

2 Samuel

Out of Every Adversity

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Introduction: From Theft to Lie

I have stolen the title of this exposition from the RSV rendering of David's words in 2 Samuel 4:9. There David uses an oath formula and calls on Yahweh 'who has redeemed my life out of every adversity'. This was no flippant remark. Anyone who reads 1 Samuel 18-31 understands it. This formula, however, does not describe a mere stage or segment of David's life but his whole life. His statement in 2 Samuel 4:9 comes during his early reign in Hebron, but he uses the *very same words* at the end of his reign (1 Kings 1:29). David and distress walked together his whole life.¹ Since David is the premier human character of 2 Samuel, it seems fitting to steal his life-description for the title of this commentary.

However, let me hasten to add that 2 Samuel is not about David. If you think it is, you will not understand it. I get worried when someone says to me (e.g., after a 2 Samuel exposition), 'Oh, I just love anything about David.' I understand and yet I cringe. The church seemingly cannot divorce herself from this *People* magazine approach to biblical narrative. Again and again as we read 2 Samuel we have to shake ourselves and say, 'This is not about David; it is not even about covenant kings; it is about a covenant God who makes covenant promises to a covenant king through whom he will preserve his covenant people.' That must be our perspective.

Before jumping into the text, I want to say a word about the major divisions of 2 Samuel. In *Looking on the Heart* (Vol 1, pp. 11-12), I argued that First and Second Samuel are to be considered one work with clearly indicated divisions, the first four of which terminate with a summary section. Hence 1-2 Samuel breaks down like this:

1. Joab instinctively linked David's life with hardship. Note his rebuke of David in 19:7 (Heb., v.8): 'And this disaster will be worse than all the disaster that has come upon you from your youth until now.' Clyde Francisco draws attention to the graphic expression the Chronicler uses to describe David's days: 'the circumstances [lit., times] that came over him' (1 Chron. 29:30), i.e., as waves run to the shore, perhaps suggesting wave upon wave of difficulty ('1-2 Chronicles,' *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. [Nashville: Broadman, 1970], 3:360).

Textual Block	Primary Focus	Summary Section
1 Samuel 1-7	Samuel	1 Sam. 7:15-17
1 Samuel 8-14	Saul	1 Sam. 14:47-52
1 Samuel 15-2 Samuel 8	David / I	2 Sam. 8: 15-18
2 Samuel 9-20	David / II	2 Sam. 20: 23-26
2 Samuel 21-24	Kingdom	

This means that 2 Samuel begins in the middle of the third block of material and that the major divisions come at the end of chapters 8 and 20. On this basis I propose the following overall outline for 2 Samuel:

- A Man After God's Heart, chs. 1-8
- A Servant under God's Rod, chs. 9-20
- A Kingdom in God's Hands, chs. 21-24

I want you to read on. But it's a sad thing about 2 Samuel — the book begins with a lie.²

2. Regarding date and authorship I simply repeat what I wrote in my volume on 1 Samuel: We know neither the date nor author(s) of 1 and 2 Samuel. Some scholars hold to a very complex compositional history that places anything like the present form of the text into the Babylonian exile or beyond (see Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1968], 217-26). Others would hold that, excepting minor alterations (like the note of 1 Sam. 27:6b?), the books seem to date close to the end of David's reign' (William Sanford Lazor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 229). See also H. Wolf, 'Samuel, 1 and 2,' ZPEB, 5:261.

11. Up With Covenant! 2 Samuel 9

Franklin Roosevelt made a speech in Pittsburgh in 1932 advocating restraint in government spending. Four years later he wanted to speak there in favor of government spending. He asked one of his advisors how he could manage an about-face without seeming two-faced. The counsel was straight-forward: Deny you made a speech in Pittsburgh in 1932.¹

I suppose David could have done something like that. Now that his kingship was firmly in place and Saulide opposition (e.g. Abner and Ishbosheth, chs. 2-4) had been quelled or eliminated, he might have recalled his covenant with Jonathan (1 Sam. 20) and said, 'That was only a ceremony - passing between two halves of an animal; besides, that was over fifteen years ago.' David could have reasoned that considerations of dynastic security precluded showing favors to survivors of a previous, rival dynasty. However much David would have liked to honor his word, current circumstances forced him to renege.

