’s more. Abner meets with David to negotiate the nation’s reunification. Joab, David’s general, hears of David’s intentions and confronts the king because Abner had previously killed his brother. Joab, in turn, deceptively lures Abner back to Hebron so he can treacherously murder him at the city’s gate. David pleads his innocence, publicly cursing Joab, his family, and future generations. It’s a convoluted mess.

We’re not done. In Israel, receiving word of Abner’s death, two of Ishbosheth’s captains betray and assassinate their king while he takes an afternoon nap. The two brothers (Baanah and Recab) then carry Ishbosheth’s head to David, expecting to be rewarded. David, however, sentences the pair to death for killing an innocent man. Is this how you envisioned the transition to David’s reign? Is there a lesson from any of this?

We should know that we live in a broken, dysfunctional world. From generation to generation, people act selfishly and maliciously against one another. Cruelty is no less common today than it was in David’s day. The hope in all of this is that God somehow still accomplishes His purposes despite the fallenness of man. Please note: none of this is a result of God’s direction. Yet, the chaos will not derail God’s larger work. God will prove greater than man’s worst actions. It may not happen overnight, but be assured that God’s larger purposes will be fulfilled. I reflect upon today’s reading, and it is a bit disheartening. But as I read the daily news, I experienced much of the same disappointment. Despite the chaos and complications, I pray that God may fulfill His larger purposes in our day. Will you join me in that prayer? David will emerge as Israel’s king in the end. My King, Jesus, will also emerge as our victorious sovereign in the end. I am encouraged by the thought, and I hope you are too!

April 22

2 Samuel 5:1-2; Samuel 6:11; 1 Chronicles 3:4;
1 Chronicles 11:1-9; 1 Chronicles 12:23-40; 1 Chronicles 13-14

Then all the tribes of Israel went to David at Hebron and told him, “We are your own flesh and blood. In the past, when Saul was our king, you were the one who really led the forces of Israel. And the LORD told you, ‘You will be the shepherd of My people Israel. You will be Israel’s leader.’” So there at Hebron, King David made a covenant before the LORD with all the elders of Israel. And they anointed him king of Israel. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years in all. (2 Samuel 5:1-4)

David is recognized as king over all of Israel. God’s anointed finally ascends to the nation’s throne, and God’s people celebrate. It represents a new beginning for the twelve tribes as they submit to David’s leadership and unite as one people. There’s renewed excitement and anticipation as the various tribes pledge their military support.

David doesn’t take long to distinguish himself from his predecessor. For example, David makes a covenant before the LORD with all the elders of Israel. Saul never took this action. It’s an early sign that David will approach his reign differently. David also adopts a distinctive approach in his warfare against the Philistines. He’s especially deliberate in seeking and following the LORD’s counsel. And when a victory is achieved, David acknowledges the LORD’s activity. He celebrates God’s intervention on one such occasion by naming the site Baal-perazim, which translates to “The Lord who bursts through.” David’s approach sets him visibly apart from Saul.

David also acts strategically in moving his capital from Hebron to Jerusalem. Having defeated the Jebusites, David secures the fortress of Zion for the nation. It would prove to be a notable victory for Israel’s new king. Indeed, Jerusalem would become David’s home and subsequently called the city of David. Additionally, David’s reputation grows. He would become increasingly powerful because the “LORD God of Heaven’s Armies was with him.” (2 Samuel 5:10)

What can we learn from today’s reading? It’s one thing to confess one’s faith, and it is something else to show it. As James attests, “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions?” (James 2:14) David’s faith is an active part of who he is. It influences his decisions and positions the nation to experience even more of God’s blessing and activity. What about us? To what extent is our faith on display? What actions testify to our trust in the LORD? Authentic faith should be observed in what we say and do. It should determine the general direction of our lives, allowing for even more of God’s blessing and activity. Genuine faith is “lived out.”

So, will we be a people of faith today? Come on. Let’s show it!

April 23
2 Samuel 6:12-23; 1 Chronicles 15:1-16:43

So David went there and brought the Ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David with a great celebration. After the men who were carrying the Ark of the LORD had gone six steps, David sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. And David danced before the LORD with all his might, wearing a priestly garment. So David and all the people of Israel brought up the Ark of the LORD with shouts of joy and the blowing of rams' horns. (2 Samuel 6:12–15)

What is David thinking as he begins to dance? What is he feeling? We can be sure his dance is not a choreographed series of steps. It is instead an overflow of emotion within. Israel's king could not restrain himself. He could not simply walk in procession. David had to dance, and dance he did. David dances before the LORD with all his might.

