

**2 SAMUEL
FOR YOU**

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2 Samuel For You

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Published by:
The Good Book Company

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New Zealand: www.thegoodbook.co.nz



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(Hardcover) ISBN: 9781784982003

(Paperback) ISBN: 9781784981990

Design by André Parker

Printed in India

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Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 translation (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- ESV: English Standard Version
- NASB: New American Standard Bible

SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *2 Samuel For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION TO 2 SAMUEL

2 Samuel is full of action. We lurch from one dramatic moment to another. We move from victory to defeat and back to victory; from civil war to national victory and back to civil war again. We read of domestic dramas and national crises; miraculous interventions and faithful suffering. The big beasts of Israelite politics square off against one another on numerous occasions. It can all be somewhat breathless.

But this is no simple fairy tale with characters drawn in black and white. Alongside all the action is a good deal of ambiguity. Yes, we meet heroes and villains. But more often we meet people somewhere in between. We encounter heroic loyalty and treacherous betrayals. We find people whose lives are both good and bad, ugly and beautiful, selfless and self-serving—people like us.

But through it all we see the hand of God, the true hero of the story. David sings a song at the end of his life in 2 Samuel 22. At the beginning, in the middle and at the end is the affirmation, “The LORD is my rock”. It’s the refrain of the song and it’s the refrain of David’s life.

For David is God’s anointed king. The word for “anointed One” in Hebrew is “messiah” and in Greek it’s “christ”. So David is God’s christ (small “c”)—his anointed king. It means 2 Samuel is a mirror in which we see Jesus, the ultimate Christ (capital “C”). Again and again the story of 2 Samuel enables us to see the glory of Christ. When David is strong and faithful and victorious, he prefigures the strength and faithfulness and victory of Jesus. When David is selfish and faithless, we feel our need for a better king—the kind of king we see in David’s greater Son. And sometimes, when David is weak and beset by troubles, we see the suffering of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who died for his people.

In David’s final words he says:

“When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,

he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.” (2 Samuel 23:3-4)

This is David’s philosophy of kingship—the “mission statement” of David’s monarchy. But it only truly finds fulfillment in Jesus, the true Son of David. As you read 2 Samuel, look out for the “the light of morning at sunrise ... the brightness after rain that brings grass from the earth” as you see the glory of Christ reflected in the story of his ancestor David.

Two Notes on the Book

Who wrote the books of 1 and 2 Samuel? The short answer is that we do not know. They are named after the prophet Samuel, but this does not mean he wrote them. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, they are called “1 and 2 Kingdoms”. And Samuel’s death is described in 1 Samuel 25:1, so he could not have written about the events after

this point. Nevertheless, Samuel may have been one source for the books; 1 Chronicles 29:29 talks about “the records of Samuel the seer”. The books were probably compiled from different sources.

And what kind of genre is this? A useful description is that this is a *preached history*.

In other words, it is real his-

tory. It is not a collection of parables or fables—the events it describes really did happen. But it is more than a record of events. 1 Chronicles 29:29 says: “As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer.”

Again and again
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There were other historical annals. The writer of Samuel is doing more than creating a historical record. He is writing with a purpose. What he records is never less than historical, but as we read it, we are doing much more than reading history. We are being shown who God is and how he rules his people; and we are being shown Jesus, his Christ.

1. THE MESS OF HISTORY

What is God doing in the world today? The central claim of Christianity is that Jesus is Lord. But that claim seems laughable. Where's the evidence? It doesn't seem as if *anyone* is in control, let alone Jesus. Maybe you long for friends to be saved, you long for the church to grow, you long for justice to be done, you long for the Christ to be honoured. But people continue to ignore the Christ. The media mocks Christianity. **Tyrants**[†] act with apparent **impunity**. The world is in a mess.

Long ago God rescued his people Israel from slavery in Egypt through **Moses**. He gave them the promised land through **Joshua**. Then about 1,000 years BC they asked for a king. So **Saul** was chosen and became the king of Israel. His reign started well, but he decided to disobey God. So God told the prophet **Samuel** to **anoint** David as his successor. Saul got wind of this and so for many years David lived as a fugitive as Saul tried to hunt down the rival to his throne. The book of 1 Samuel ended with Saul, facing defeat in battle, committing suicide.

2 Samuel 1 – 5 tells the story of the transition from the end of Saul's reign to David's enthronement as king over all Israel. And frankly *it's a mess*. It's not a neat transfer of power. It's not even clear who are the good guys. It's the story of David and his army commander, Joab, and Ish-Bosheth, Saul's son, and his army commander, Abner. Who are the good guys? Judge for yourself.

[†] Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 169).

The story is arranged in a **chiastic** structure (a common Hebrew literary device in which the second half of story or poem mirrors the first half):

- a. David executes the (purported) murderer of Saul (**1:1-16***)
 - b. David laments Saul and **Jonathan** (**1:17-27**)
 - c. A struggle between the houses of David and Saul (**2:1 – 3:1**)
 - d. David's house (**3:2-5**)
 - c*. A struggle between Abner and Joab (**3:6-30**)
 - b*. David **laments** Abner (**3:31-39**)
 - a*. David executes the murderers of Ish-Bosheth, Saul's son (**4:1-12**)

David Executes a Murderer

2 Samuel begins with an **Amalekite** coming from the battlefield to David and honouring him as king (**1:1-2**). When he comes to David, David repeats **Eli's** question after a previous battle with the **Philistines**: "What happened?" (1 Samuel 4:16; 2 Samuel **1:4**). The first question marked the end of a priestly house; the second, the end of a royal house.

