SERMONS ON 2 SAMUEL

CHAPTERS 1–13

John Calvin

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We saw yesterday the remarkable and memorable victories which God gave to David against all his surrounding enemies, who had been giving the people of Israel so much trouble. God's causing David to prosper against all his enemies was a confirmation of his divine call as king. More was involved here than the mere fulfilment of the promise which God made to Abraham. This was also intended to lift up the hearts of the faithful so that they might know that the promise which God gave them of a king, under whom they should hope for total happiness and perfection, was not empty.

The text says that 'Toi, king of Hamath', protector of Syria, 'sent to David to greet him and to congratulate him on the victory which he had won against Hadadezer'. This, undoubtedly, is told us to show that God, in everything and everywhere, showered his favours upon David. We know that God holds the hearts of men in his hand and bends them as he pleases (Prov. 21:1). When this king thus declared himself the friend of David, and even 'gave him presents by the hand of his son', there is no doubt that God had arranged this to confirm David all the more. It is true that King Toi gladly did this 'because he was

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the enemy of Hadadezer', and rejoiced to see his enemy beaten. 
But still God used this means to declare eternally and ever more 
fully his benediction on his servant David. That is why it is 
repeated here that 'God has saved him' in all his affairs. We saw 
this sentence yesterday, but it is not empty repetition, for when 
God gives us an experience of his grace, we do not understand it 
as we should unless he then explains to us that it is he who is 
Governor of all, and is addressing us. This is true whether he 
turns the courage and affection of men to love us, or turns them 
bitterly against us, giving us the means to overcome them. 
Whatever may happen, let us realise that our salvation is only 
in him, which means that we can only be preserved by his 
strength and protection.

After stating that God fortified David all around, the text 
goes on to say that he 'reigned over Israel doing justice and 
judgement'. This should be carefully noted, for even if a man 
wins amazing victories over his enemies, yet treats his own 
people cruelly or tyrannically, what good are his victories? These 
victories will not benefit or give his people relief. We have seen 
many warlike and extremely brave princes who even succeeded 
in all their undertakings, but yet were so addicted to pillage and 
murder that they gave their subjects the same treatment. We 
still see a great deal of this today. For princes assume that since 
God gives them their position, they have total licence to gobble 
up their poor subjects — to pillage, to loot, to sack everything. 
Therefore, when we are told here that David exercised justice 
and judgement in Israel, this demonstrates that his bravery 
was not used as an occasion to act cruelly towards his people. 
Although he was victorious over his enemies, he still governed 
himself in a totally fair and equitable manner, for he knew what 
his calling was. This is meant to instruct all those who are in 
superior positions and are divinely placed in the seat of justice.

These words 'justice' and 'judgement' are joined together in 
order to convey a total righteousness which is characterised by 
a constancy and magnanimity which resists all evil. Now there 
are many people who will exercise justice, but not judgement. 
For while they will be able to keep themselves from doing 
wrong, from evil, from trouble-making (and thus avoid both
fraud and violence), still, when they see some poor man in trouble, they will not come to his rescue. Those who thus accommodate themselves (to evil) are upholding righteousness only half-way, even though they do no harm or injury to anyone. Hence, let us note that Scripture joins these two words to indicate that it is not enough to keep ourselves from injuring anyone, but that we ought to take as strong a stand against evil as we can. This command is given to everyone — not only to princes, magistrates, and officers of justice, but to all private persons as well. For instance, the eighteenth chapter of Genesis states that although Abraham was responsible only to govern his own family, still he said that he would carry out justice to those whom God had given into his charge and placed under his protection, and that he would teach them what was appropriate and essential so that they could exercise justice and judgement (Gen. 18:19). We see, therefore, that exercising justice and judgement is a universal rule which applies to everyone. It means governing oneself as to treat everyone fairly and properly, and it means standing against and resisting evil whenever it is necessary to relieve poor, afflicted people, and also giving them all needed help.

