King David: Triumphs and Failures

Article 1

DAVID (b. ca. 1040 BC) stands as one of the most important people in the entire Scripture. His early life is punctuated with fantastic exploits, but his failures are some of the most visible in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet, David is in the family line of Jesus. David was the son of Jesse (see 1 Samuel 16:10 and 1 Chronicles 2:15) and the youngest in his family. He was one of the most significant leaders in the history of Israel, a brilliant military mind, keen politician, and an insightful poet. The words of Psalm 40:10 reflect the spiritual depth of David: “I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness from the great assembly.” The psalms display the wisdom of a man devoted to God with a special insight into life. The Scripture depicts many successes for David, but his failures are all the more tragic in the light of his greatness. This article will focus on the triumphs and failures of David’s reign as king of Israel.

First Samuel records the death of King Saul as the Philistines were overtaking the armies of Israel: “Saul said to his armor-bearer, ‘Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.’ But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it” (31:4).

David learned of the death of Saul as he returned from defeating the Amalekites. He tore his clothes, wept, and mourned until evening when the death of Saul was confirmed. After this, David was anointed king of Judah: “Now then, be strong and brave, for Saul your master is dead, and the people of Judah have anointed me king over them” (2 Samuel 2:7). For two years, Ish-Bosheth, son of Saul, ruled over the northern section of the territory—Israel. This was the first major conflict of David’s reign. After a struggle, Ish-Bosheth was killed, and Israel was united. According to 2 Samuel 5:3, “When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.” David ruled from 1010 to 970 BC. He reigned in Judah for seven years and Israel for 33 years. He was 30 when he was anointed, and he reigned for 40 years. David moved the capital from Hebron to Jerusalem very soon after becoming king.

One of the first triumphs of David was the defeat of the Jebusites (v. 6). “And he became more and more powerful, because the Lord God Almighty was with him” (v. 10). He also defeated the Philistines from Geba to Gezer. After securing Israel by this defeat, David ordered his men to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The measure of God’s blessing on David and Israel is clear: “I took you from the pasture, from following sheep to be prince over my people Israel . . . I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of earth” (7:8b-9a, NRSV). God promised “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (v. 16). The reign of David was intended to be a reflection of God’s grand design for His people, Israel.

David proved to be an effective leader of the army. He subdued the Philistines, Moabites, and Edomites. According to 8:14, “The Lord gave David victory wherever he went.” This period of David’s reign was punctuated by a clear consolidation of Israel by the defeat of all the enemies of the nation. Truly God was with David as he remained faithful to Him. Yet, in this time of triumph, a dismal failure took place. David was walking along the roof of his house when he saw a woman bathing; her name was Bathsheba. Adultery followed and she became pregnant. The failure deepened as David ordered her husband, Uriah, to come home, so that others might think that the baby was his, but Uriah would not go to his wife. Instead, he slept “at the entrance to the palace with all his master’s servants” (11:9).

The final and most disappointing aspect of this event is that David sent him back to battle with the intent of indirectly killing him. Uriah was intentionally placed at a more dangerous position, and he was killed. It is, indeed, difficult to understand this moment in the life of David. He was condemned for his failure by Nathan, a prophet sent from God: “This is what the Lord says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight” (12:11). Psalm 51 reflects the depth of David’s sorrow in light of the words of Nathan: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me” (v. 3). David breathes a desperate prayer: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (v. 10).

Bathsheba bore a child, but the Lord struck the child with illness. The child died. In the midst of his pain and failure, David dared to believe that God might be gracious to him. Eventually, Bathsheba bore another son; they called him Solomon.
Unfortunately the ripples from David’s failure continued as his son Amnon fell in love with his sister Tamar. Through trickery, Amnon lured his sister into his bedroom and raped her. David refused to discipline Amnon. This lack of moral courage led Absalom, another of David’s sons, to avenge the rape of Tamar with Amnon’s murder. This bears an ironic similarity to the manner in which Uriah had been killed. David ultimately forgave Absalom for his part in the murder of Amnon, but did not speak to him for many years. Just as Nathan had prophesied, trouble within the house of David continued as Absalom attempted to overthrow David. As Absalom’s power rose, David fled Jerusalem. Eventually, Absalom was killed and his armies defeated. Second Samuel reflects the sentiment of David on learning of the death of Absalom: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!” (18:33). This period of David’s reign is a hard illustration of the fact that the wages of sin are death. The rebellion of Absalom was not the last. Sheba, son of Bikri, rose up against David, but he too was soon defeated.

David was ruthless to his enemies, but gracious to his friends. For example, he showed mercy to Shimei (19:18-23) and Barzillai (v. 24-30). When David reflected on his reign, he proclaimed, “The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior! He is the God who avenges me, who puts the nations under me, who sets me free from my enemies. You exalted me above my foes; from a violent man you rescued me” (22:47-49).

The final years of David’s reign were relatively calm. Toward the end of his life, another struggle for power took place. Nathan observed, when talking to Bathsheba, that David was not even aware that Adonijah had become king without having been anointed. Bathsheba went to David to remind him of his oath that her son, Solomon, would be the next king of Israel. David summoned the priest Zadok, along with Nathan, and Solomon was anointed king. First Kings records these words, “Then David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David” (2:10). Solomon followed his father and his kingdom was firmly established (v. 12).

The triumphs of David’s reign, along with its failures, are instructive for those who read the Scripture. First, David was God’s anointed king to lead Israel. During the reign of David, the enemies of Israel were defeated. Second, the story of David is a testament to the faithfulness of God. Clearly David was not perfect in his obedience, but God remained faithful. The fact that Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, succeeded David indicates the capacity of God to restore and fulfill. David reflected on his earlier life, declaring: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing” (Psalm 23:1).

Third, the reign of David offers a stark picture of the effects of sin. No doubt David was keenly aware of the moral failure of Saul, but when tempted by Bathsheba, he failed as well. The sin of adultery was followed by the indirect assassination of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband. The first son of Bathsheba died because of this sin. Yet God in His graciousness eventually made Solomon, also a son of Bathsheba, king of Israel.

When Nathan confronted David about his sin, Nathan promised that more trouble would follow. David’s son raped a sister and another son attempted to overthrow his father. All this flowed from David’s unfaithfulness.

Fourth, the life of David provides a vivid illustration of how God is able to use imperfect people to accomplish His work in the world. David understood and reflected a deep understanding of the nature of God and the call to righteousness. Psalm 89:1 says, “I will sing of the LORD’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.” David’s failures could never diminish the faithfulness of God. It was not acceptable that David sinned, but finally it is the faithfulness of God that remained clearly in view.

Ultimately, the reign of David teaches that every life presents opportunities to obey God in the midst of temptation and struggle. David faced many difficult situations when he was anointed king. Life is rarely easy, and neither is the work of God. David faced the challenges presented by the Philistines, Ammonites, Edomites, and others. He was called to be faithful in a difficult time. David had been a shepherd of sheep, and as such, was prepared for the challenges of caring for a nation. He was the shepherd of Israel.

Perhaps the final lesson of David is that life is often a tapestry that includes many dark threads. While these are painful, and often find their way into other lives causing additional troubles, the hope presented by God is redemption. No one ever need excuse sin, but we must resist the temptation to believe that it is the last word. Psalm 51:17 captures the final assessment of David’s reign: “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”

by Henry W. Spaulding II
President of Mount Vernon Nazarene University, Mount Vernon, Ohio.