



2 SAMUEL DEVOTIONAL

By Pastor Phil Emerson

NAME: _____

OUR DISCIPLESHIP FLOW

At Emmanuel Church, we are passionate about living out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to see His Kingdom come in our lives and the world in which we live. We recognise that in Biblical times, a disciple was someone who followed a teacher or rabbi, not simply to gain head knowledge to pass an examination, but to be fully immersed in the life of the rabbi, and *learn his ways*, so that they in turn could replicate this to the world around them. As Christians, we are now those who have been invited to ‘follow’ Jesus and all of His ways, and we therefore call ourselves His disciples.

“This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” 1 John 2:5,6

We therefore want to take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples and also commit to an ongoing journey of teaching and discipleship together.

We all have differing personalities and learning styles. At Emmanuel, we recognise this diversity within the church body and therefore desire to support and journey together as we relate with God and each other in some of the following environments:

- **Public (20+)**

In the Bible, we see Jesus seeking to make disciples as He engaged with larger numbers of people, e.g., His interaction with the crowds (Matthew 4:25; Luke 14:25), and the 72 (Luke 10:1-24).

At Emmanuel, we want to use each of our **larger gathered environments** as an opportunity to make disciples, e.g., **Sunday services, Friday Youth/Kids’** environments, **men’s/women’s** gatherings.

- **Social (10-15)**

Jesus demonstrated the necessity for **smaller accountable relationships** as an essential part of the life of a disciple. He did this by teaching and doing life with his twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew 10).

At Emmanuel, small accountable relationships are offered through:

Lifegroup 12s

These are **gatherings of 10-15 people** who meet bi-weekly in homes or around specific interests, e.g., crafts, football.

- **Personal (2-5)**

As well as having smaller accountable relationships amongst His twelve friends, Jesus also seemed to go to even deeper levels of trust with three in particular – Peter, James and John (Matthew 17; Mark 9). At Emmanuel, we seek to do this through:

Lifegroup 3s

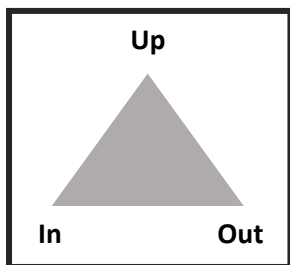
These are smaller **gatherings of 2-5 people** who are committed to transparent and accountable relationships in order to grow together in following Jesus. The aim for these groups is that after 1-2 years, each person in the group would be able to lead a smaller number of people themselves and replicate the process... **disciples making disciples!**

- **Intimate (1-1)**

Jesus regularly withdrew to spend time alone with the Father. This is the ultimate goal of discipleship, that each member of our church family would increasingly spend time alone with the Father and grow in devotion and desire to see the Kingdom come.

A TOOL TO USE

As stated previously, 1 John 2:6 makes it clear that for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, our goal should be to daily walk in the ways of Jesus, our Rabbi. As we examine the New Testament we see that Jesus lived His life based on three relationships: **Up** – with His Father; **In** – with His chosen followers; **Out** – with the hurting world around Him. This is illustrated in the following triangle:



Jesus taught and modelled out to His disciples how to live into each of these areas in life.

Up

Jesus frequently left the disciples to spend personal time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He taught them the significance of prayer, and how to pray and communicate with the Father (Luke 11:1-13). When comparisons with one another or insecurities presented themselves, He spoke into it in love and challenged them into a greater depth of living (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 18:1-5).

In

Jesus had significant relationships with others in which He intentionally invested (12s and 3s). When He went to engage with the Father He brought the three with Him (Matthew 17:1). He taught them and modelled out the significance of Sabbath and rhythms of rest (Mark 6:31). He demonstrated with His life the significance of generosity and sacrificial love for others (John 13:1-17).

Out

Jesus personally lived a life that engaged with the crowds and the broken world around Him. He healed the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), fed the poor (Mark 6:30-44), and cast out demons (Matthew 8:28-34). But with the people who were closest to Him, He challenged them to do the same (Mark 6:37), and when they took risks themselves He critiqued and gave honest feedback to call out more for them (Luke 10:17-20).

As we spend time alone or together in this devotional, we want to help and encourage you to engage in each of these ways – UP, IN, and OUT.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

First

If you haven't already done so, please take a second to fill in your name on the inside of the front cover. There'll be a lot of identical books floating around, and we don't want yours to get lost.

Prepare

Get ready for each session by spending some time to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. The Bible is a written word (logos), which becomes a living word (rhema) as the Holy Spirit breathes upon it and speaks directly to our lives through it.

Commit

Commit to the journey. Discipleship is not a commitment to a moment, but to a lifetime journey. As you personally commit to journeying with God daily, commit to others by sharing what you are learning (possibly in Lifegroup 12s or 3s), and in this way encouraging one another in what God is saying.

Reflect & Respond

Each day, as you spend personal time with God, we encourage you to ask the following two questions:

- 1) What is God saying to me?
- 2) What am I going to do about it?

This is how we become doers and not just hearers of what God is saying.

INTRODUCTION TO 2 SAMUEL

In 1 Samuel, we were introduced to the man we now know as King David. We followed him from his dad's sheep field to killing a giant on the battlefield to gathering a bunch of undesirables in a cave at Adullam.

Here in 2 Samuel, we will follow his ascent to Hebron as king not just of Judah, but of all Israel. One can hardly sense that we have moved from one book to another, from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel. The transition seems virtually seamless, which in fact it is in the original text. I love these books that one could simply call 'The David Story'. Let's get right in!