And yet those who are in positions of justice have a double obligation which is far stricter. Hence, it is not enough for them merely to abstain from looting and cruelty and from taking personal advantage of their position — but they must also protect the good and innocent, and must reprimand anyone they see breaking the law. In sum, these words tell us that David knew what his duty involved as a divinely constituted king. All who are in authority ought to understand this principle, which requires them so to govern themselves that they might render a good and loyal account to God, who allowed them to be like shepherds to their subjects. In other words, they were supposed to care for their subjects.

David shows vividly how he felt when he promised in Psalm 101 that when he gained the crown, he would act in this way. This Psalm was composed before he was in possession of the kingdom. When I obtain my kingdom, he says, then I will drive the wicked from my house and will see to it that all learn to
know God. I will keep my house pure and clean. As far as possible, I will destroy all wicked and flattering persons from among the people of God. So David promised this while he was waiting upon God to fulfil what he had promised in his anointment as king.

These words show us that David, unlike the hypocrites, actually fulfilled his vow. When hypocrites are in trouble, they will make wonderful promises, but when they get what they want, they merely shrug their shoulders and stick up their noses, as the old saying goes. But on the contrary, during the whole distressing time that David was waiting until the Lord stretched out his hand and made him king, he was keenly aware of his sacred promise to the Lord. We see here that when he was brought to the royal throne, he faithfully carried out his vow.

Moreover, we must gather from this that God will always prosper people who sincerely uphold true justice, for this is the best defence that we can have against our enemies. Many times it will surprise us how it is our own fault that God gives our enemies opportunities to injure us. Our trouble is that we are totally confused inside: everything is out of order, nothing is right, and iniquity is in charge. This is the same thing as if we broke down all our walls so as to expose ourselves as prey and allow our enemies to come in.

Instead, let us learn how to place ourselves in God’s care so that he can keep us safe. We do this by getting control of ourselves so that we are well regulated on the inside. Then it is certain that God is well able to keep us safe from all danger and to prosper us so that we will lack nothing. Our text, then, has emphasised the importance of self-control in the life of David.

But we must go beyond David to the truth as it is in our Lord Jesus Christ; as Psalm 72 says, ‘Lord, give judgement to your king, and he will govern your people in justice and judgement’. This shows that David was a type which had its perfect fulfilment only in our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, let us carefully note that God gave only a small taste of what good government was to his people, and that he reserved the full reality until the coming of his Son. Let us recognise that our Lord Jesus Christ has been given to us so that we might be governed in justice and
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Earthly kings can do no more than merely keep their subjects in check so that evil-doers are punished and the good and innocent are upheld by the sword which God gave to these rulers. But our Lord Jesus Christ goes still further, for by the power of his Spirit he always watches over the hearts of men, which he reforms and renews. Thus, it is said that we are brought to justice when it pleases God to call us into his Church. That is how Isaiah the prophet speaks of it when he says that all the faithful whom God will call under his guidance will be governed in justice (Isa. 11:4). Thus, our Lord Jesus Christ not only uses human means to guide his Church in virtue and equity, but he also reforms hearts on the inside by his Spirit, since his kingdom is spiritual.

Let us also notice carefully that Isaiah says that God will have pity on the poor, he will relieve the afflicted. This teaches us that the Son of God will never fail us, that we will be sustained by his help as long as we have our refuge in him – but only insofar as we allow him to rule over our hearts. Now I said ‘allow’, to show that we can hinder him, in certain respects, from governing us. For when we act like wild beasts and cannot bear the yoke of our Lord Jesus Christ, there is nothing in us but pride and rebellion. The fact is that we drive him far away and do not want him to rule over us. Instead, we prefer to remain in our pleasures and to rest in our vices without being disturbed. What is that but seeking our own ruin? However, when we become docile with an accommodating spirit that submits to his control, then he will certainly be the sort of king over us that this Psalm describes (Psa. 72:13).