What would cause such intense emotion? From David's perspective, it is a defining moment—for himself and the nation. The people of God are accompanying the symbol of God's presence (the Ark of the Covenant) into the nation's heart (Jerusalem, the new capital city). God's people had neglected the ark for too many years. They had lost sight of the LORD and their responsibilities to Him. David is determined to lead the nation back into a right relationship with their God and Savior. He even supplies the Levites with a song to be lifted in praise.

“Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! His faithful love endures forever. Cry out, ‘Save us, O God of our salvation! Gather and rescue us from among the nations, so we can thank your holy name and rejoice and praise you.’ Praise the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives from everlasting to everlasting!” (1 Chronicles 16:34–36)

Again, David could not restrain himself. His heart soars because he recognizes the significance of the moment. The LORD will dwell again among His people, and the nation will not be the same. Yes, David dances before the LORD, and it's the appropriate thing to do.

What about us? How aware are we of God's presence? When was the last time we were so overcome with emotion over the LORD that we couldn't stand or sit still? I read today's account, and I want to experience the joy David displays. I long for the LORD to be the center of my kingdom and life. And you? May the LORD open our eyes to anything that may stand in the way. May we renew our focus and commitment to following the LORD wherever He leads. May our excitement be evident for all to see. Let the dance begin!

April 24

2 Samuel 7:1-8:14; 1 Chronicles 17:1-18:13

When King David was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all the surrounding enemies, the king summoned Nathan the prophet. "Look," David said, "I am living in a beautiful cedar palace, but the Ark of God is out there in a tent!" Nathan replied to the King, "Go ahead and do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you." (2 Samuel 7:1-3)

Grateful to God, David desires to honor the LORD. He intends to construct a dwelling worthy of the LORD. He envisions a permanent home in which the sacred Ark of God might reside. God's prophet, Nathan, supports the king's noble intent, only to have the LORD inform him otherwise. The LORD is not offended or dishonored by David's aspiration. God had other plans.

What are God's plans? The LORD intends to build David's house instead of the other way around. Indeed, God extends to His shepherd-king a twofold pledge: First, the LORD will bless and prosper David beyond his imagination. He announces, "I will make your name as famous as anyone who has ever lived on the earth." (2 Samuel 7:9) Second, the LORD promises to establish a dynasty of kings through David's line. What Saul forfeited by his disobedience (1 Samuel 13:13-14), David would experience because of his trust and devotion. Of course, the promised dynasty would find its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, our LORD (Matthew 1:1). God would keep his pledge to David (2 Samuel 7:16) and also fulfill the words of His prophet Isaiah,

"For a Child is born to us, a Son is given to us. The government will rest on His shoulders. And He will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of His ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!" (Isaiah 9:6-7)

There's something beautiful and instructive from today's reading. David seeks to honor the LORD, but God turns it around and honors His servant-king. That is so much like God. He builds up those who do not build up themselves. He honors those who do not strive for self-glory. Should we take that lesson to heart? How do we seek to honor the One we trust and follow? Please note. We do not elevate the LORD to be exalted. We humble ourselves before the LORD because He is worthy—even if our position remains unchanged. David didn't offer to build a permanent residence for the ark to gain an advantage. David's motive is pure, and God's pledge only deepens his devotion and service.

Let's learn from David's example and honor the LORD appropriately.

April 25

2 Samuel 8:15-10:19; 1 Chronicles 6:16-53; 1 Chronicles 18:14-19:19

One day David asked, “Is anyone in Saul’s family still alive—anyone to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” (2 Samuel 9:1)

The story of David and Mephibosheth is another revealing account of Israel’s notable king. In addition to being a king “who did what was just and right for all the people” (2 Samuel 8:15), we can add kindness to David’s list of qualities—which says a lot. David did not allow his success and power to go to his head. He remains grounded in how he relates to those around him. His trust and humility before the LORD undoubtedly influence his attitude and actions toward others.

