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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 17: DAVID

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 10 “2 Samuel” and 13 “1 Chronicles” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read (optional) chapter 20 “David” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the specific texts from 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles as they are cited in the following material.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

There is no question that David is one of the most important figures in the Old Testament and the Bible as a whole. One measure of his importance is how often he is mentioned in the Bible – about 1,000 times in most translations (for example, 974 times as “David,” 26 times as “the son of Jesse” in the NIV). This is far more than Abraham or Moses or any biblical personality other than Jesus.

The religious importance of David is immense, as we will see, and the story of David has had a profound effect on Western culture – inspiring countless literary and artistic compositions from early Christian paintings to Michelangelo’s Renaissance statue “David,” and modern works such as Sir Timothy Rice’s musical “David” and Leonard Cohen’s pop-rock song “Hallelujah.” Perhaps no other Old Testament character appears so dynamic, so colorful, so human, or so devout.

The great-grandson of Ruth and Boaz (1 Chronicles 2:12), David was from the tribe of Judah, the son of Jesse of Bethlehem and was either the youngest of seven sons (1 Chronicles 2:13-15) or, more likely, had seven brothers (1 Samuel 16:10-11 – see Note 1).

Despite or because of his humble beginnings, David became the second king of Israel (see Note 2) shortly before 1000 BC. He may have been born around 1040 BC and was anointed to be Saul’s successor (1 Samuel 16:1–13) when he was only about fifteen – around 1025 BC. It was not until Saul’s death, however, that David became king over Judah around 1010 BC (1 Samuel 31:3-6); and it was not till seven years later, around 1003 BC, that he was accepted as king over all Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-5). It was at this time that David captured Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-10) which would become his royal capital, the “City of David” – the center of Israel’s kingdom until the nation was torn apart two generations later. David died around 970 BC, a hero to his people and the founder of a growing kingdom.

The international geopolitical situation of that era made this rise of Israelite power under David possible. Ancient Israel was sandwiched between three superpowers of that age – Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Hittite Empire. For much of history, one or the other of these powers controlled much of the area of Canaan, but with the migration into the area of the “Sea Peoples” (including the Philistines) around 1200 BC the outside powers were effectively neutralized. Although Egypt itself was able to repulse the invaders from its own land in the reign of Rameses III (1186 to 1155 BC), the Egyptians could no longer control the main international throughfare of the Canaanite coastal plain where the Philistines settled. This left the Israelites in the mountainous inner region of Canaan in relative peace – apart from frequent altercations with the Philistines themselves – during the period of the judges and the early monarchy. Once Saul and David finally repulsed the Philistine threat, Israel was able to develop into a relatively prosperous and secure kingdom in the later reign of David and that of his son, Solomon.

As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that David is the first figure in the Hebrew Bible for whom we have archaeological evidence. An Aramaic inscription dating to the ninth century BC and discovered in 1993 at Tel Dan in Israel speaks of the “king of the House of David” not long after the time of David himself. Another inscription from around 840 BC (the Moab Stele) may also refer to David.

But the evidence for David comes mainly, of course, from the Bible. As the main character in three major biblical books, David’s life is covered in more detail than any other Old Testament figure, and most of the records clearly come from David’s own lifetime. In 1 Chronicles 29:29 we read: “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.” These three individuals all knew and interacted with David, and their works doubtless form the basis of the books we call 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. There are differences in these works that record David’s life, however. While 1 and 2 Samuel give an unvarnished picture of David’s faults as well as his strengths, the later book of 1 Chronicles gives a much more edited version which focuses on David’s role as the founder of Judean kingship. For example, if we read 1 Chronicles 20, it is evident that the story of Bathsheba fits in there, but it is not included. Because Chronicles was written much later than the book of Samuel, the situation was different, and its readers needed to understand the theological significance of David more than his personality and character.

Finally, of course, we have a rich mine of information regarding David in the songs or psalms he wrote. David is credited with seventy-five of the compositions found in the book of Psalms and may have written a number of the others, also. As we will see, this material gives a closer look into the mind of the king than we find with any other biblical character.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The Bible gives so much information about David that we cannot possibly discuss it all in this unit. Instead, we will look in this section at some key passages that may be somewhat difficult to understand or that are sometimes misunderstood.

1 Samuel 13:14 tells us that God had “sought out a man after his own heart,” and this statement is often understood to mean someone who was in some way like God. But the Hebrew expression means simply that God had selected an individual of his own choosing – according to his own will or purpose – rather than someone chosen according to the will of the Israelites themselves (1 Samuel 9:20). The expression does not concern the nature of David but demonstrates God’s will in rejecting Saul.

1 Samuel 16:12-13 describes Samuel's anointing of David. Although the Bible records the anointing of the priests (Exodus 29:7) to consecrate them, the anointing of kings seems to have been somewhat different. In ancient Egypt, and perhaps in some other Near Eastern cultures, although the king was not anointed, he anointed the lesser rulers who were subject to him. This anointing stressed both their subordinate relationship to the great king and his protection of them. Such a meaning seems to fit the priestly anointing of Israelite kings – signifying their coming under the rule and protection of God – though they were sometimes also anointed by the people, as was David in 2 Samuel 2:4. In such cases, the anointing seems to signify a contractual relationship between the king and the people he was to rule over.