Phil

Live

Reflecting back on first Samuel, there was a little phrase in the last chapter that caught me: verse 8, *“The next day...”* What happens ‘this day’ will have a profound effect on ‘the next day’. That is why ‘this day’ is so vitally important. Saul made so many blunders in his todays that it had to come to an end somewhere. Now, after the far-reaching grace of an almighty God, the day had come. After his final battle, when the Philistines went out to strip the dead, they found him and his three sons lying on Mount Gilboa all dead. What a tragic end to a family, a family whose jealous father led them to destruction in its cruellest form, Saul even having to end his own life to spare himself the barbaric treatment he would have received from the Philistines.

As we open the pages of 2 Samuel, news of this travesty reaches the ears of King David. What a chapter. In the first half, we have the view of Saul’s death from an Amalekite. This guy had read King David all wrong, thinking he was the bearer of great news, even exaggerating his own involvement (which he paid dearly for). In the second half of the chapter, we have David’s view. David pens a song for the funeral march and not a word of Saul’s sin against him is mentioned, only grief and loss. What a guy this David really is!

This has really made me question my own attitude when something bad comes the way of those who have wronged me. It’s a good examination to do today to see the condition of your heart. Answer honestly, would you grieve or gloat? David’s grief is real and deep, it reeks of finality, as grief does, and only those who have been closely affected by it will truly understand. In a way, I can understand the young Amalekite’s thoughts, David could only gain from these deaths as, bar Jonathan, they had brought him nothing but heartache and pain, but what a heart David had, a man after God’s own. What a quest today!

Pray

Father, I am led today to pray for those who are grieving – the loss of a loved one, the loss of health to a terminal illness or even the loss of a job or a friendship. I ask You to help them through this season of loss. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

Let me give you a quick overview of today's reading and then we'll think about how to apply it. I love how this chapter kicks off, David asks the Lord. It is recorded that he asks specifically which town he should go to, and he is directed to Hebron. So he, his men, and their families go. The men of Judah met David and anointed him their king. David wanted to bless the men of Jabesh Gilead for burying Saul and Jonathan, but Abner, the Commander of Saul's army, declared Ishbosheth, Saul's son, king over all the other Israelite tribes. After two years, David's army (led by Joab) and Ishbosheth's army (led by Abner) met in battle. David's troops won and chased the men commanded by Abner. Asahel, Joab's brother, ran after Abner. Abner desperately didn't want to kill him, but Asahel continued to chase him, so Abner hit Asahel hard in the stomach with the blunt end of his spear, which killed Asahel instantly. Joab continued chasing Abner and his men until, from the top of a hill, Abner shouted at Joab asking how many more men must die. After counting the casualties, Joab took his men back to Hebron.

Now, here are some questions we must ask today. Do we always ask the Lord for His guidance before taking any action? Have we caught on that even though the Lord has anointed us for a task, it may be many years before the opportunity arrives to start doing it? Do we understand that we may have to rely on others to fight on our behalf? Do we try to prevent injuring others who mean us harm? Are we wise enough to know when to stop and retire from the field of battle? Oh dear! Abner in this story today reminds me of Esau. I'm like him at times. My peace-pangs take over, and in the moment, I'll gladly settle for a bowl of hot porridge over the hope of a future banquet. The provision of a snack-in-hand blinds my eye, deafens my ear, and dulls my taste buds for the future feast with my King.

Pray

Father, help me focus on the Day when my longing and demanding heart will be fully set free to delight in You. Some days I lose sight of that great Day when faith will give way to sight. Until then, keep my eyes on You. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Live

We start today with a long war between the people of Judah who were faithful to David and the other Israelite tribes who were faithful to Saul and Ishbosheth. During this time, David's position got stronger and stronger while Ishbosheth's got weaker and weaker. Then there is a little section telling us that Abner, leader of Ishbosheth's army, slept with Rizpah, Saul's concubine. When accused of it by Ishbosheth, Abner became so angry that he said he would give Saul's kingdom to David. David refused to make a covenant with Abner unless Michal, his wife, came back to him, so she was taken from Paltiel, her husband who loved her, and brought to David. Abner consulted with the leaders of each tribe in Israel, telling them it was time to make David their king. Abner then went to Hebron with twenty men and told David that all Israel and Benjamin had agreed to support him. David gave a feast for them, then sent them away in peace. When Joab and some of David's troops returned from a raiding party laden with spoil and Joab was told of Abner's visit, he went straight to David and accused Abner of being a spy. Then, without David knowing, Joab sent messengers to bring Abner back. When Abner arrived, Joab killed him in revenge for the death of his brother, Asahel. David was devastated when he heard of Abner's death. He fasted and mourned, attending Abner's funeral so all the people of Judah and Israel would know he was not responsible for Abner's murder.

So how do we apply this today? We may have to fight for a long time to take possession of all that the Lord has given to us. If we have turned away from the Lord's will, we need to turn back to Him and be intent on putting that right. Do you make sure of all the facts before jumping to, what may be, the wrong conclusion? Do you seek revenge for anything? If so, we must carefully consider the Lord's Prayer, which reminds us powerfully to pray, *"Father, forgive me as I forgive others."*

Pray

Father, I love You and I am so sorry for my selfish actions. Thank You for Your forgiveness; without it I am nothing, but with Your forgiveness I am whole again. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Just twelve little verses today in the pages of Holy Writ, verses full of deceit, misunderstanding, bloodshed and heartache. It isn't really surprising because verse 1 sets it all up for a fall. Ishbosheth, the king of Israel, loses his courage and gets paralysed with fear. Not the most wonderful opening to any chapter. Fear is the complete opposite of faith, and, if not dealt with, never has a good ending. There is no exception today. While Ishbosheth is taking his afternoon nap, two of his once trusted employees (who obviously now have different thoughts of allegiance) sneak into his chamber, kill him and cut off his head. These two boys are making the same mistake a certain Amalekite made a few chapters back; they haven't been around David long enough to know what sort of man he is. Yes, he is a bloodthirsty avenger of the armies of his God, but he is also a righteous man who serves his God with fervour and strength. David reminds them of the mistake of the Amalekite who fabricated a story of his involvement in Saul's death for political and maybe financial gain, only to lose his life. David invokes the covenant of the Lord spoken in Genesis 9:5,6 *"And I will require the blood of anyone who takes another person's life. If a wild animal kills a person, it must die. And anyone who murders a fellow human must die. If anyone takes a human life, that person's life will also be taken by human hands."* These two chaps meet a hasty demise.

