

Battles Won

2 Samuel 8, 10

A customer was whining incessantly to the waiter. First, he asked that the air conditioning be turned up because he was too hot, then he asked it be turned down cause he was too cold, and so on for about half an hour. The waiter was very patient as he walked back and forth in response to the customer's demands. Finally, a second customer asked him why he didn't throw the pest out. "Oh, I really don't mind," said the waiter with a smile. "We don't even have an air conditioner."

That story reminded me of a true experience. Some years back, the church I served was hosting a Christian opera singer. He turned out to be a bit of a primadonna, whining in advance about having a cold, just in case his voice did not resonate with what HE called "its typical brilliance." As I tried to pre-set his microphone before the performance, he whined, "Not enough treble!" I adjusted the knob accordingly. Then, he'd whine, "Too much treble!" so I'd back it off. He went back and forth until, just to amuse myself, I lifted my fingers off the knob and only pretended to respond to seven or eight more of his fussy demands until he finally declared, "Perfect!"

Nobody likes whiner. I have preached many messages to you folks without engaging in any whining, but today I have to whine a little. This message was haaa-rrd to organize. First of all, the text is about David's battles. He defeats nations that don't mean anything to people today led by characters whose names we cannot pronounce. How does one apply that? It is history at its most tedious. The lessons don't exactly leap out. Secondly, the author of 2 Samuel tends to organize his story-telling according to certain literary themes that he desires to present rather than chronologically. It is difficult at times to determine in what order things even happened.

Chapter 8 includes an overview of David's victories in battle, some of which have already been discussed in detail in earlier chapters and some which will be discussed in detail in later chapters. Other conquests are simply recorded here for the official record and won't be discussed in detail at all. Some of these battles represent the initial conquest of the Land that *JEHOVAH* commanded back in the days of Joshua, but that had never been completed until David finished the job. Some reflect a more empirical intent on David's part as he posts garrisons in distant territories.

What is clear is that the author strategically situates, in his narrative, this summary of David's battles won so that the reader will recognize that ultimately, these victories fulfill God's promise to establish David as a powerful king. In chapter 7, David decided that he wanted to build a temple for *JEHOVAH* in which to house the Ark of the Covenant. He felt bad that he was living in a fine "cedar palace" while the Ark was sitting in a tent. Through the prophet Nathan, David learned that he was not to build such a temple, but that God would build for him a great dynasty.

The latter half of chapter 7 is David's prayerful response to that prophetic word. David praises God for His goodness. Then, he prays that God will fulfill what He has already promised to do. To pray according to God's promises was a way for David to ally himself with God's purposes. So, while some of these battles recorded in chapter 8 have to do with the old unfinished business, others have to do with David working out God's purposes of increasing his kingdom.

I. David's Victories Secure an Empire

A. The Philistines Defeated verse 1

¹In the course of time, David defeated the Philistines and subdued them, and he took Metheg Ammah from the control of the Philistines.

The Philistines were Israel's greatest nemesis since the days of the Judges. Samson battled the Philistines. The Philistines killed Eli's two sons in battle and indirectly caused Eli's death when the old man broke his neck falling out of a chair upon hearing that they had taken the Ark of the Covenant. Saul was regularly at war with the Philistines. David forged his reputation by killing the Philistine giant, Goliath, and he solidified his reputation as a warrior in additional skirmishes with the Philistines. The Philistines eventually defeated Israel, killing Saul and Jonathan. In one inglorious moment, while fleeing for his life from Saul, David fled to Gath in the land of the Philistines and had to pretend to be a lunatic to get out of town alive.

The victory over the Philistines in our text was described earlier in 2 Samuel. When David became king, they decided to attack him before he got his feet under him. They failed, and David drove them out of the land. But, here we learn that at some point, David took "Metheg Ammah" which means, "the mother city." From the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles, we know this was Gath itself. With control of this major city, David now wielded control over much of the nation of Philistia, which lay to the west, between Israel and the Great (or Mediterranean) Sea.

B. The Moabites Defeated verse 2

²David also defeated the Moabites. He made them lie down on the ground and measured them off with a length of cord. Every two lengths of them were put to death, and the third length was allowed to live. So the Moabites became subject to David and brought tribute.

At one time, David had been on good terms with the Moabites. In fact, he was one-eighth Moabite. His great-grandma was Ruth. When David feared that Saul might harm his family, he sent them to Moab where the king protected them. Something dramatic must have occurred for that relationship to go so far south. One Jewish tradition says that the king betrayed this covenant and killed David's parents. That would do it, but it is just a tradition and cannot be substantiated.

