

“Advancing and Waiting”

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There are many ways to pursue the Lord during a transition. All start with the heart.

2 Samuel 2:1-11

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Transitions

Your first question after reading or hearing the sermon text today might be, “What does this have to do with my life?” More than you thought. This Scripture is about transitions – life changes. While I was writing this sermon yesterday, I received an email from Mark Thomas. Stacey has a new job at Elon University, and Mark sent an email, “Parting Ways,” to give us the update and express gratitude for their time here.

What changes are you living through or anticipating? Some examples: births, deaths, and weddings in the family. Changes in health for you or someone you love. Starting or ending a job. A promotion. Moving from one home to another – it could be you, or maybe neighbors or children or friends.

If you are facing one or more transitions, today might perfectly fit you. I can tell you it is personally relevant for Linda and me. This has been great reflection as we consider the unknowns of the year ahead. My Sunday School class this fall will be about processing the pastoral succession process. [Email me](#) if you would like to join us.

Transitions are mostly about people and places. There are subtractions and additions. We grieve over the people and the places that have been part of our story. We welcome or adjust to new people and places. Transitions are always packed with memories of the past and often with anxiety or fear about the future.

If you were part of our church family a year ago, you may remember that the sermons last fall came from 1 Samuel. We finished our studies in 1 Samuel the Sunday before Thanksgiving last year with a sermon on 2 Samuel 1. We pick up with chapter 2.

People

The best way to review 1 Samuel is to review the people and places listed in 2 Samuel 2. We start with the people. As Pastor Lori read the Scripture, you heard two names you know well even if you were not with us last fall: Saul and David. Here's what I learned last fall: Saul was better than you thought and David was not as good.

Saul. You don't to re-read 1 Samuel to know that in 2 Samuel 2, Saul has died. Verse 7 says so bluntly: "Saul your master is dead." Verses 4 and 5 mention his burial.

In verse 8 we learn about two other names connected to Saul: his general and uncle, Abner, who had accompanied Saul to hunt David in the wilderness. We also meet one of Saul's sons, Ish-bosheth. Strange. We never met him in 1 Samuel. His name means "man of shame" like "nothing man." He may have been an illegitimate son.

Saul had been Israel's first king. For much of 1 Samuel, if you weren't reading ahead, you thought Saul would become the main story. The boy Samuel had grown up with an uncommon aptitude to hear from God and speak for God. The last of the judges, his leadership was spiritual, military, and political. As he aged, the people feared the transition. They knew there would be no Samuel 2.0. They asked Samuel, "Give us a king like all the other nations have." Samuel feels rejected, but God tells him it's OK.

We generally recall the worst about him, but Saul was a great king if the standard is "like all the other nations." Saul won every war he fought until the one that took his life. He repeatedly turned back threats from the Ammonites and Edomites to the east, the Philistines to the west, and the Amalekites to the south.

Saul never abandoned his God to worship Baal or the other gods of the Canaanites, as some of the judges before him and many of the kings who followed him did. What sullied his reputation? His insecurity and his ego. Success ruined him. He did not wait for God, did not obey Samuel's instructions, and even erected a monument in his own honor. The kingdom became about Saul's position and his exploits. He stopped trusting the God who put him on the throne and took matters into his own hands to eliminate the threat posed by the man he came to know would replace him: David.

David. We meet David in 2 Samuel 2:1. He is inquiring of the Lord about his next step. That symbolizes the best of David: he has a heart for God.

We also learn he has two wives with him. A third, Saul's daughter Michal, had been taken away from him. This is another aspect of David's story: he's a man of passion. There are others in this story as well. David's men and their families. They are joined by the men of Judah. David knows about people from the past and new relationships going forward.

We had first met David in 1 Samuel as the runt of the litter in his family, scorned not only by his brothers but even by his father. After Saul's first great act of disobedience, Samuel had anointed David as the future king of his people. He rose to prominence first by felling the giant, Goliath, and then by engaging and winning a series of battles. He is a warrior among warriors and gains such respect from Saul and the military. Soon, though, Saul felt threatened by David's exploits and his notoriety.

But David wasn't as good as you thought. In addition to the women who had and would snare him, David's faith proved shaky in one notable season of his life. He cozied up to Israel's nemesis, the Philistines. He became a traitor. During that season of his life, He did not trust God with outcomes. He feared that Saul would succeed in killing him. He ran, he lied, he killed, he stole.