There is much for us to take from a chapter like this today, like, always do the right thing. But the big lesson is to curb fear at every corner. My mum always used this acrostic for fear: False Evidence Appearing Real. Fear is a cheat, a tool of the devil to disempower you and render you ineffective for the Lord. It will cripple you with anxiety and even destroy your health. It is a killer. I love Proverbs 3:5, *"Trust in the Lord with ALL your heart and lean not on your own understanding."*

Pray

Father, help me to never allow fear to take root. Even when people threaten or connive, may I never fall into their deceitful trap. Thank You for Your patience with me. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Unity is the powerful message found in this chapter today as we see the people's response to God's king. While Saul, Abner and others may have resisted David's rise to the throne, it was the will of God. After Abner's death, the people of Israel recognised that David should be their king, and the leaders approached David, expressing their desire. David is most certainly a prototype of the 'Son of David' who is to come, God's King, who will come to the earth to defeat His enemies and rule over His kingdom.

There is a little verse in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "*He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*" This chapter in 2 Samuel 5 expresses the beautiful timing of our great God and the heart of a man fully devoted to that God, one who is willing to wait for His moment. How many times David could have seized this throne through force and his own strength and cunningness, but he waited, and now it's being handed to him on a plate.

Another thought that jumps out today is the immediate response of the enemy to God's plan and call. Verse 17 says when, or "*as soon as*", the Philistines heard of David's promotion, they mobilised all of their forces against him. Even after David defeated them, they came back for a second go (verse 17). The old enemy never gives up, always remember this, it's a good rule to know. I love how David inquires of God to find out if he should go and fight them, and how he gets an immediate response. Also, it is interesting to see how God got David to change his tactics on the second approach. My takeaway from this is never take for granted that what worked before will work again. Fresh grace is the fuel of every believer, and the great thing is it's in full supply!

Pray

Father, You are all-powerful! Even Your thoughts produce action. I pray for our leaders in the government, for they also have power, though it is limited. I pray that they would use their positions wisely, for You are the One who has allowed them to lead us. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

This story reminds me of how active the ‘accuser of the brethren’ is. Satan is always lying; he is lying to us about God, and to God about us. He tempts us, seduces us, and then he condemns us. But as devious, lethal and persistent as his actions are, David in our reading today gives an example of learning from our mistakes and God’s correction. When God killed Uzzah, yes, David was confused and angry, but rather than allowing his heart to become bitter, he evaluated the experience and allowed learning to come from it. People often say that experience is the best master, but I don’t think that’s true; if it were, people would get better as they get older, and I know people who have got older and bitter, not better. You see, *evaluated* experience is the best master, stuff that you learn from and then grow into a better person with more wisdom for the next leg of the journey.

I see two worship extremes exposed today, and both are wrong. Lively charismatic worship, which is only about us, is just plain horizontal. No matter how much enthusiasm you may add, it is still wrong until it exalts God into the rightful place of honour. Every bit as wrong is proud stately worship that avoids emotion and enthusiasm purely because we are too proud to humble ourselves before God. This one is done out of formula, ritual and habit. The former produces barrenness; the latter produces death. Let us seek to worship God as David and Israel eventually did, in accordance with His Word, with humility, with hearts filled with joy and gratitude, and with enthusiasm. Religiosity cannot abide true worship, that’s what happened to Michal. Her religious pride wouldn’t allow her heart to open to the unadulterated worship of her husband, the king of Israel, in the presence of almighty God. That same God shut up her ability to reproduce for the rest of her life. Daunting or what?

Pray

Father, I want to love and worship You simply because You are God. You are the God of all grace, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort. There’s no other god besides You, and there’s certainly no other god like You. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

David had this heart unction to build God a house. He looked at the palace where he lived and compared it with the tent where the ark of God was kept. He spoke to his seer, Nathan, who thought it was a pretty cool idea, but then Nathan got a word from the Lord to go back and instruct David otherwise. There is a great deal of emphasis these days on the planting and building of churches, great churches. Planting churches is a good thing, and the building of large churches is not necessarily a bad idea. But let us guard against the false assumption that larger and more impressive buildings are proof of God's presence and power. We need to guard against prideful thoughts of our own contribution to the kingdom of God, thinking that God really needs us. It is always Him who will be carrying us, rather than us carrying Him. How easily we begin to focus on what we have done and can do for God, rather than on all He has done and will do for and through us.

David is reminded of all God's mercies to him and told that while he could provide for the new house, he was not to be the builder as his hands were bloodied by battle. I often wonder what my response might have been to such a message from God. Here is how verse 18 records David's response, he, *"sat before the Lord."* After Jill, my wife of 27 years, died suddenly in 2006, this verse above all others was a source of strength when I had no words left, only groans. When the tears seemed to run from a never-ending source of a busted heart, I would just sit before the Lord. On my bedroom floor, the place where I had held my wife as she breathed her last, the place I had screamed out in anguish and disbelief, the place where I had felt hope had died along with her, I would just sit for hours and slowly allow God to interpret my groans and love on me. Sit before Him today. He is the Author and Finisher!