David executed two-thirds of the Moabites. Commentators who feel compelled to justify David call this an act of mercy. After all, he did spare a third of them. Other commentators treat this act as an atrocity. Still others suggest it might have been a necessary brutality to secure submission from Moab. It intrigues me a little, but in the final analysis, I conclude that it does not matter. Ultimately, the story of God's faithfulness to David is not contingent on the king's perfect choices or moral flawlessness. God was bringing His purposes to pass. At times, David presented himself to God as a useful vessel. Other times, he presented himself as something less. Still other times, it's hard to say. In any event, Moab was now controlled by David, thus securing and expanding Israel's eastern border.

C. The Arameans Defeated verses 3-6; chapter 10

³Moreover, David fought Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah, when he went to restore his control along the Euphrates River. ⁴David captured a thousand of his chariots, seven thousand charioteers and twenty thousand foot soldiers. He hamstringed all but a hundred of the chariot horses.

⁵When the Arameans of Damascus came to help Hadadezer king of Zobah, David struck down twenty-two thousand of them. ⁶He put garrisons in the Aramean kingdom of Damascus, and the Arameans became subject to him and brought tribute. The LORD gave David victory wherever he went.

This conflict with the Arameans (or Syrians) was just one incident from a greater conflict that was initially with the Ammonites, who only hired the Arameans as mercenaries. But, since the Arameans were a more substantial force and since David used the occasion to expand his borders, the official chronicle of David's conquests emphasizes his victory over that nation.

The whole story is told in chapter 10. David was an ally of the Ammonite king, Nahash. When Nahash died, David sent a delegation with his condolences to the new king, Nahash's son, Hanun. Perhaps, because David was becoming so powerful or perhaps, from innate cynicism, the Ammonite nobles gave their king some brutally bad advice:

When David's men came to the land of the Ammonites, ³the Ammonite nobles said to Hanun their lord, "Do you think David is honoring your father by sending men to you to express sympathy? Hasn't David sent them to you to explore the city and spy it out and overthrow it?" ⁴So Hanun seized David's men, shaved off half of each man's beard, cut off their garments in the middle at the buttocks, and sent them away. – 2 Samuel 10:2-4

Dumb move. To shave a man forcibly was to take his dignity. To shave half of his beard just made the man look silly. And, of course, to send him on his way with his backside exposed was to humiliate him. When David received word that his whole delegation has been humiliated, he told them to wait in Jericho until their beards grew back, and then to return to Israel.

David did not immediately assemble his armies for war, but the Ammonites knew that they had become "a stench in David's nostrils" (2 Samuel 10:4). Perhaps, they suspected he was planning retaliation, for they hired thousands of Arameans (or Syrians) and thousands of other soldiers from other kingdoms. Only as he saw that the Ammonites were making overtures of war did David gather his troops and order his general of the armies, Joab, to take the battle to Ammon.

As Joab approached, the Ammonites and the Syrians divided into two groups, intending to attack the Israelites from the front and the rear. Joab divided his force into two groups. He led one division against the Syrians who were in the open field, while his brother Abishai led the other group against the Ammonites, who were backed up against the gate of their major city, Rabbah. The mercenary Arameans fled Joab's forces. When the Ammonites saw this, they lost heart and ducked into the city. Joab seemed content with this outcome and returned to Jerusalem.

Now, the story becomes less about the Ammonites and more about the Arameans (or Syrians), who have empirical ambitions of their own. The story begins to parallel the account in chapter 8. Hadadezer, king of Zobah, becomes the chief adversary of Israel. Zobah is only one of many tribes in Syria. Hadadezer solicits the help of various other Syrian cronies, but they are all routed. David stations garrisons in formerly Aramean-controlled territory, and the people there also pay him tribute. Israel's northern border now extends towards the banks of the Euphrates River.

D. The Edomites Defeated verses 13, 14

¹³And David became famous after he returned from striking down eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.

¹⁴He put garrisons throughout Edom, and all the Edomites became subject to David. The LORD gave David victory wherever he went.

