

# 2 SAMUEL



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**S**econd Samuel reads more like a soap opera than something one would expect to find in the Bible—lies, murder, sex, betrayal, and court intrigue are all run-of-the-mill occurrences in this fascinating depiction of the reign of Israel's most beloved king, David. Yet, despite all of the shocking stories in Second Samuel, woven throughout the book is the incredible narrative of God's grace, of God's justice, of God's faithfulness to God's people, and of God's willingness to forgive those who will repent and seek God. In order to help the reader to benefit the most from this intriguing story of God's grace and God's justice, this guide will provide brief descriptions of the composition, historical background, and genre of Second Samuel. It will then give a brief overview of the book's contents, and lay out the major themes of the book.

### *Composition History*

Second Samuel was presumably written by the same person or persons

who authored First Samuel, as the books were originally a single composition, which is reflected in their placement in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Samuel has traditionally been held to be the author of the books of Samuel, which accounts for the books' title and their placement in the Prophets division of the Hebrew canon. Samuel dies in First Samuel (25:1), so students of Second Samuel have always known its history of composition to be complex. The book itself indicates that at least one other source, the Book of Jashar (or the "Book of the Upright"), was used to help compose Second Samuel (2 Samuel 1:18).

Second Samuel records the rise and fall of King David, which occurred during the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C.E. Some think of chapters 9–20 (together with 1 Kings 1–2) as a "Court History," or a "Succession Narrative," about the struggle over who would succeed David as king. Despite this narrative setting, however, the internal

evidence of the book suggests that it did not reach its final form until during or after Judah's captivity in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. The book of Second Samuel, along with First Samuel, served as a history of the United Kingdom (Israel and Judah) for the people returning from exile. It would have been a guide for the people that recounted the folly of poor leadership, exemplified by Saul (1 Samuel), as well as godly leadership, exemplified by David (2 Samuel). It is important to note, however, that even David's history does not shy away from portraying the king's significant failings. These failings, though, are used to demonstrate how a godly king is to respond to sin—with repentance—as opposed to how King Saul responded to sin—with excuses. The books of Samuel are part of the larger narrative of the Former Prophets (the traditional Jewish term for Joshua through Kings), also known as the Deuteronomistic History (the contemporary scholarly term).

## *Historical Background of David's Story*

Placing the events of Second Samuel in their historical context will help one to understand the political intrigue that one encounters at nearly every turn of the page. King David's rise to power in Judah (and then Israel) took place during what is known as the Early Iron Age, a period of roughly 200 years from 1200–1000 B.C.E. During this time in the history of the ancient Near East, the major regional power brokers—Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon—had relatively little influence over the rest of the Mediterranean world. This created a power vacuum that allowed a multitude of small kingdoms, such as Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Israel to control the region's political climate. The major powers' lack of influence is important because it allowed these small kingdoms the freedom to develop, thus creating the perfect incubator for the birth of Israel's monarchy. The Israelite monarchy arose

during a time in history in which the small city-states throughout the Mediterranean world were finally experiencing self-rule and thus becoming formidable powers in the ancient Near East. Furthermore, the power vacuum created by the absence of a dominant political power allowed King Saul, and more thoroughly King David, to build the nation of Israel and exert control over its neighbors. During the early stages of the monarchy of Israel, its only foes were the budding nations who were in a similar stage of political development as Israel.

## *Genre*

One would not read the horoscope section of the newspaper in the same way that one would read the front page. That would be absurd. In the same way, one must be aware of the genre of a biblical book in order to read it properly. Throughout the history of the church, interpreters have treated Second

Samuel like history and understood its portrayal of David's life to teach rich theological lessons. In recent times, by contrast, some have proposed that Second Samuel is nothing more than an elaborate political document written to free King David from all blame regarding his ascension to Israel's throne. In this view, the author has shrewdly portrayed David as a godly man who did not take the throne forcefully, but rather allowed God to promote him and defeat his enemies. Second Samuel, on this reading, is quite similar to the modern campaign commercial—there is quite a bit of skewed rhetoric thrown in.

As noted previously, 2 Samuel aims to help God's people returning from exile in Babylon better reflect on their history and learn some key theological lessons along the way. If the book is largely driven by apologetics and polemics, however, then the reliability of the book's theological message must be questioned. Thankfully, there are a number of good reasons to hold that

Synagogue and Church have not misread Second Samuel. The book is more history-like than propaganda-like. First, the archaeological record confirms the book's description of the ancient Near East and the customs described in the book are appropriate to the period of David's reign. Second, Jewish and Christian interpreters throughout the ages have found the book nourishing of their faith in a way that does not fit a piece of political rhetoric. To overturn a millennia-long experience of the book would require significant evidence indeed. And, third, the book's negative portrayal of David belies the notion that it is a skewed, pro-Davidic tract. Why would an apologist for David put the king's adultery, murder, and inability to control his children front and center in his or her account? Surely, a belief in the historical reality of David's ambiguous character and susceptibility to sin were squarely rooted in tradition and understood as significant subject matter for spiritual instruction.