Pray

Father, may I be a lover, not a fixer, in my world of relationships, a person who knows how to weep with those who are grieving, and dance with those who are coming alive to Your grace. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Ephesians 1:4 has, for years, been one of my special verses, *“Chosen in Christ before the foundations of the world.”* I have often marvelled at being chosen; I’m sure you have too. David was a man chosen as a military power for God. For years, David had very little power; he was put out in the fields to keep a small flock of sheep for his family. When Samuel came on the scene to anoint Israel's future king from among the sons of Jesse, David was not even considered a possibility by his family. They had to be instructed to bring him in from the field. There were times when David exercised a certain amount of power and authority under Saul, but he soon became a fugitive, and then his official power was taken away, even his wife was taken from him. Yet now, years later, Saul is dead, and David has become the king of Israel in his place.

In our chapter today, David subdues his enemies and brings peace. He now has the power to do whatever he desires and this is the time we see David at his best, and, unfortunately, at his worst as well. In chapters 8 to 10, we find David in his finest form. He employs the power God has given to accomplish God's will. This drives us today to think about how we perform when all is well in our world. It’s interesting to observe!

Reading about David moves us to gladly bow before God, not floundering in fear nor grovelling in our guilt, rather, ever growing in His grace. He is the Father we always wanted, the Father from whom all fatherhood derives its name and meaning. God was certainly with David as his power and authority grew and grew. Other nations and kingdoms had to bow to David’s splendour and success. When God is for us, who and what can come against us? I love this. Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world. Rejoice today that you have been chosen and your name is in the eternal Lamb’s Book of Life. Beautiful!

Pray

Father, You’ve already forgiven me for the years I spent parenting by fear, control, guilt and pride. Now I pray for the redeeming of those years through Your inexhaustible riches and Your measureless power. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

REFLECT & RESPOND
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Live

The story in this chapter is such a beautiful demonstration of love and acceptance, but it's even more beautiful when we understand the culture in which David and Mephibosheth lived. During this time in history, when one king took over another king's throne, the new king would kill the entire family of the former king. This was to ensure that the family of the old king would not try to regain the power they once had. This explains why Mephibosheth bowed down out of fear. It also explains why David comforted him and told him not to be afraid. David didn't follow tradition; he didn't follow culture; he followed God. Now there is a great lesson today, turn your ear to God and not to the culture of tradition. We've been taught that God provides grace and mercy in spite of our behaviour and in spite of our sins. Like Mephibosheth, we need God in our lives now more than ever, knowing that we are not perfect and that our sins are not hidden from Him.

We are told that Mephibosheth was dropped by his nurse; it was no fault on his part, a complete accident we would say. I think today of the people in our sphere who have been dropped, broken and maimed through no fault of their own. Parents break up and a child gets scarred, an abusive father, a health issue, on and on we could go. May we be like David who sought out this young man, even going to a place like Lo-debar, which means 'place of no pasture'. Mephibosheth probably thought no one would ever stoop to where he was, but he was wrong. Remember, David was called a man after God's own heart. Of course, we know how Jesus stooped, He became one of us so that we could become like Him. I love how this chapter ends with Mephibosheth sitting at the king's table, not as a guest, but as a member of David's family, *"He ate always at the king's table."* Oh the matchless grace of our Abba, who call us sons and daughters, hiding our brokenness under His table of forgiveness.

Pray

Father, I may not always be perfect, but I strive to be better. Lord, help me be better. Help me see the clear, narrow path in front of me so I can walk in Your ways and in Your glory. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

Have you ever rubbed someone up the wrong road, or has anyone ever rubbed *you* up the wrong way? There is no nice way to say it, so I will just say it, King Hanun in today's chapter is a goat! He thought he was being smart, but he was just being plain stupid. Of all the people I wouldn't like to agitate in the day and age in question, it would have been King David. He was a great friend and a ruthless, terrible enemy. You know you've done the wrong thing when you need to hire an extra 33,000 men to fight on your side, but, as you read towards the end today, David slew over 40,000 soldiers.

In chapters 8-10 we have seen the favour, power and might of David grow. We have also seen the graceful softness of his heart. These three chapters remind us that these two dimensions of God, sovereignty and grace, blend perfectly. God's grace is sovereign grace, grace that is not earned or deserved. It is bestowed upon whomever He chooses, and solely on the basis of His benevolence. He reminds us in Romans 9 that He will have mercy on whom He chooses. God's righteous reign is also a sovereign rule that prevails over all the enemies of God. God will destroy His enemies as He has done in the past.

I am reminded of Joshua 24 when Joshua asks the people to choose who they will serve. He is reminding them that no one can serve two masters, so they must choose. In western civilisation today, there is much to distract the child of God. It's not all bad stuff, but full diaries and stress filled lives are an enemy to our King. These things will rob us of a true relationship with our God. Let's face it, most of what is going on in our lives right now is by choice. One of my all-time favourite movies is 'Indiana Jones, The Last Crusade'. At the end, Indiana stands looking for the Holy Grail and the old warrior from whom he seeks direction says to him, *"You must choose, but choose wisely."* Great advice I think!

Pray

Father, let me be more like You by giving others unconditional love, giving them a path, and helping them see clearly what needs to be done. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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What am I going to do about it?

Live

This passage stirs up a bunch of stuff in my heart. In our world, we've never been more aware of the pervasiveness of sexual brokenness; it's everywhere we go, everywhere we look, including in the mirror. So many people bear the wounds, feel the shame and know the power of disconnect resulting from sexual brokenness. And yet, the gospel dares us to hope. The most healthy, pure and satisfying intimacy between a husband and wife is just a hint and whisper of the rich relationship we are meant to enjoy with our Father God – now in part, and in fullness when He returns.