As king, David is credited with the Edomite victory even though the actual military campaign was executed by Abishai and Joab. The placement of Israelite garrisons in Edomite territory served to secure and expand Israel to the south. David has now subjected the nations around him in all four directions. Geographical Israel is now more than twice as large as it was when David became king. This was the dawn of Israel's Golden Age. God was keeping His word to David, but, more than that, these new national boundaries to David's realm quite precisely fulfilled a much older promise, the one first worded to Abraham and reiterated in the days of Moses and Joshua:

... Every place where you set your foot will be yours: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea. – Deuteronomy 11:24

II. David's Victories from Two Vantage Points

A. David Was Driven by a Variety of Motives

In many of these ventures, we must assume that David was driven by a purposeful pursuit of what God had promised. God had made certain promises to David himself including a promise to make him a great dynasty. God had made promises to Abraham and to the nation of Israel regarding a precise geographical allotment of land. There is a sense in which David knew that he was pursuing a divine agenda. By expanding Israel's boundaries, David was in the will of God.

It is worth noting, however, that David was reluctantly dragged into one of these battles. He did not choose the fight with the Ammonites. In fact, David thought the Ammonites were his friends. But, one Ammonite king's foolish miscalculation resulted in David's encounter with the Arameans and in the single largest land acquisition of all of David's military campaigns.

David was driven by his dreams of building a house for God. God told him that he would not get to build the temple even though it was good that he desired to do so. Still, David planned for that temple right up to the day of his death when he handed his plans over to Solomon. Even as David was plundering the spoils of war, he was doing so with one eye on the finished temple:

⁷David took the gold shields that belonged to the officers of Hadadezer and brought them to Jerusalem. ⁸From Tebah and Berothai, towns that belonged to Hadadezer, King David took a great quantity of bronze.

⁹When Tou king of Hamath heard that David had defeated the entire army of Hadadezer, ¹⁰he sent his son Joram to King David to greet him and congratulate him on his victory in battle over Hadadezer, who had been at war with Tou. Joram brought with him articles of silver and gold and bronze.

¹¹King David dedicated these articles to the LORD, as he had done with the silver and gold from all the nations he had subdued: ¹²Edom and Moab, the Ammonites and the Philistines, and Amalek. He also dedicated the plunder taken from Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah.

Whether it was the ornamental gold shields of enemy officers, the contents of the storehouses of vanquished cities, the tribute paid him by defeated nations or the gifts given to him by those who wanted to be his buddies, David dedicated all of these treasures to the LORD. One day, some of these spoils of war would be placed in the temples "as is" while others were refashioned into materials for the building proper of the temple as well as for many of its furnishings.

B. God Was Simply Working Out a Promise

All in all, David is given high marks for how he led his nation during this period that he was vanquishing foreign lands. "David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people" (2 Samuel 8:15). That is not to say that every decision David made was unsullied. There is a degree of moral ambiguity in some instances in the text we have looked at today, but even if you don't buy that, know this. It was during this same period of David's reign, while God was expanding the boundaries of his kingdom, that David committed his most heinous sin of all.

Next week, we are going to look at a story that depicts David as the nicest, sweetest, most sentimental king who ever sat on a throne as he remembers a promise that he made many years ago to his dear old friend, Jonathan. Then, in the very next message, you might find that you are grateful that you don't even know anyone so low-life and despicable as this very same David.

There is much to admire about David, but there are a few things to despise. The true value of all biblical narrative is not how it props up human beings as though they were saints. Rather, it testifies to the consistent faithfulness of God even when working with flawed vessels. Twice in the midst of this bloody narrative appears a reminder of Who was really winning these battles:

The LORD gave David victory wherever he went. – 2 Samuel 8:6 & 8:14

I want to close with two lessons that seem to flow uncontrived from this text:

1) Even when God makes a promise and the outcome is clearly in His hands, we are still to pour ourselves into His purposes as if the outcome were up to us. That is how we ally our lives and our energies with the kingdom of heaven. David was promised a dynasty. He still fought wars and established garrisons in hostile territories. God will have His way with or without me. The question is "Do I want my legacy to be that of a useful vessel to His purposes or of an unruly hindrance?" To presumptuously excuse myself from the Lord's labor, knowing that it will be done with or without me, is as sinful as simply disbelieving His promises in the first place.

2) The disorder produced in this world by virtue of the fact that we are a sinful bunch renders it inevitable that there will be human suffering as well as many violent collisions among people. Whether or not the motives of the God's people are always pure, God's Providence moves forward. Even the sin of God's covenant nation could not thwart the divine plan to bring a Savior to the world. Even the habitual sinfulness and weakness of God's children will not nullify His promise to finish the work that He began in us in Christ Jesus. That is not to say that our love of righteousness is irrelevant to God. He will not be mocked. But His grace is greater than our sin.

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