This discussion is crucial for interpretation because it enables Christians today to read the events recorded in 2 Samuel, such as the covenant that God makes with David, which prepares the way for Jesus Christ, and take great comfort in the work of God in history. Not only that, but it also enables us to trust and to apply the theological messages presented in 2 Samuel to our lives today. But, before examining the major themes and theological emphases of 2 Samuel, it is important first to become oriented to the book's arrangement and contents.

### *Content and Arrangement*

As noted previously, First and Second Samuel were written as one piece of literature, so they should be read as one story. The two books together tell the story of the first two kings of Israel and Judah. Whereas 1 Samuel chronicles the development of the Israelite monarchy and the foibles of its first

king, Saul, 2 Samuel recounts the reign of its second and most beloved king, David. The following skeleton outline is a helpful guide for placing the smaller events into the book's overall context:

1. David solidifies the throne (2 Samuel 1–7)
2. David rules over Israel (2 Samuel 8–20)
3. Conclusion (2 Samuel 21–24)

**1. David Solidifies the Throne (2 Samuel 1–7).** First Samuel ends with the death of Saul; Second Samuel picks up the narrative without skipping a beat. A young man brings David news of Saul's death, but much to the young man's chagrin, rather than rejoicing at the news of his enemy's demise, David kills him for taking credit for it, famously asking, "How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?" (2 Samuel 1:14 ESV). While Saul's death sets the stage for David's rise to power, his accession is not quite as easy as one would perhaps expect at this point in the narrative.

To readers today, who know the story of David quite well, it seems bizarre that all the people of Israel and Judah do not immediately hail David as king. This is the person, after all, whom God had chosen to rule. He is the person who slew Goliath, and the great military commander and leader of the people. Nevertheless, the contrast between the will of the people and the will of the Lord that led to the kingship in the first place (1 Samuel 8) rears its ugly head once again: the Lord has chosen David to rule (1 Samuel 16), but most of the people want to remain under the authority of Saul's house. This leads to civil war between Judah and Israel.

Just as David remained upright regarding the death of Saul in chapter one, David distances himself from much of the bloodshed resulting from his initial rise to power. Two deaths in particular—Abner and Ishbosheth—help David solidify his rule over the United Kingdom, but in each of these deaths David remains free of bloodguilt.

David's non-participation in the execution of these men enhances the picture of David as a person who allows the Lord to promote him rather than using deception and power to gain what he wants.

Another important factor in David's rise to power is his bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark of the covenant was "called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim" (2 Samuel 6:2 ESV) and was the primary means through which God's presence dwelled with the people during this period in salvation history. Therefore, by moving the ark to Jerusalem David does two important things: 1) He consolidates his political and religious authority by transferring the symbol of God's presence to the place where he (David) would rule over God's people. 2) He legitimizes Jerusalem as the new capital of Israel—since God's presence is now at Jerusalem, it only makes sense that the city would also be the capital of the nation.

The final important event that occurs in the first section is closely related to the unification of David's religious and political power: the Davidic covenant. Yahweh has made David the ruler over unified Israel and he has peace from his enemies. Now, David asks to build a house for God. (Compare Deuteronomy 12:5, "You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there" [ESV].) In a clever turn of phrase, the Lord denies David's request, but states that he will instead build a "house" (a dynasty) for David. This interaction in 2 Samuel 7 is a climactic moment in the book and indeed represents one of the high points of the two testaments of the Christian Bible, for it is from the line of David that *the* Messiah, Jesus Christ, will eventually come.

**2. David Rules over Israel (2 Samuel 8–20).** After listing a number of David's military victories, this section recounts another story that extols

David's uprightness and integrity (2 Samuel 9:1–13). Faced with the opportunity to kill a potential threat to his throne, Mephibosheth (Jonathan's son), David instead shows kindness to him because of David's relationship with Jonathan and his respect for the fallen King Saul. This episode is especially illuminating in light of the covenant that the Lord established with David in chapter 7. A typical human response would be to do everything in one's power to "help" God keep his promises (cf., e.g., Abraham's dealings with Hagar). Instead, David follows the later example of Abraham when he chooses to obey God by sacrificing the promised heir, Isaac (though, of course, the angel stays Abraham's hand). This episode thus once again demonstrates David's faith in God, an example that the church would do well to follow today.