I often get asked, can a Christian fall? The answer is yes, absolutely. David is not only a believer, he is a model believer. David sets the standard because he is a man after God's heart. Nevertheless, this man, David, in spite of his trust in God, in spite of his marvellous times of worship and his beautiful psalms, falls deeply into sin, not just sexual sin but a web of lies, deceit and premeditated murder to cover it up. I can understand him *looking* at Bathsheba, but to take her! He bypassed hordes of his own wives and concubines, all of whom were at his beck and call. We are told in verse 1 it was spring, when kings usually go to war, and David sent Joab while he stayed at home. It's the age-old truth, idle hands will soon find mischief.

If David can fall, so can we, which is precisely what Paul warns us about. *"Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."* (1 Corinthians 10:11,12). May God help us flee all forms of sexual immorality by fleeing to Him, our great and gracious Bridegroom. In our marriages, in our singleness, in our brokenness, in our need for repentance and healing, may Christ be glorified.

Pray

Father, grant me a greater capacity to understand and enjoy life in union with You. All my brokenness in the area of sexuality, I lay it all before You. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

How do you tell a king he has sinned woefully, knowing that it could cost you your life? Oh, I know, tell him a story. An old Native American proverb says, *“Those who tell the best stories rule the world.”* I read recently of a poll that asked 3,000 people who they would trust more as their leader, J.K. Rowling or Queen Elizabeth. Shockingly, by a landslide, people picked Jo Rowling. Why would people trust the storyteller over the woman who has spent her entire life in leadership? Because everyone loves a story, and most, if not all, are taken in by them. Jesus in the gospels was the greatest at this, He was the Master storyteller. His stories were soaked in a deep theology that has allowed us to live our lives differently as a result.

The Bible says, *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”* (Proverbs 27:6). I have known many people who refused to rebuke, or even caution, someone close to them, thinking they were being a friend by being non-condemning. A good friend does not let us continue on the path to our own destruction. Nathan was acting as a prophet, but he was also acting like a friend. Would that we had more prophet-friends. Would that we were a prophet-friend to one on the path of destruction. Again, the writer of Proverbs reminds us, *“Deliver those who are being taken away to death, and those who are staggering to slaughter, Oh hold them back.”* (Proverbs 24:11). We all need people in our lives who will call foul when they see it, people who love us enough not to see us fall and fail. Let’s face it, we all have blind spots and what I’ve come to learn, especially in leadership, is that usually the only one who can’t see their blind spot is the person themselves, most of the people around them see it all too clearly.

Alas, even forgiven sin has consequences and we see this in today’s reading when the little baby dies. It would be good to read David’s Psalm 51, his repentance after Nathan pointed out his sin.

Pray

Father, in these coming days, write stories of redemption that will reveal Your glory and showcase Your grace, leaving us revelling in Your goodness and rejoicing in Your timing. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT & RESPOND
What is God saying to me?

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Live

In this chapter of lust, incest and murder, I find myself asking how this got into the pages of Holy Writ. And yet it reveals to us the depth of sin in our own hearts, and for that we should be thankful. Is it any wonder Scripture tells us that the heart of man is desperately wicked. We are also told to guard our heart for out of it is the wellspring of life. Not only did Amnon have lust in his heart that led to raping his own sister, but Absalom held hatred in his heart that led to murder. David seemed to have little control over his family. He was a great leader and king, a powerful, ruthless, military power, but an absent, passive father. For over two years Absalom's heart held bitterness and anger, which grew silently and unchallenged, stemming into hatred and murder plans.

Oh, the heart. It would be a good exercise today to do a heart test because what's in will eventually come out. If there is anything in your heart that would destroy you if exposed, deal with it now! If you don't, there will come a day when you would give a thousand worlds to be back at this point.

As a pastor, I have always tried to give people the benefit of the doubt. I look for the best, which I think is good to do. When someone wronged me, I used to have a little habit of saying, "Ah well, at least they have a good heart." A friend challenged me about this many years ago. He said, "Phil, you always say that, and it's simply not true." I was shocked. He went on to say, "The Bible says, '*Out of the heart the mouth speaks,*' so if evil and wrong are flowing from the mouth, then it's a heart issue. You see, they don't have a good heart." I stood corrected, of course, and I've never forgotten this. Speech is a good indicator of the condition of the heart.

Pray

Father, I reaffirm that You are my priceless treasure and most desired inheritance. To know You is eternal life. To be loved by You is peace beyond understanding and riches beyond measure. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Today, one wonders again how to get through to a king who is fast taking over every country around him. Oh yes, that's right, just tell a really good story with all kinds of loaded intentions, that'll do the trick. When I read today's chapter I feel like I need to ask God to forgive me for double standards, as that's what seems to be happening in this reading. How can I judge people harshly for something while the same, and worse, is going on in my own life? If there is judgement in your heart, get rid of it. Matthew 7 says do not judge, for in the same manner we will be judged ourselves. Keeping myself and my own heart right is a big enough job for me without trying to sort out anyone else. Jim Collins in his book 'Good to Great' explains the difference between what he calls a 'level four' and 'level five' leader. A 'level four', when things go wrong will look out the window for someone to blame, and when things go right will look in the mirror and take all the credit. A 'level five' leader when things go wrong will look in the mirror, and when things go right will look out the window and give praise.