What's most important about the backstory of Saul and David is that we would never have had David if we hadn't had Saul. If Saul had not turned on David and pursued him into the desert, we would not have, for one thing, many of the Psalms we have. He needs God to live through another night – physically and emotionally. He needs to need God. David is readied for the throne by his troubles. His heart is shaped by Saul's pursuit. David ends up on the lam for two decades as God teaches him to wait.

In 2 Samuel 2, we are on the verge of a crucial transition for David, full of hope and anticipation. But let's not forget it also comes with deep grief. David surprises us with his reaction to the news that both Saul and Jonathan are dead. He executes the messenger, he tears his clothes (as do his men), he weeps and fasts and writes a lament. "How the mighty have fallen!"

This is what transitions are all about. We grieve over family members and friends separated by death or distance. At the same time, those losses result in new relationships.

Places

The places are also significant to the story in 2 Samuel 2. Our chapter opens with David asking God if he should "go up to one of the towns of Judah." Judah was one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the largest in land and population. The tribes were named after their ancestors, all sons or grandsons of Jacob. David was born in Bethlehem, which would have been a nothing town in history if David and, later, Jesus, had not been born there. Bethlehem was on the northern end of Judah. At this time, Jerusalem wasn't even under Israelite control. That story will come later in 2 Samuel.

Remember that David had been in Ziklag, a town on the Philistine side of the border, but Ziklag is no more. It was leveled and burned by the Amalekites while David was marching with the Philistines. The Amalekites, who had been defeated multiple times by both Saul and David, took advantage of the unprotected city and attacked

Ziklag while David was gone, taking anything of value back to their towns, including all the women and children.

David chased them down, killed every man, woman, and child in the Amalekite towns, rescued the families of his own men, and returned with more loot than he had lost. In turn, he distributed that bounty among the villages of Judah, including Hebron. Among other things, that was politically astute. He had made friends all across Judah. Now that Saul is dead, David asks God for direction, and God tells him to go to Hebron, the leading city of Judah, where the leaders of the city formally and publicly anoint him as their king.

But remember, Judah is only one of the twelve tribes, and it's at the southern end. The closest tribe to Judah is Benjamin, Saul's tribe. How is he going to win the rest of the country?

His first act after settling his family and receiving the crown is to send a delegation to Jabesh Gilead. No place in Israel had a deeper bond to Saul than Jabesh. What first established Saul's credibility as a warrior and king was a threat from the Ammonites who demanded that Jabesh submit to a peace treaty and prove their submission by having the right eye of each man gouged out. Saul came to their rescue. So when Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle, the men of Jabesh had risked their lives to cross the Jordan, retrieve the bodies of Saul and Jonathan, and give them a decent burial.

David sends them a thank you note. "The LORD bless you for this kindness to Saul your master," David says. "May the LORD show you kindness and faithfulness. I will show you favor. He asks them to be "strong and brave" again because "Saul your master is dead, and the people of Judah have anointed me king over them."

We assume that David's rule will soon be firmly established over the entire kingdom. After all, God had chosen him and Samuel had anointed him. Both Saul and Jonathan knew that David was next up. But not so fast.

In a town just south of Jabesh we are going to hit pause on the expansion of David's rule north from Judah. Mahanaim is also on the other side of the Jordan River from where Saul had mostly lived, fought, and died. But it's part of a much larger kingdom that David does not yet control.

Abner is going to lose his place. He brings Ish-Bosheth to Mahanaim because, again, it was beyond the reach of the Philistines who were on the other side of the Jordan. Abner crowns Ish-bosheth king of the eleven tribes. The writer mentions all these other places, which included all the area Saul had ruled except Judah.

With God or without him

So there you have it – the people and places. We have encountered all the elements of transition – the loss of an old place for David – Ziklag, and a new home, Hebron. This resulted in leaving friends and allies behind – the Philistines, even if we are not so sure David should ever have made them friends in the first place. More significantly, for David and all of Israel, Saul is dead. People are in mourning. They also don't know what is going to happen next. There is a power struggle. People are positioning themselves for influence and control. Abner is doing that. Ish-Bosheth is doing that. But so is David.