David, however, is not without his faults, as his sin with Bathsheba in chapter 11 makes abundantly clear. Much like spring today marks the be-

ginning of baseball and soccer season, in the ancient Near East springtime marked the beginning of war season, when kings would lead out their armies in battle in order to solidify their rule and expand their territory. This particular spring, however, David decides to stay in his palace, entrusting his commander Joab with the responsibility of leading Israel's army. Unfortunately, this small decision led David down a path of disobedience—including adultery and murder—that had devastating consequences for his personal and public life.

True to his character as a man after God's heart (1 Samuel 13:14), David humbly repents of his sin when Nathan the prophet confronts him. Nevertheless, David does not escape punishment: his son will die and the sword will never leave his household. Whereas David secretly dishonored the Lord with his sin and deception, God will publicly humiliate David. Importantly, the narrator is careful to present the account of

David's sin in such a way that highlights the fact that God executes judgment without regard for personal status or even prior relationship. While God does not nullify the eternal Davidic covenant of chapter 7, David will now experience God's hand of discipline and will experience God's blessing in a much more limited way.

Also important in this chapter is the role of Nathan. From the time of Samuel on, prophets played the crucial role of religious adviser to the king, though they were not always so well received (cf., e.g., the relationship of Elijah and King Ahab). The model of receiving advice from godly people is well attested in the Bible, especially Proverbs, and is a model that is still valid for Christians today, even if we are not all national leaders.

The violence that God promised in 2 Samuel 12 begins in full force when Amnon, David's son, rapes his half-sister, Tamar. This angers David, but he does nothing to discipline Amnon.



David's lack of action leads Absalom, another of David's sons, to avenge his sister's dishonor by murdering Amnon (cf. Genesis 34). Fearing reprisal, Absalom flees, though his absence is short-lived. Seeing that David greatly misses his son, Joab convinces him to allow Absalom's return. Upon his return, however, Absalom attempts to overthrow David (2 Samuel 14–18), causing another civil war between Israel and Judah. Once again, David's life and kingdom are spared. Once again, David mourns the death of an enemy, this time his own son. And once again David shows kindness to another enemy after his kingdom is secured. Though David's life is upended because of his sin with Bathsheba, he remains faithful and obedient to the Lord.

### **3. Conclusion (2 Samuel 21–24).**

The final four chapters of Second Samuel are often called appendices to the book because they seem to be an insertion that breaks up the flow of the narrative rather than a continuation of it.

They lend Second Samuel a remarkable shape, however, rounding off and highlighting the composition as a unique scripture specially dedicated to David, forerunner of Israel's Messiah. And, taken with First Samuel, these chapters form a fitting conclusion to the two books.

Chapter 21 records David's final military victory over the Philistines as well as his rectifying Saul's sin against the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites are a people who made a treaty with Joshua in Joshua 9:13–17 that guaranteed their safety when Israel was conquering the land of Canaan. Saul, however, "had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah" (2 Samuel 21:2). Because of this, the Gibeonites sought restitution from Saul's house. David offered up to them Saul's sons, but spared Mephibosheth, with whom he had earlier made a covenant.

Chapter 22 records David's final song to the Lord, a beautiful piece of

poetry that recounts the multiple times and ways in which God remained faithful to David throughout his life. Placed here at the end of 2 Samuel, the song forms an *inclusio* (a literary device akin to bookends) with Hannah's song that comes at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Each song extols the God who looks on the lowly, raises up the humble, and rewards obedience. Chapter 23 contains a list of David's mighty men, which together with the military victory recounted in 2 Samuel 21, serves to remind the reader of David's military prowess and success at both extending Israel's borders and bringing peace to the nation.

Second Samuel ends in a somewhat strange way: David commits yet another grave sin that has dire consequences for the nation of Israel. This time he takes a census of the people, against Joab's judgment. Interestingly, according to 2 Samuel the Lord incites David to take the census, but according to 1 Chronicles 21:1–28, Satan incites David to

take the census. The two passages can be harmonized by appealing to the fact that God is the ultimate mover—*everything* is under God’s authority. Exactly why the Lord considered the census such a great offense is debated, but it seems that David failed to ensure that his subjects kept Exodus 30:12: “When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them.” Since the outcome of the census was a three-day plague that took the lives of 70,000 people, it is safe to assume that the people did not provide a ransom for themselves.