When David responded favourably to the woman of Tekoa and her son, this was what Joab behind her was waiting to hear. In this case, David ignored the cause of justice for the sake of family sympathy and loyalty. In personal relationships, it is a good and glorious thing to be generous with forgiveness and mercy when we are wronged. David, in this woman's story, guaranteed safety at the expense of justice, and immediately the woman captured him in her trap. This is one of the best gospel texts in the Old Testament. God has devised a way to bring the banished back to Him, that they might not be expelled from Him. The way is through the person and work of Jesus. He stood in the place of guilty sinners as He hung on the Cross and received the punishment that we deserved.

Pray

Father, You alone are the source of all life, so help me to drink from Your wellspring of life. All other cisterns fail me, and some would poison me, even though the waters are sweet. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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I have a really good friend who gave me some sound advice many years ago. He said, *“Phil, always be wary of someone who says, ‘If it were up to me.’”* You know what I’m saying, don’t you, that person at work who says, *“If it were up to me, I’d give you that promotion,”* or the so-called friend who says, *“If it were up to me, I’d let you join our little inner circle.”* What these people are really doing is trying to raise themselves up by putting others down, and it’s spawned in the depths of hell. Oh yes, ever so subtle but very dangerous are these people.

As we open chapter 15 today, we find subtle, dangerous Absalom. For crying out loud, he has only just been brought out of exile. One might think he would lie low for a while. Not this boy, he buys a chariot and horses, and hires himself fifty men as bodyguards to run ahead of him. He is a puffed-up, arrogant man full of his own self-importance with an agenda that he has perused over for a long time. Being a prince is not good enough for him, he wants to be king. He stands at the gate to intercept the people looking favour from his dad and says, *‘If it were up to me...’*

This chapter starts with Absalom standing at the gate and closes with him sitting on his father’s throne, a seat that was far too big for him. He could never fill his dad’s throne. This is when David penned Psalm 3; he was running for his life, literally. I have always called this psalm my *“Oh Lord”* psalm. There are three little sections. In the first *“Oh Lord”* section, he recognises the facts; humanly speaking, everyone is saying it’s over. The second section is the fact of who God is, *“But You, oh Lord, are a Shield about me, my Glory and the lifter of my head.”* And in the last little section, his confidence notches up when he hands it all to the Master. Do you need to follow this simple formula today? Cry sincerely, *“Oh Lord!”*

Pray

But You, Oh Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the Lord, and He answers me from His holy mountain. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

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Today's chapter has much to teach us about true friendship. The Book of Proverbs has a great deal to say about true friends, and other so-called friends. *"Many will seek the favour of a generous man, and every man is a friend to him who gives gifts."* (Proverbs 19:6). Today, we find out who David's real friends are. The amazing thing is that many of them are not even Jews, but Gentiles. A number of his true friends became his friend while he was facing adversity, fleeing for his life.

Many true friends can be found among the brothers and sisters with whom we worship and serve God. Who do you need to phone or meet today to celebrate friendship? My prayer is that God would give us the eyes of grace to see what He sees in other broken people like ourselves. Who have we branded hopeless with either our actual words or unspoken words? Who have we written off, or who have we named in our hearts as never to be trusted again? I know certain relationships call for great wisdom and clear boundaries, but I also know God is calling us to love others as He loves us, to show the same extravagant grace that He constantly lavishes on us, and to work for peace, and hope for reconciliation. I'm so thankful that God doesn't give up on us, coming after us when we were running away from Him as fast as we could. Overtly and covertly we tried to avoid and ignore Him, but He found us, He bound us to His heart through the cords of His love, and slowly but surely, He is changing us.

I'm sure, like me, you realise the journey from slavery to sonship isn't easy, but ever so liberating, for sure. We all know what it's like to be David. We've been failed and we've been hurt, we've been betrayed and suffered loss, but nothing like Jesus. I have been stressed and forsaken by some, but I have never sweat blood like my Saviour in Gethsemane. David saw things in these true friends that he had never seen before, just like Jesus saw something in us that no one else saw.

Pray

Father, none of us are beyond the need of Your grace, and none of us are beyond the reach of Your grace. Thank You. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Ahithophel proposes to secure a quick and easy victory for Absalom while the new, self-promoted king remains behind in Jerusalem. There is an interesting phrase that betrays his heart, *“I will strike only the king.”* This slip of the tongue showed that, deep in his heart, even Ahithophel knew that David was the real king. His plan would have worked, but God had other plans for David and for Absalom. Those plans were brought to pass through David's friends – Hushai; the priests, Zadok and Abiathar; their sons, Ahimaaz and Jonathan; a farmer's wife in Bahurim; and a number of other faithful friends and supporters of David. These friends knew how to swing the play to Absalom's ego and prideful heart. David's deliverance is the story of how God is always ahead of the smartest of men, them being clay in the hand of the potter.

This reminds me of an old hymn we used to sing, *“My times are in His hands, my God I leave them there.”* While you look at the temporal plan, God has much more for you in His eternal plans. I love this. It is a major biblical principle, no one can escape God, and all the plans of a person's heart must bow to the greatest plan of all. We are told Ahithophel set his house in order and went out and hanged himself. What a mystery and paradox, a weird mix of mind and madness. I love how Spurgeon puts it, *“Thousands set their houses in order but destroy their souls; they look well to their flocks and their herds, but not to their hearts' best interests. They gather broken shells with continuous industry, but they throw away priceless diamonds. They exercise forethought, prudence, care, everywhere but where they are most required. They save their money but squander their happiness; they are guardians of their estates, but suicides of their souls.”*

We close with a strange mix of names: Shobi, Machir, Barzillai. These men are given special mention because they helped David in a time of great need. God deemed it fit to record these otherwise unknowns for their friendship.