And what about the story of Mephibosheth? We’re introduced to Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 4:4, when it is recorded, *“Saul’s son Jonathan had a son named Mephibosheth, who was crippled as a child. He was five years old when the report came from Jezreel that Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle. When the child’s nurse heard the news, she picked him up and fled. But as she hurried away, she dropped him, and he became disabled.”* Mephibosheth’s injury accompanies the sad account of Jonathan’s death. The child’s situation goes from bad to worse, and then he disappears from the story until today’s reading.

Remembering his loyal friendship with Saul’s son, Jonathan, David inquires if any of Saul’s descendants remain. He learns of Mephibosheth and promptly brings Jonathan’s son to Jerusalem. Mephibosheth must have been fearful to hear of David’s summons. Descendants of former kings were often viewed as potential threats to one’s reign. David, however, meant Mephibosheth no harm. He intends to honor the son of his beloved friend. Indeed, he acts with great kindness and generosity toward Jonathan’s child. It’s a further glimpse into the heart of Israel’s King.

Let’s allow David’s example to promote kindness and love on our part. How might we reflect the same disposition of heart? It doesn’t have to be tied to a past event or relationship. Let’s think about honoring another, looking for someone today or this week to whom we might respond with kindness. David wasn’t too busy or too important to do so. He acted with compassion and love. Let’s do the same.

May the LORD encourage our hearts as we do.

April 26

2 Samuel 11:1-12:25; 2 Samuel 5:14-16; 1 Chronicles 14:3-7;
1 Chronicles 3:5-9; 1 Chronicles 20:1; Psalm 51

Then David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." (2 Samuel 12:13)

The failures of God's servants are not hidden in the Bible. The greatest of God's leaders falter in disappointing and devastating ways in both the Old and New Testaments. What are we to make of this? On one level, it lends credibility to the testimony of God's Word. If the Bible is merely a human endeavor, we can be sure that they would hide such failings. Highlighting notable individuals' sins indicates that something more is being revealed. Indeed, it is. God's Word testifies to humanity's need (no matter how prominent the individual) and God's willingness to forgive.

David's sin is particularly distressing. He displays such faith and devotion to the LORD. He's described as a man after God's heart (1 Samuel 13:14), but his actions toward Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah, raise serious questions. What went wrong? We might say that David was at the wrong place and time (2 Samuel 11:1-2), which is true. He likely should have been with his army during a time of war. Perhaps we could also highlight his failure to look away when he observes Bathsheba bathing. Again, yes, David should have shown discipline and restraint. The problem is he didn't (2 Samuel 11:3-4). David elevates his desire for Bathsheba above all things, which leads to tragic, far-reaching consequences. The king of Israel, the man after God's heart, proves himself flawed and sinful.

Sadly, David is slow to acknowledge his sin. Like so many, he seeks to hide his offense. He attempts to navigate around the consequences. Sin, however, puts forces into motion beyond his control. Sin frequently drives us further into the darkness with even greater ramifications. Again, the man after God's heart demonstrates the destructiveness of spiritual blindness and self-deception. Yet, the LORD will not allow His servant to remain in the shadows. God sends His prophet, Nathan, to bring David's actions into the light so that he might respond appropriately. And, with great remorse of heart, David chooses to do so.

What do we learn from David's monumental failure? We should be mindful of our vulnerability. If this could happen to David, we are all susceptible to temptation and sin. Yet, David's experience also extends the hope of forgiveness. Note: God's forgiveness **does not eliminate the consequences** we put into motion. We may still experience potential sorrow and loss. God's forgiveness, however, enables us to face the future with the assurance of God's presence and help. His forgiveness is not a reset button, but it does offer the promise of restoration and joy—even the possibility of a clean heart. May God teach us through David's failure and lead us to walk humbly before the LORD. Indeed, may we join David in his confession,

"You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering. The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God."

Like David, may we respond humbly to the LORD!

April 27
2 Samuel 12:26-14:33; 1 Chronicles 20:2-3

When King David heard what had happened, he was very angry. (2 Samuel 13:21)

What's going on? Rape? Murder? Are we observing another downward spiral—morally and spiritually? Reading today's passage, I had to double-check to ensure I wasn't reading again in the book of Judges. The actions of David's sons, Amnon and Absalom, are reminiscent of the period when God's people pursued what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). It was destructive then and is destructive now as David's reign began a negative descent.