There is a rather dramatic contrast in verses 1-11 of 2 Samuel 2. It's clear the narrator is intentional. Did you see it as we read? Everyone in this part of the story is experiencing transition. Everyone has lost and gained, both people and places.

So what's the vivid contrast? The LORD is mentioned five times in verses 1-7 and none in verses 8-11. In verse 1, David "inquired" of the LORD. This is such an important tie to 1 Samuel. The Hebrew word translated "inquired" is used more than 40 times in 1 and 2 Samuel. It can mean either "inquire," "ask," or "dedicate." Hannah asked the LORD for a son. She dedicated Samuel to the Lord. The people asked for a king. Saul's name is based on this same Hebrew word. Early in his reign Saul asked for guidance from God directly or through Samuel. Later Saul inquired of God through a medium. David asked Saul for permission to leave. David frequently inquired of God, sometimes directly and sometimes through the priest. We don't know exactly how David inquired of God in 2 Samuel 2, but it's beside the point. He did.

The language David used in his letter to the men of Jabesh Gilead is also significant. He used words that showed his worldview was a God-centered one. "The LORD bless you." "The LORD show you his kindness and faithfulness." "I will show you favor." The word "kindness" is particularly important. It's the most important theological word in the Old Testament. Different translations may use "steadfast love" or "loyalty." In Hebrew, *hesed*. It's a word tied up with God's covenant relationship with Israel. In New Testament language, we love (agape) because God first loved us. In Old Testament vocabulary, God initiates *hesed* with his people and David extends it to his kingdom.

By contrast, there is no mention of God in verses 8-11. Abner, following Saul's example, was moving ahead without listening to God, asking God, even bringing God into the conversation and correspondence like David did.

In other words, the focus of this story about transition is about moving through the losses and gains of people and places with God or without him. God is involved either way, but do we choose to consciously inquire of him, seek him, include him, be with his people? This is of course behind our "Thirty Days of Prayer" initiated by the Pastor Search Team. We're not eliminating uncertainty, maybe not even anxiety. We

are naming and moving toward this time of transition with a conscious decision to trust God before, during, and after it.

When we talk about the “Who” of 2 Samuel 2, we are really not talking about either Saul or David. We are talking about the LORD. 1 Samuel chapter 1 had introduced us to a name for God that doesn’t appear in the first eight books of the Bible. It is “the LORD Almighty” or “the LORD of hosts” in some translations. It implies an invisible, omnipotent army. 1 and 2 Samuel was never about Samuel, nor about Hannah or Elkanah or Saul or even David. They are about Yahweh, the LORD Almighty. He is directing the unfolding events, but more importantly, he is directing a larger plan that far exceeds the stories told in 1 and 2 Samuel. This is God’s story, propelled forward by and written about Yahweh.

So how does that help you and me? How is it practical? Notice the end of this text. Ish-Bosheth reigns only two years over Israel. He was a weak and fearful leader, and his story did not end well. But David was willing to wait. When the opportunity came, he advanced. He had been waiting for as long as two decades before Saul died, and he moved into Judah when God gave him the green light. He assumed he was supposed to keep moving, but when the door closed, he waited.

Faith is the willingness to advance or wait, a decision to trust God no matter what. There was a very human process involved in David’s anointing in Hebron. There had been planning on David’s part, and in spite of knowing he was God’s choice he still had to be approved by the people. He had waited, run, and hidden all those years, but when he had to wait even longer, he trusted the LORD Almighty. Amen.

Our narrator is establishing the legitimacy of David’s reign. David did not want to look back with regrets. He would wait seven and a half years for the full kingdom to be under his control. He had already established a pattern of waiting. Discerning when to advance and when to wait is hard, but it’s necessary.

David inquired of the Lord and the Lord answered. There were many times when he received no answer. There is no guarantee. It was also true that people had to affirm his call to Hebron. The process of change is usually complex, and often longer than we want it to be because there are people and places involved. The story is not designed to make it simple.

The issue is one of the heart. Does my heart look like Saul and Abner? Is it set on being “like all the other nations?” Or is my heart pursuing God, ready to advance but willing to wait, to trust. There are many ways we can pursue the Lord during times of transition. They all begin with a heart that wants to.

Try these simple prayers. *Father, your will be done. Jesus, show me kindness. Spirit, guide me through what’s next. Amen.*