Pray

Father, this one passage alone affirms that Your plans are far more integral than mine. You called me to new life in Jesus. You call me Your heir and Jesus' joint heir. How marvellous. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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There is nothing more powerful than love, and the love of a parent for their child is a powerful force. We see this in the opening verses today. As the troops gathered to fight, the overwhelming thought in David's mind was the safety of his son, Absalom. This son was a scoundrel on every count, but he was still a son. Joab, Abishai and Ittai were fighting machines, men who served David. They were hard to control, and so David told them in the hearing of all the troops to deal gently with Absalom. The request fell on deaf ears. When the opportunity arose, Joab ran Absalom through with three daggers, threw his lifeless body in a pit, and buried him with rocks.

How sad is this chapter, which adds a kind of epitaph to Absalom's death. Verse 18 informs us that at one time Absalom had no sons, and fearing that he would be forgotten, he built a pillar for himself in the Valley of the Kings. By this, he thought, he would preserve his name. As it turned out, Absalom did have sons, but in his desire to possess his father's throne, he would be remembered as the traitor who died hanging from a tree, the most undignified death of all. His pillar in the Valley of the Kings would never erase the memory of his folly and death. I am reminded today that no matter what earthly pillar I build, my legacy will be what I have done for Christ, my trust is in God alone.

As the chapter closes, we have two runners carrying news, the first with news of victory, and the second an Ethiopian with added information of the demise of Absalom. David is distraught and declares the famous lament, *"Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you. Oh Absalom, my son, my son!"* I often think this strange because I'm not sure how the scene would have unfolded if Absalom had been captured alive. As a conspirator against the throne, his punishment would have been death, but that wasn't going to comfort David.

Pray

Father, You've made so much of me by Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I embrace You only in response to Your eternal embrace of everlasting love. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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David's excessive grief stunned the city. Victory came his way, but it seemed it was at too big a price. The problem was that David had literally thousands of soldiers who had just put their lives on the line for him, and yet this grief blotted all that out. I'm not a great fan of Joab, I have to say; he was a ruthless killing machine, but boy was he bold and courageous, and that you have to admire. He definitely landed a few home truths at David's door in verses 5 to 8.

In today's chapter, we see some truth coming out. The people who tried to gain from David's loss now have to eat humble pie as he returns to Jerusalem. First, David is confronted with Shimei, who cursed him on the way out of the city, but David forgives him (against some advice from Abishai). Second, he hears the real truth about loyal Mephibosheth. Of all these guys, I have to admit I love Barzillai. He is in his eighties and while others were trying to scheme and prosper out of the king's dilemma, this old guy was just plain faithful. Friends like Barzillai are few and far between and when you find one, cherish it because it is a rare commodity.

I will share a little thing I have found that has helped me around friends. Some are confidantes, they love me for who I am and vice versa. We hang out because we enjoy each other's company and seem to be better for that. Some people, however, are constituents, they are around me because they like what I do. Both are great people, but the second set of friends will change if I change direction; or, if someone does what I do better, they will quickly follow them. I have seen this trend in others and I've recognised it in myself. Keep your eyes open and see if I'm right; it's just my own little personal observation of working with people for many years now.

Pray

Father, there are some friends who come and go, friends for different seasons of life. There are a few who have remained faithful, friends for life. Thank You for them today, and thank You most of all for the Friend who sticks closer than a brother. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Troublemakers, they are age old and they seem to breed, don't they? Today we are introduced to one who is getting a rebellion underway. His name is Sheba. David knows speed is of the essence. He dare not allow Sheba time to gather a following, organise his army, and find fortified cities to hide in or fight from. The sooner David's army can overtake Sheba and deal with him, the better. So, David summons his new commander, Amasa, and instructs him to muster the military forces of Judah to pursue and subdue Sheba as quickly as possible. For some unexplained reason, Amasa does not assemble the armed forces of Judah in the three-day time frame set down by David. You can imagine how uneasy David must be, knowing that every hour Sheba is free, the threat to his kingdom increases. It must pain David greatly to finally admit Amasa is not coming, at least not for a while, and call for Abishai, the brother of Joab (and long-time pain in the neck for David). David would not ask Joab to do the job, for it would appear to be an admission that he has erred in firing Joab and replacing him with Amasa, but when Abishai goes out from Jerusalem, leading David's select warriors in pursuit of Sheba, he is accompanied by Joab.

Sorry for giving you a little synopsis here today, but the moral of the story is – it's so important to entrust yourself to the right people! As I read this chapter, it makes me glad about several things. I've never been more grateful for the family God has given me. We're a broken, but beloved, bunch; each of us is on the path of groaning and growing in grace. I'm also thankful for good friends to share the highs and lows of life. But I'm most thankful for the ways God shows me more of Himself, the Author and Perfecter of my faith. I can afford to be flexible about a lot of theological issues, but I cannot afford to be wrong about Him.

Pray

Father, continue to smite my heart with more of Your glory and Your grace. May the gospel keep getting bigger and bigger, and more and more liberating in my life. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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Live

I love the subject of covenant, it has been my pet study and theme for over forty years now. I love the origin, which is in God, of course, the great covenant Creator and Designer. Even when a covenant is entered into foolishly, as we see today with the Israelites and the Gibeonites, God expects us to keep our covenants.

How many times we have witnessed a marriage ceremony where a man and a woman enter into the covenant of marriage. Then, a few years later, one partner (or both) decide the marriage hasn't been all they hoped it would be. They feel the person they married isn't really the person they thought he or she was. So, they feel free to leave the marriage and go on to another. Now listen, I am so aware that divorce happens for all kinds of reasons and I can even give you some Biblical ones. I'm talking here about the issues that are resolvable if we were willing to work through them. If God expected the Israelites to keep their covenant with the Gibeonites, even though they were deceived by them and even though 400 years had gone by, how do you think God feels about the breaking of the covenant of marriage?