It's not coincidental that the events at hand follow the report of David's moral collapse (2 Samuel 11). His failure creates the environment that contributes to Amnon and Absalom's shameful behavior. The prophet, Nathan, warns: *"From this time on, your family will live by the sword because you have despised Me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own."* (2 Samuel 12:10) It does not excuse or justify the actions of David's oldest sons. Their sin is their sin. They are ultimately responsible for their decisions. Admitting as much, we can't ignore the impact (positively or negatively) of a parent's choices. The "sins of the father" can have generational implications.

What can we learn from today's unseemly account? As with David's demise, let's appreciate the danger of unrestrained sexual desire. Amnon, driven by lust, acts reprehensibly toward his sister. He disregards all sensibility to satisfy his carnal longing, only to discard Tamar without consideration or concern. His actions are despicable and must be condemned. But that's the problem. There's no indication that David holds his Amnon responsible. The king is outraged (2 Samuel 13:21) but fails to confront his son. Take note: inaction in the face of evil promotes further evil.

What is David thinking? Did his past failures disqualify him from addressing Amnon's sin? Or does David hesitate because Amnon is the firstborn, the future king? Whatever the motivation, David's refusal to hold his son responsible will open the door to greater harm. How does Tamar interpret David's silence? What does it communicate to the already dysfunctional family? On some level, the king's inaction contributes to Absalom's extreme action. May God help us to see the correlation.

Everything about this story disturbs me. It screams for godly accountability, and no one steps forward. I pray God will grant us His perspective in ways that influence us appropriately toward our society and families. It bothers me that Amnon's cousin, Jonadab, appears unaffected by the sordid episode. May today's reading teach us to act honorably and responsibly toward the LORD and others, for we see the consequences if we do not.

April 28

2 Samuel 15:1-17:14

So Absalom went to Hebron. But while he was there, he sent secret messengers to all the tribes of Israel to stir up a rebellion against the king. “As soon as you hear the ram’s horn,” his message read, “you are to say, ‘Absalom has been crowned king in Hebron.’” (2 Samuel 15:9–10)

Absalom, David’s son, moves to seize his father’s throne. As he schemed to murder his **brother**, Amnon, he now plots to overthrow his father. Absalom is careful as he implements his plan—slowly casting doubt among Israel’s leaders concerning their aging leader. He cleverly elevates himself in the people’s eyes while simultaneously diminishing David. Absalom’s plan is shrewd and well-executed.

At Hebron, Absalom publicly announces his intentions. Word is sent to all of Israel that he would soon be crowned king. His conspiracy is out in the open, and Absalom appears to have the upper hand. David, hearing the report, hastily flees Jerusalem. What must God’s anointed be thinking or feeling? The man who faced so many enemies is now pursued by his son. David’s emotions must have been jumbled and confused.

Reactions to the unfolding events vary—some support David, and others turn against him. Shimei, a member of Saul’s clan, is very outspoken in his denunciation. He travels beside the fleeing procession, casting rocks in David’s direction. He publicly curses the departing king. And David’s response? Interestingly, David refuses to take action against him, for he’s unsure of God’s intentions. He explains to Abishai, *“My own son is trying to kill me. Doesn’t this relative of Saul have even more reason to do so? Leave him alone and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to do it. And perhaps the LORD will see that I am being wronged and will bless me because of these curses today.”* (2 Samuel 16:11–12)

What might we learn from today’s reading? Again, we’re reminded how our past actions can have far-reaching effects. How much is David replaying the mistakes of the past in his mind? Does he view the unfolding events as an inevitable consequence? One thing is clear. David was determined to yield himself to whatever the LORD deemed appropriate. He expresses this earlier as the king refuses to allow the Ark of the Covenant to accompany him out of the city.

“If the LORD sees fit,” David said, “He will bring me back to see the Ark and the Tabernacle again. But if He is through with me, then let Him do what seems best to Him.” (2 Samuel 15:25–26)

“If the LORD sees fit!” David’s exclamation expresses it all. The fleeing ruler doesn’t know the future, but David knows the LORD and chooses to yield to His purpose and plan. That’s a lesson we can carry with us. Let’s entrust the uncertainties of our future into God’s hands. Is He not trustworthy? *“If the LORD sees fit!”* Indeed, may it be so!