The Amalekite tells David that Saul is dead (**v 3-4**). "How do you know?" asks David (**v 5**). *Because I killed him*, is basically what the man says in reply (**v 6-10**). We know from 1 Samuel 31 (as presumably David did not) the story of Saul's death. So, as the Amalekite recounts the story, we realise his version is different. This is reinforced by the threefold repetition of "the young man who brought this report" (2 Samuel **1:5, 6, 13**). The narrator keeps reminding us that this is only his "report" and not necessarily the facts.

The young man claims that it was he (and not Saul) who delivered the final blow (**v 4-9**). "I happened to be" on a battlefield stretches credibility (**v 6**). More likely he was **scavenging** among the dead. Now he has brought the crown and royal armband to David, expecting to be

* All 2 Samuel verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

well rewarded for his actions (v 10). He assumes David is desperate to become king and will be delighted with the man who paves the way. But the narrator has already hinted that this will not go well for this Amalekite, for David has just returned from “striking down the Amalekites” (v 1).

But we also know from 1 Samuel that David has consistently *refused* to snatch the crown from Saul. Indeed David was conscience-stricken after merely cutting off the corner Saul’s robe (1 Samuel 24:5). “Why weren’t you afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD’s anointed?” he asks in genuine puzzlement (2 Samuel 1:14). David checks his background (v 13). “The son of a foreigner” is the term for a sojourner, a Gentile who had made his home among God’s people. In other words, David checks this Amalekite understands the import of what he claims to have done. In **verses 15-16** David orders, “Go, strike him down” (echoing **verse 1**). The irony is, of course, that the young man didn’t kill Saul. He loses his life for a lie.

Saul lost his kingdom because he plundered the Amalekites, against God’s strict orders. Now an Amalekite has plundered him. Saul claimed to have wiped out the Amalekites, but he did not (1 Samuel 15:8-9, 13; 28:18). Now an Amalekite claims to have wiped out Saul, but he did not. More significant are the opening words of 2 Samuel:

“After the death of Saul, David returned from striking down the Amalekites and stayed in **Ziklag** two days” (1:1).

Saul died because he failed to strike down the Amalekites, and so the christ of Israel (her anointed king) is dead. Immediately, David returns to centre stage. And what has he been doing? Striking down Amalekites. The message is clear: *He is the christ that Saul was not.*

On the first Good Friday the ultimate Christ died—not for his disobedience, but for ours. And hope was gone. But two days later (on “the third day”) Christ returned. Paul asserts that Christ rose on the third day “according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:4). Perhaps the words “on the third day” in 2 Samuel 1:2 in the context of David’s rise to kingship is one prophetic pointer towards that claim.

David Laments Saul and Jonathan

David does not rejoice that his adversary is dead. Instead, he and his men respond with impromptu grief (v 11-12). This is followed later by a composed song of lament for Saul and his son Jonathan (v 17-27). Saul may have been a rogue, but he was the king of Israel.

Imagine a prime minister or president whom you personally dislike is assassinated. You would naturally respond with shock, outrage and sadness. We honour the post, even if we don't honour the post-holder. This is not the time to linger on Saul's faults. David proclaims his virtues along with the more evident virtues of Jonathan (v 19, 22-24). He doesn't want Israel's enemies to hear the news (v 20-21). He adds his own personal grief at the loss of his friend Jonathan (v 25-26).

Verse 21 creates a tragic image. Shields were often covered with leather, which needed to be oiled. But "the shield of Saul" now lies in the dust. But Saul, too, was anointed with oil as God's king to be a shield for the people. Now the shield-which-is-Saul lies in the dust. **Verse 22** celebrates Jonathan's bow and Saul's sword, which have been features of the story (1 Samuel 20:20, 36 and 17:38-39). Were Saul and Jonathan undivided as 2 Samuel 1:23 suggests? Not always. Saul twice tried to kill his son (1 Samuel 14:39, 44; 20:33-34). But Jonathan remained loyal and died fighting alongside his father (2 Samuel 1:23).

The phrase "your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women" in **verse 26** has been taken to suggest a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan. But in a military culture and a culture in which marriage could be a matter of political expedience, the bonds between fellow warriors might well be deeply felt. The suggestion, in fact, says more about our own culture's sexualisation of relationships.

The Struggle Between the Houses

In 2:1-4 the men of the tribe of Judah anoint David as king. This section starts with David "enquiring" of the LORD. The Hebrew word has the

same root as “Saul”. Saul was the king the people had “asked for”, but Saul himself did not “ask of” the LORD as now David does.