Such, however, was not David's way. Instead he practiced covenant loyalty, and 2 Samuel 9 is the record of it. At first blush this chapter does not appear to be very theological or devotional. But, if I might anticipate, it has a good bit to teach us about covenant. Above all, 2 Samuel 9 asserts that life under the covenant gives you a firm place to stand and ought to evoke a sense of security, privilege, and wonder from you. Let us work through the narrative by means of three major observations.²

1. Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Anecdotes* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 271.
2. With 2 Samuel 9 we enter another major section of 1-2 Samuel. In-house jargon calls these chapters (2 Sam. 9-20, along with 1 Kings 1-2) the Succession Narrative, a section or document 'written to show how it was that Solomon, and not one of David's other sons, followed his father on the throne' (Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 41). The problem (as Gordon and others point out) is that the Succession Narrative doesn't focus on succession; see David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David*, JSOT Supplement Series 6 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 82-84. Hence I dispense with the hypothesis. My rubric for these chapters is 'A Servant Under God's Rod', and I would break them down into the following broad sections:

The Power Covenant Exercises (9:1-4)

David's question was: 'Is there yet someone left in the household of Saul that I might deal with him in a *hesed*-way for Jonathan's sake?' (v.1).³ You may wonder why I drag in covenant as the central theme of this passage. Because *hesed* (three times, vv. 1, 3, 7) is the devoted love promised within a covenant; *hesed* is love that is willing to commit itself to another by making its promise a matter of solemn record. So when David mentions *hesed* and 'for Jonathan's sake' we know he is alluding to the sacred commitment Jonathan had asked David to make in 1 Samuel 20:15: 'And you must not cut off your devoted love from my house forever, not even when Yahweh cuts off each one of David's enemies from the face of the ground.'⁴ And David had gone on oath about that. Now he is preparing to fulfil that pledge.

David's officials locate a certain Ziba, a servant connected to Saul's family, and summon him for a royal interview. David inquires and Ziba informs him that there is still one of Jonathan's sons left, one who is 'stricken in his feet' (v.3). He is living in Lo-debar, east of the Jordan, under the patronage of Machir (v. 4).⁵

It has now been fifteen to twenty years since David had made that promise and entered into that covenant with Jonathan.⁶ But it still controlled and directed his behavior: 'Is there anyone belonging

1. The fidelity of David's relationships, chs. 9-10

2. The morass of David's guilt, chs. 11-12

3. The trouble from David's house, chs. 13:1-19:8a

4. The turmoil in David's kingdom, chs. 19:8b-20:26

3. NJB nicely captures the connotation of *hesed* in its rendering here: 'to whom I might show *faithful love* for Jonathan's sake.' Cf. my discussion in *Looking on the Heart* (1 Samuel), 2:64-66. See also Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, 'Love (OT),' ABD, 4:377-80.

4. Perhaps 1 Samuel 23:18 indicates a renewal of this covenant promise. David had also assured Saul via oath that he would not eradicate Saul's family once he came to the throne (1 Sam. 24:20-22).

5. Exact location of Lo-debar is unknown. Umm ed-Debar, ten miles south/southeast of the Sea of Galilee, is often proposed. See NBD, 2nd ed., 274-75.

6. We cannot reconstruct a gapless chronology. We only have some clues. We know Mephibosheth was five when he suffered his tragic injury when his father Jonathan was killed at Mt. Gilboa (2 Sam. 4:4; cf. 1 Sam. 31). David reigned for seven and a half years in Hebron before ruling all Israel from

to Saul's family left, to whom I might show faithful love for Jonathan's sake?' (v. 1, NJB). That solemn word, given in that solemn ceremony, under a solemn curse, constrained him to act with devoted love.⁷ Nothing about it being a long time ago, about conditions being different, about it being only a formality. Here is the power covenant exercises – the promise made in the past directs fidelity in the present. Does this not press upon us the urgency of keeping all our covenants?

This is something our world and culture does not understand. I remember some years ago seeing the movie 'Out of Africa' – the natural scenery was breathtaking, the celluloid romance immoral. But in one scene Meryl Streep and Robert Redford sit talking on the beach. She wants him to marry her. Redford's response is: 'Do you think I'll love you more because of a piece of paper?' That is the mentality. A covenant is a piece of paper, a mere, empty formality. And of course the movie line completely misses the point of a marriage covenant, for such a covenant never claims to regulate love's intensity but only its security. What the world does not see is that love that truly loves is willing to bind itself, is willing to promise, willingly and gladly obligates itself so that the other may stand securely in that love.

If you are a Christian, your life consists of covenant obligations, times when you have made sacred promises. In my own communion, we make vows when we publicly confess our faith before the congregation, when our children receive baptism, when someone assumes church office (elder, deacon), and, of course, when entering into marriage. One does not keep such vows because it is dramatic but because it is faithful. Sometimes you do not keep your covenants because you feel like it but simply because you promised.

Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:5). David would likely consume a great deal of time consolidating his rule at home and abroad. If Mephibosheth already had a small son by the time David summoned him to court (the more natural reading of 9:12), he may have been twenty years old at this time. The episode in our text then could be as much as fifteen years after the debacle of Gilboa, and David's covenant with Jonathan (1 Sam. 20) could easily have been five years prior to Gilboa (cf. 1 Sam. 27:7). See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 252-53.

7. I do not mean to imply that David was moved only by a formal or legal motivation. One cannot read 'for Jonathan's sake' without sensing that love for the memory of his dear friend also stirs him.