April 29
2 Samuel 17:15-19:30; Psalm 3; Psalm 63

During the battle, Absalom happened to come upon some of David's men. He tried to escape on his mule, but as he rode beneath the thick branches of a great tree, his hair got caught in the tree. His mule kept going and left him dangling in the air. (2 Samuel 18:9)

Absalom assumes that he has prepared for every scenario. He is confident that his plan is fool-proof, but it would not be God-proof. All of his scheming and planning will fail to achieve his ultimate dream. Instead, Absalom will find himself dangling helplessly from a tree. His distinctive hair would be his undoing. Absalom would die without honor and without anyone to come to his defense.

And David? His faith and humility would elicit God's help and support despite David's failings and flaws. In one of the darker chapters of David's life, he cries, "O God, You are my God; I earnestly search for You. My soul thirsts for You; my whole body longs for You in this parched and weary land where there is no water." (Psalm 63:1) God will respond.

Absalom foolishly places his confidence in himself. David, in contrast, puts his hope in the LORD. And it would be this heartfelt trust that would bring David through his family nightmare. No, this is not a "happily ever after" story. However, it is another example of God's mercy and grace reaching into the messiness of the human experience. David will still shed some tears. He will face new hardships, but David's faith in the LORD will remain intact, and it will be the difference.

And our faith? I don't know what you are currently facing. Perhaps you, too, are experiencing disappointment and hurt. The question is, "Will our circumstances push us from the LORD or draw us to Him?" In the worst of David's situations, he turns to the LORD, and so should we. Indeed, let's allow David's testimony to become our own:

"I lie awake thinking of You, meditating on You through the night. Because You are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of Your wings. I cling to You; Your strong right hand holds me securely." (Psalm 63:6-8)

Yes, life can be disorienting, but come on. Let's cling to the LORD.

April 30

2 Samuel 19:31-21:22; 1 Chronicles 20:4-8; Psalm 7

Once again the Philistines were at war with Israel. And when David and his men were in the thick of battle, David became weak and exhausted. Ishbi-benob was a descendant of the giants; his bronze spearhead weighed more than seven pounds, and he was armed with a new sword. He had cornered David and was about to kill him. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to David's rescue and killed the Philistine. Then David's men declared, "You are not going out to battle with us again! Why risk snuffing out the light of Israel?" (2 Samuel 21:15-17)

How does David proceed following Absalom's rebellion? He acts with mercy toward Shimei, who cursed and taunted David as he fled Jerusalem (2 Samuel 19:18-23). He displays kindness toward Mephibosheth and Barzillai (2 Samuel 19:24-40), reassuring Jonathan's son following his alleged disloyalty and publicly honoring Barzillai and his family for their support. David also seeks to unite the nation as they move beyond such a volatile episode. It's not surprising that Sheba's revolt follows Absalom's rebellion. David's perceived weakness feeds Sheba's ambition. Like Absalom, however, his actions will be short-sighted and costly.

How does David proceed? The king endeavors to rule again. He does so with appropriate humility. David confesses his dependence on the LORD, *"I come to You for protection, O LORD my God. Save me from my persecutors—rescue me! If you don't, they will maul me like a lion, tearing me to pieces with no one to rescue me."* (Psalm 7:1-2) The restored king recognizes his vulnerability and celebrates the LORD's salvation and deliverance. *"God is my shield,"* he declares, *"saving those whose hearts are true and right."* (Psalm 7:10)

My favorite portion of today's reading involves the appearance of several sizable enemies—four Philistines, to be specific. Even the brother of Goliath (Lahmi) attempts to defeat the Israelites, only to experience his brother's fate. Though the Philistines are physically intimidating, they would prove no match to God's provision through David and his warriors (2 Samuel 21:22). David's role, this time, was more inspirational than heroic. Nevertheless, the outcome would be the same. God would grant His people victory. Indeed, their new giants would fall.

How does David proceed? With God's help, David moves on to the next challenge. Absalom's defeat didn't represent the end of David's problems. Nor does it indicate the end of God's provision. Let's learn from David's renewed focus and (with God's help) face the giants before us. God will prove faithful on our behalf. Let's then trust in Him as we seek to move forward.

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie
All references unless noted: New Living Translation