1 Samuel 17 tells the story of David and Goliath. Although the story of David's slaying of a "giant" is sometimes seen as fanciful, there is nothing far-fetched about the account. In the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible the height of Goliath is given as "six cubits and a span," which is around nine feet nine inches, though both the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls (followed by a number of modern translations such as the ESV and NET Bibles) record his height as "four cubits and a span" or about seven feet tall. In either case, an Egyptian letter (Papyrus Anastasi I) of the thirteenth century BC describes warriors in Canaan who are seven to nine feet tall, giving historical support to the biblical account. The *Guinness Book of Records* lists more than twenty individuals over eight feet tall in the last century or so.



"David and Goliath" by Guillaume Courtois (1628-1679). Image: Archival.

1 Samuel 18:1 and 2 Samuel 1:26 record the affection between David and Saul's son, Jonathan, which has been considered by some to have been sexually based. The two verses say: "Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself" and "Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." 1 Samuel uses exactly the same word for love (*ahab*) in saying "all Israel and Judah loved David," and no one would suggest that this was also sexual love. The Bible shows many types of love, and David and Jonathan's relationship was simply a profound example of close comradeship and friendship – the type of love the New Testament calls *philia* or "brotherly love." David knew the commands regarding sexual relations found in the law (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), continually praised the law and stressed how he loved it throughout his psalms. To see more in his friendship with Jonathan than the text says is to read something into it that is not there.

1 Samuel 18:4 tells how Jonathan gave gifts to David, including “the robe he was wearing.” The word used often denotes a royal robe. Ancient texts from nearby Ugarit mention that the crown prince wore a special identifying robe in that city. If Israel had the same custom, Jonathan (who knew David would be the next king – 1 Samuel 23:17) was in effect renouncing his claim to the throne by giving David his princely robe.

1 Samuel 21:10-15 relates how David fled from Saul to the Philistine city of Gath (ironically, the city of Goliath) for his own safety. But when some of the Philistines suggested that if this were indeed David, he might be a threat they should dispose of, David cleverly feigned insanity – not to pretend that he, David, was insane, but that he was an insane person claiming to be David. 1 Samuel 22:3-4 shows David next fled to Moab – another enemy of Israel – temporarily hiding his parents there. In doing this, David likely stressed his own partial Moabite ancestry through his great-grandmother Ruth (Ruth 4:17). After hiding in wilderness areas for much of Saul’s reign – and twice refusing to kill the king when he had opportunity – David remained loyal to Saul as “the LORD’s anointed” until the latter’s death.

2 Samuel 5 tells us that, after being anointed king of all Israel, the next major event was David’s capture of Jerusalem. The city had been taken at the time of the conquest (Judges 1:8), but the Israelites had not driven out the inhabitants (Judges 1:21), which is why the city had to be retaken at this time. In verse 6 the central fortified area is called “Zion” – a name of uncertain meaning which eventually came to be used for the whole of Jerusalem. The strategically located city became the capital of David’s kingdom.

2 Samuel 6:14-21 records David bringing the ark into Jerusalem. His “dancing” is said to have earned the disapproval of his wife Michal, and the activity is often portrayed as wild or ecstatic gyration unbecoming a king. But the Hebrew word *makarker* translated “dancing” in verses 14 and 16 is used only in this passage and nowhere else in Scripture. However, the same word was used in the related language of Ugarit where it is known to have meant movement of the *fingers*. Similarly, the word *mapazzez* translated “leaping” in verse 16 is used only in this verse and in a variant form of the verb in Genesis 49:24, where it describes the movement of the *arms*: “his arms were made agile” (ESV). So, it is likely that in fact David was not actually involved in “dancing,” but in the swaying of his arms and snapping or waving of his fingers as he proceeded before the ark. The passage shows that Michal was actually upset because David had taken off his royal robe and had led the procession in a simple linen tunic (v. 20).

2 Samuel 7 contains the promises made to David when the king desired to build a temple for God. This event is really the high point of the story of David, and we will look at it more closely below. But notice that although God gave great and lasting promises to David, he declined to allow the king to build his temple due to the fact that as a warrior David had shed much blood (1 Chronicles 22:8). In explaining to the Phoenician king, Hiram, why David had not built a temple, Solomon later gave a different reason: “because of the wars waged against my father” (1 Kings 5:3). This is not a contradiction, but an ancient example of “political spin,” in which the facts were worded as diplomatically as possible.