Covenant allows us to commune with a holy God. It's a dangerous thing to miss fellowship with Him. It's a deceptive thing to enjoy God but no longer actually need Him. It's a deceitful thing to be satisfied with correct theology about Him without experiencing rich communion with Him. And it's a deadly thing to find our ultimate satisfaction in anyone or anything else but Him. Only His steadfast love is better than life and only His mercy-drenched love fulfils us, nothing else will do. Someone once put it this way, in us all there is a God-shaped hole that only He can fill, a screaming, empty place that fits only Him. We try to cram it with human love, with life's comforts, or anything else that seems to fit, but we realise only God will do. He fills all things with Himself. I love this!

Pray

Father, I want what David had, an intense yearning and craving for You. Make me so thirsty that I'll remain insatiable until You saturate me with Your steadfast love and flood me with fresh grace. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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I love the psalms of David. In them we get a bird's eye view into the creaks and crannies of David's life. The anointing of God takes you up and up, and every time we read of this boy, we see God's hand in his life. He was a shepherd boy, who, without a premeditated plan, arrived on a battlefield to deliver lunches to his big brothers and ended up killing a giant with just a rag and a rock. He became a soldier, a powerful king, all the time an ordinary human man with all the weaknesses of such. But one of the things I love about him is that he was a songwriter and musician, and today we see that gift bubble to the top in power and splendour. If I could sing, I would sing this (actually, I have, but you're never going to hear that, it's a joyful noise!). David heralds God as a Rock, a Shield, a Fortress, and a Saviour. Beautiful words.

As David reflects on his rise to the throne, he understands that his rise to power and prominence is due to divine grace. He recalls the peril he was in and the death that seemed inevitable, and he praises God as his rescuer, his refuge, his source of strength and success. It is not as though David did nothing and waited for God to do everything, rather, in all David did, he knew it was God who preserved his life and God who promoted him to be the king of Israel. David exemplifies true humility here. Let us learn from him today. If a man of his stature and spiritual intensity can give God the glory, then certainly we should as well. As Paul once put it, *"For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"* (1 Corinthians 4:7). All good things, the Scripture reminds us, come down from above. He is the Father of lights and with Him there is no variableness nor any shadow of turning (James 1:17).

Pray

Father, You are my Rock, my Fortress and my Saviour. In You I find my protection. You are my Shield, the Power that saves me and my place of Safety. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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I am always interested in last words. Today, we have the greatest king who ever lived facing the end of life, and his last words are recorded. This chapter is a must read as David reminds us who is in control. God holds our very breath in His eternal hand, so David gives all glory to his God.

It interests me to see that there is a long account of David's friends and co-workers in life and battle. I have stood around far too many deathbeds. I have listened to final confessions and heard people tell their families that they love them. I have never heard anyone ask to check their post or their bank account or make sure the house is tidy and clean. Values change dramatically when the end is near.

I came on a book by Joseph Bayly called, 'The View from a Hearse'. The title intrigued me because I think we should all view life from the vantage point of a hearse. I had to see what this book was about. Three of Joseph Bayly's seven children died at a young age, and so he was intimately acquainted with the pain of death, all too familiar with what he called this enemy's "grim violence". But he was even more intimately acquainted with the One who conquered that enemy forever. The book is a simple, helpful meditation on death and grieving. He wrote it for those facing the death of a loved one, those still in the throes of grief, and those preparing to die. Joe knew that peace with death doesn't come from understanding everything that happens to us, but in knowing the God who is in control of everything. People nearing the time of their death usually have a very different set of priorities. Many people in their golden years look back on their earlier years and see things differently. David is among that smaller group of individuals who, in his golden years, sees things not only in terms of his past, but also in terms of his eternal hope. I love this about him!

Pray

Father, when all is said and done at the end of this life journey, only what we did for You will really matter. May I start by making this day count, and may all other days follow on with a fresh pursuit and priority to love, serve, and honour You with all the life I have left to live. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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As I study this chapter today, I learn one of the greatest lessons in all my life. Our sin, while it offends a righteous God, does not tie His hands. The opposite is true; God can use even our sin to accomplish His purposes and promises. We know that David is the best history has to offer us; we are often told there was no king like him, before or since, and David actually became the measuring rod for all others. While he was God's chosen king and a man after God's own heart, he was certainly not the Saviour of mankind. The salvation that God promised through David's seed would have to come through someone greater than him.

I sometimes think if my sin was printed in a book for all to read, I'd have to hide and never show my face again. David's sins are recorded for all to see and learn from. The amazing thing to observe from first and second Samuel is that while David sinned, and many suffered thereby, God sovereignly chose to bring about great blessings through his failures. Two of Israel's greatest blessings came about as a result of two of David's greatest sins. David's sin with Bathsheba resulted in the messianic line passing down through Bathsheba, and this marriage eventually produced the next king, Solomon. Today's chapter records David's sin in numbering the Israelite warriors, which by the way, resulted in the purchase of the threshing floor of Araunah, the site for the temple that was to be constructed under King Solomon.

I begin to see a pattern emerge and realise how God can, and does, turn evil to good. God can bring beauty out of dirty old ashes. He can make rivers run in the desert and mountains into flat plains. The salvation of the Gentiles was due, in part, to the rejection of Jesus Christ as Messiah by the Jews, according to Romans 11. On and on we could go, but I think you get my drift. As we close out this amazing book today, let's lift God's name high.

Pray

Father, it's only because of Your everlasting covenant with me in Jesus that I dare hope for such standing in grace. You've forgiven my unbelief and redeemed me to You. You are good all the time, and all the time, You are good. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

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