Hebron was a key location in the story of the **Patriarchs** and the place of their burial. God’s choice of this location links David’s story to **Abraham’s** (as Matthew 1:1 does). David is fulfilling the promises made to Abraham: through David God’s people will live in the land under God’s blessing (2 Samuel 7:1).

Throughout the period of the **judges** and into Saul’s reign, the tribes of Israel had remained to a large degree like independent political entities. They were more like the nation states making up the European Union than counties in the nation of Great Britain. So for one tribe to acknowledge David as king did not mean he was king of Israel, especially as that one tribe was his own.

The men of Jabesh Gilead were allied to Saul. We might suppose they would be David’s natural enemies. But David commends them because they showed kindness or **covenant** loyalty to Saul (**2:4-5**). David prays that God will show the same kindness and covenant loyalty to them (**v 6-7**). David is king, but he is keen to heal the divisions in the kingdom by honouring those who have honoured his predecessor. He is a picture of Jesus, who rises victorious to offer grace to his enemies—those allied to Satan.

Abner
knew David
was God’s
anointed...
but he
rejects him.

But David’s **accession** is not going to be straightforward. While David is being crowned by the tribe of Judah, Abner, Saul’s army commander, is crowning Ish-Bosheth, Saul’s son (**v 8-11**). Abner knew David was God’s anointed—he would have heard Saul acknowledge as much in 1 Samuel 24:20 and 26:25. But he rejects him. David is God’s anointed. Ish-Bosheth is Abner’s anointed.

The result is a stand-off between the armies of Abner and Joab (**2:12-13**). “Abner said to Joab, ‘Now let the young men arise and

hold a contest before us” (v 14, NASB). The word “contest” is normally used for play. It shares the same root as “laughter”. It’s the word behind **Isaac’s** name (Genesis 21:3-6). The same word is used to describe the Philistines bringing **Samson** out in the temple of **Dagon** for their “amusement” (Judges 16:25-27). It seems Abner is suggesting a tournament somewhat akin to the medieval tournaments in which knights proved their prowess.

But this tournament turns deadly. At the end of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Prince Hamlet and Laertes have a sporting dual, but Laertes has secretly poisoned the end of his sword so the dual turns from being fun to being fatal—especially as they swap swords in the course of their fight. In 2 Samuel 2 both sides are intent on deadly betrayal and so both fall victim to the other.

The fight is clearly intended to be symbolic. Perhaps Abner intended it as a non-deadly version of Goliath’s challenge in 1 Samuel 17, a winner-takes-all combat. Perhaps the hope was that this military diversion would create time for a political solution. But we have a divided Israel “Isaacing” to determine who are the true sons of Abraham. Each side is represented by twelve men fighting to determine who are the true tribes of Israel.

What is the result? All 24 fall in a bizarre, almost synchronised, act of simultaneous mutual stabbing (2 Samuel 2:15-16). The true Israel will not be determined by civil war. Sadly, Abner and Joab do not pick up on the clues and a brutal civil war is what follows (v 17).

Joab wins the battle and Abner is forced to flee, pursued by Asahel, Joab’s brother. Asahel is described as being “as fleet-footed as a wild **gazelle**” (v 18-19), which may not bode well for him since the last person likened to a gazelle lies fallen on the heights of Israel (1:19). Abner does all he can to avoid fighting Asahel (2:20-22), but Asahel refuses to give up his pursuit. So eventually Abner kills Asahel by thrusting the butt of his spear through his stomach (v 23). Joab corners Abner, but Benjaminite warriors rally round Abner (v 24-25). Things look set for a bloody showdown. But then Abner says, “Must

the sword devour for ever? Don't you realise that this will end in bitterness? How long before you order your men to stop pursuing their fellow Israelites?" (v 26) Joab sees the sense of this and calls off the pursuit (v 27-32).

"The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time," we are told in 3:1. Earlier we were told that Ish-Bosheth reigned for two years (2:10). But throughout this period "David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker" (3:1).

David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

David's Dangerous House

These verses are at the centre of the chiasmic structure—and often that means they are the most significant. Yet in dramatic terms they are the least exciting. We meet a similar summary at the end (the climax?) of this section in 5:13-16. It may be intended to signify the power of David, with his sexual potency mirroring his growing political potency. But at a political level, the multiplication of sons bodes ill for the future. David has six sons, each by a different mother. Already the succession is looking complicated. At a spiritual level, it sets an example to his sons which will reap still further disasters for God's people (1 Kings 11:1-13).

What appears expedient in the moment can often have disastrous long-term results. And that is as true in parenting as with anything else. Think about your own parenting, if you have children. A repeated failure to enact discipline because you're tired or in a hurry, or the expedient act which is a bad example, may reap bitter fruit in years to come.

Questions for reflection

1. The setting at the start of 2 Samuel is one of conflict. What hostility or conflict do you face in your everyday life? How can you understand the causes of those conflicts, pray about them, and work to resolve them in light of what we have read so far?
2. War, scheming, lies and brutal murder are all described here, and yet from this mess, God's chosen king is slowly raised up to power. How can we reconcile these gritty facts of history with the belief that a good God is in control of all things?
3. How does this passage suggest we should pray for our world, our church, and our leaders?