The Psalm says, in particular, that he will have pity and compassion on the poor, that he will relieve the afflicted. This teaches us that while we are under the guidance of the Son of God and while he claims us as his people, we are not automatically sheltered from many troubles and oppressions – because, in fact, God will let our enemies take over in order to test our patience and humble us. Even when we are afflicted
and poor, we can still rejoice, for this Psalm says that this king whom God has established will take care of us in our time of need.

Let us learn, then, in the first place, to seek for justice where we can find it. That is, let us pray that God will be pleased to make us experience the virtue which he has given to his only Son, so that everything might be well governed around us, that we might walk in integrity, and that he will regulate not only external matters, but all our inward affections. And then let us learn constantly to return to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to keep ourselves hidden under the shadow of his wings when we are tormented unjustly. Let us not give up in times of severe testing, but let us take courage and not doubt that the Son of God will finally accomplish what he has promised. His promise will not disappoint us if we give him room to work in our lives. Thus, let each one of us bear our poverty patiently in our own way. When we are tormented by the wicked, instead of quarrelling, let us learn to glorify the king who watches over us, and pray that he will want to help us in our need. It is certain that he will make us experience what this Psalm promises: that he will support his poor ones, provide for their needs, and have compassion on them (Psa. 72:13). That, in sum, is what we should remember about David giving justice and judgement to all Israel.

This passage then speaks of the conduct of those who were in charge and were David’s officers, such as ‘Joab, who was captain general of the army’. This shows us that if a king wants to carry out his duty properly, he must be aided by those whom he calls into public office – this applies even to those in the lowest positions. Now even if a prince is personally honourable, but trusts and promotes wicked persons who are either greedy, or adulterous, or thieves, then his entire government will become degenerate. So when a prince is careless in his position, he is surely worse than a tyrant without meaning to be so, for his laxness causes more evil than tyranny. This passage therefore teaches us that princes ought above all to be careful to seek reliable and substantial persons to help them govern their people.

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There are, as I have said, different degrees of authority. If
magistrates, for instance, want everything to go well and to be
properly governed, and yet have wicked aides who are addicted
to corruption and are even degenerate and dissolve, it is
certain that all their good desires will amount to nothing and
will be snuffed out. We see this by experience.

Thus, the officers of David are spoken of here with good
reason, in order to show that he was endeavouring to bring just
treatment to his people not merely in his own person, but also by
appointing subordinates who were men of virtue and even
excellence. It is true that there were very serious faults in Joab, as
we have seen, but all things considered, you will find that he was
a man whom God had endowed with remarkable qualities. And
all these others – such as the secretary or chief of staff, who was in
charge of reporting all business – are named here, not out of
criticism, but rather to show that David was prudent enough to
call people who could help him, since he could not do everything.

David actually carried out what he promised in Psalm 101:
that he would choose officers in his house, that he would teach
the fear of God, and that he would drive out the wicked. How
greatly this is needed today: we would see an almost angelic
reformation in the world if this were done. But on the contrary,
there is such widespread degeneration because authorities are
often careless in putting people into office. Sometimes those are
appointed who actually know what it is to govern and have
some zeal for it, but most often, people who lack self-control are
put into office. It takes only one wild horse to break up a team of
twelve, and it is the same way when there are people in public
positions who do not behave properly. They certainly throw
everything into confusion. Thus, we must pay very close
attention to this passage.

Since we do not always find people who are endowed with
these particular virtues, we are urgently admonished to pray
God to provide them for us. When the passage says that God
gave these fine ministers to maintain his judgements and
righteousness among the people, it is showing that God
stretched out his hand to David to shower his goodness upon
him. Let us realise that it is a special gift from God whenever

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there are people available whom we can appoint and put to work to help us maintain civil justice. And it is a sign of the vengeance of God if we are stripped of prudent men. This very thing is threatened by the prophet Isaiah when he says that little children will reign (Isa. 3:1ff.). In other words, there will be no sense or prudence in those who are in charge of the people. This is the greatest poverty that can possibly happen, for famine will not be nearly so dangerous and troublesome to the people as when they are stripped of good ministers, leaving nothing but total breakdown and disorder. Thus, let us be keenly aware that since God has blessed his servant David in this way, if we are in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, he will always give us people to maintain fairness and justice for us. Whenever we are in trouble in this matter, he admonishes us to take refuge in him – there is no other hope. This is the point we must remember from this passage.