The rest of 2 Samuel (see Note 3) and the parallel passages in 1 Chronicles tell of events regarding David’s further establishment of his kingdom and the occasions on which he failed in some way (his affair with Bathsheba; the numbering of the people; etc.) or in which his family members failed him. David’s first six sons were by six different wives (2 Samuel 3:2-6), and this complex situation led to much family infighting and the rebellions of his sons Absalom (2 Samuel 13) and Adonijah (1 Kings 1). Yet, as we will see, despite its personal and political problems, the reign of David was overall a righteous one which became the measure by which all later kings would be judged.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

We can learn much from the life of David, of course, but two aspects of his story are of particular importance: 1) the way he conducted his life, and 2) the covenant that God made with him.

1) We have already mentioned several unique aspects of the Bible's portrait of David. The stories of David also provide a body of material that is unique in showing David's actions from the outside – as recorded in the books of Samuel and Chronicles, *and* his thoughts on the inside – as recorded in the Psalms. No other person in the Old Testament is so well documented. Although a great deal is said about Joseph and Moses, for example, very little is said about their inner thoughts. On the other hand, the Psalms reveal David's thoughts firsthand and in all kinds of situations.

As a result, David gives us a key reference point for a personal relationship with God. The Bible records as many of his faults as it does his strengths and accomplishments; but if the historical books record the king's frequent failures, the Psalms record his ongoing attitude of repentance and his undying desire to please and obey God (for example, Psalm 51). David also experienced a great deal of difficulty in his life – from persecution to personal loss, and the experience of having close friends and even sons become his enemies. The Psalms describe his walk with God during those difficulties and the trust he maintained throughout them (for example, Psalm 23).

As a result, the account of David's life and his own portrayal of it strike a chord of both realism and hope in every believer. That is doubtless why Psalms (see Note 4) is the most read book of the whole Bible and why more people are encouraged by the things David wrote than any other writer of the Old Testament. David, like all of us, failed in a great many ways. Yet the primary lesson we gain from his life story is that God can and does continue to work with us as long as we continue to seek him (see Note 5).

2) The realism and intensity of David's walk with God formed the basis of a relationship which God blessed richly, and the greatest of those blessings was the covenant God made with the king. The first part of God's promise to David is recorded as follows:

'When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.' (1 Chronicles 17:11-14)

The second part of God's promise to David is found in 1 Chronicles 22:7-10, which shows that this promised son was to be David's son Solomon who would build the temple David had wanted to construct for God. But, just like God's covenant with Abraham, there was clearly a future aspect of the promise that would be fulfilled not by David's immediate son, but by his eventual descendant, the Messiah. We see this ultimate reality in 1 Chronicles 17:12 – that the future descendant would also build a house for God (2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-6). We also see in 1 Chronicles 17:14 that his kingdom would be established for eternity. David's human kingdom came to an end with the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, but the promise is still being fulfilled through the messianic King of David's line, Jesus Christ.

The promise to David represents one of the three great covenants described in the Old Testament (those of Abraham, Moses, and David) upon which the rest of the Bible is based. In each covenant there was a

preliminary fulfillment as well as a future one of greater importance. So it is essential to keep the Davidic covenant in mind as we read the rest of the Old Testament if we are to understand much of what occurred in Israel's later history, as well as the message of Israel's prophets, and the role that Jesus fulfilled (Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:32-33; Acts 13:22-23; etc.). This spiritual aspect to the promises made to David is why Psalms is the book of the Old Testament that is most quoted in the New Testament, and why the story of David is a direct part of an ongoing narrative that begins in Genesis and finds eventual fulfillment not in the Old Testament, but in the New.

* Note 1: The apparent discrepancy in the number of David's brothers is probably the result of the fact that when an individual died without leaving any children, he was often omitted from genealogical records which stressed continuing families. The passage in 1 Samuel may thus have been written in David's lifetime before the death of one of his brothers, while the genealogical list of 1 Chronicles was recorded later.

* Note 2: Some count David as Israel's third king because when Saul died, Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul's army, made Saul's son Ish-Bosheth king over Israel. Nevertheless, David had already been anointed as king by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:1-13), so David took precedence both in time order and in God's sight as the second king of Israel.

* Note 3: The account of David in 2 Samuel is not always given in strict chronological order. For example, the events of 2 Samuel 7 seem to have occurred after those of chapter 8, and the account of the famine during David's reign is given in 2 Samuel 21, though it occurred before Absalom's rebellion recorded in 2 Samuel 15-18.

* Note 4: For optional further study of David's psalms, we recommend our free e-book, *Spotlight on the Psalms*, which can be downloaded from www.FreeChristianEBooks.org.

* Note 5: David's last words include a saying that might well serve as the king's obituary: "When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise ..." (2 Samuel 23:3-4).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

What were the three "superpowers" that surrounded ancient Israel?

Is there archaeological evidence for King David having existed as an actual person?

What is the main difference between the accounts of David as recorded in 2 Samuel and in 1 Chronicles?

Looking Below the Surface:

What can we learn from David's refusal to kill Saul on two occasions when he was being hunted by that king?

Everyday Applications:

What is the greatest lesson you can find in the life of David that can be applied in your own life?

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