Importantly, the book does not simply end with the destruction of a large segment of Israel’s population. After David’s repentance, the Lord instructs him to build an altar at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite (the Jebusites ruled Jerusalem before David took over the city). This altar

would be the site of the Temple that David wanted to build, but which his son Solomon will construct in First Kings. The book thus ends on an exceedingly hopeful note, with the purchase of the site of the future Temple and with the Lord responding to David's prayer for Israel, something he promises he will continue to do when the Temple is dedicated in 1 Kings 8.

### *Theology and Themes*

Second Samuel is a continuation of First Samuel; one must read 1 Samuel in order to get a full picture of the themes of 2 Samuel. We will look at the theology and themes of 2 Samuel by themselves, but encourage you to keep in mind that the two books share many emphases. Of special interest here are God's presence among the chosen people, the Davidic Covenant, and the significance and consequences of sin, including the importance of repentance.

**God's Presence.** The presence of God among God's people is an important theme throughout the books of Samuel. This is seen in 1 Samuel when the people request a king in the first place. The Lord's response to the request is to tell Samuel to give the people what they want because they have not rejected him, but the Lord (1 Samuel 8:7). Since the days of the exodus, God was present among God's people—the Lord was their king. The request for a human king is therefore tantamount to rejecting God's presence among them. Nevertheless, God does not remove the divine presence from Israel, but comes upon Saul in a unique manner. The Spirit of God eventually leaves Saul because of his consistent disobedience, but God continues to reveal God's self to David in a special way.

Moving forward to Second Samuel, the importance of God's presence is highlighted in the narrative of the ark of the covenant in chapter 6. David wants

to bring the ark to Jerusalem so that the presence of God would once again be with the people of God. David's plan is stalled, however, when God kills Uzzah for touching the ark in a seemingly innocent gesture. This greatly angers David and he leaves the ark with Obededom. When David hears that Obededom's household is experiencing unusual blessing, however, David goes again to retrieve the ark, this time successfully.

This brief chapter may strike today's readers as somewhat bizarre. After all, I can think of no one who has been struck down by God for touching the altar at my church. Not only that, but the Holy Spirit now dwells in each believer, so God's presence is not uniquely tied to a particular object, such as the ark of the covenant. Despite this potential disconnect, this passage demonstrates something about God's presence that is just as important for believers today as it was for the book's original audience: God's presence is not

something to be trifled with. This becomes even more important today as believers *constantly* are in God's presence in a unique way through the Holy Spirit. Because of God's constant presence in our lives, we must take care to live uprightly.

**The Davidic Covenant.** The importance of the Davidic covenant for the rest of the biblical story can scarcely be overstated. Volumes could be (and in fact have been) written concerning its importance. Here the aim is simply to point out a few of its important features as well as its significance for the rest of the Bible. God's covenant with David is eternal—there will be a Davidic king reigning before God forever. This is not meant to imply, however, that those of David's dynasty are entitled to sin with no regard for consequences. God states that David's son will be subject to severe discipline from God: "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with



the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him” (2 Samuel 7:14–15 ESV). If the covenant with David is eternal, and a Davidic king will always rule in God’s presence, the question becomes, how so? Israel and Judah were both invaded, destroyed, and sent into exile. The nation of Israel did not exist for many centuries, and even now there is no Davidic king ruling Israel. Christians confess that the Davidic covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who reigns now and for eternity: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32–33 ESV).

**Sin and Repentance.** Finally, sin and repentance is a highly significant issue in both books of Samuel. The stories of Saul and David provide a vivid contrast between the proper way to respond to sin and the improper way

to respond to sin. In 1 Samuel, we find that God rejects Saul because of his disobedience—first by sacrificing in an unlawful manner (1 Samuel 13:8–15), then by not sacrificing to God everything required (1 Samuel 15:1–35). In each of these instances, rather than taking responsibility for his actions and repenting to the Lord, Saul shifts the blame from himself, first onto Samuel then onto the people. As a result, the Lord says, “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments” (1 Samuel 15:10).

Like Saul, David also fails to obey the Lord on a number of occasions, such as his adultery with Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah, and the census he took at the end of his reign. Unlike Saul, in each of these cases David repented when confronted with his sin. Rather than blame his disobedience on another person, David throws himself upon the mercy of God. As a result, although David must still suffer the consequences

of his sin (e.g., the death of his first son with Bathsheba, the plague that resulted from his census), he is never rejected by God. The sharp contrast that the books of Samuel present between these two kings of Israel is telling for how Christians today should respond when we sin: with repentance. There is no doubt that God already knows of our sin, the only question is how we will respond once confronted with it. With Saul, we can shift the blame onto others and never truly confess to God, or with David we can take responsibility for our actions but plead for his grace to cover us.



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