But on the other hand, since we have mentioned that Joab had several serious failings, we must recognise that although God wants to give us good officials, yet they will always be imperfect and liable to fall often. Now the grace of God clearly shines out from the kingdom of David, who is a type of Jesus Christ, which is why those in full authority are named. This teaches us that God did not restrict his grace in those days to people who were utterly perfect and spotless. Hence, when we find vices in people who are otherwise very virtuous, let us realise that our Lord wants to use this to humble us, and so let us put up with the evil. But at the same time, let us try to correct this evil, for we must never wallow in our filth. Thus whenever we perceive some vice in an official, we ought not only to condemn it, but also to try to remove it as far as we can. At any rate, let us not be surprised if the people whom God places in the centre of the stage in order to make us experience his paternal care, have weaknesses. This, in sum, is what we must remember.

Some have considered that ‘the Cherethites and the Pelethites’ who were mentioned in this passage were . . . whom David had chosen for office.¹ Others even say that this implies

¹Words lacking in text.
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separation, as if he had not said that 'Benaiah the son of Jehoiada' was their leader. But by looking at the seventeenth chapter of First Chronicles, we can understand this passage as well as the following passage (in 2 Sam. 8), which says that 'the sons of David were priests'. It is plainly said in 1 Chronicles 17 that these Cherethites and Pelethites were under the authority of Benaiah. Some say that some of them were archers and that the others used the sling. This was a fairly common thing in those times, as we see for instance in David (1 Sam. 17:40ff.). Be that as it may, it is very likely that they were the bodyguard of the king. So much, then, for these words, which are not of great importance.

Finally, the passage says that the 'sons of David were priests'. This expression is commonly used in Scripture. At first glance, it could almost seem that David was instructing his children in the worship of God so that they could be in the priesthood. That is why some think that David had his sons educated by the doctors of the Law as their disciples, so that they could later be in charge of the Church. Scripture says that the priests at that time were like the messengers of God to instruct the people (Deut. 17:9ff.).

When we have an obscure passage, our only action should be to clarify it by comparison with another passage of Scripture. Thus, we compare the obscure statement in 2 Sam. 8 with 1 Chronicles 18:17, which says that 'the children of David were pre-eminent'. So this word in the latter passage certainly cannot mean priest. Indeed, David would have committed sacrilege if he had wanted to introduce his sons into the priesthood. We know what happened to Uzziah for merely wishing to attempt to offer the incense to God (2 Chron. 26:16ff.). 'He was not content with being king', but also wanted to usurp the priesthood, and so he was stricken with leprosy, and was separated in shame from the people. Uzziah certainly wanted to stand apart from the common rank of men, but this was far more than he bargained for - to be cut off as an unclean creature. This proves that David could not have made his sons priests.

1 Actually chapter 18.
Even when Psalm 89 says that our Lord Jesus Christ will be ‘a priest after the order of Melchizedek’, it attributes this priesthood to him as a unique honour and privilege. The apostle to the Hebrews says that Christ needed no companion (in his priestly work) and that he ‘did not take this priestly honour upon himself’ (Heb. 5:4). Since Christ was not a priest who was subject to change, the word ‘priest’ in this passage cannot therefore refer to the order of Aaron. Furthermore, ‘priest’ does not refer to David, because David himself testifies in Psalm 89, which he composed, that it refers to Melchizedek, who was both king and priest, as Genesis 14 says. Now Melchizedek, by virtue of his kingship, also held the office of priest. Similarly, the priesthood was reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ, because it was intended for him. Now kings were also priests (because of their personal pre-eminence) among the early pagans, as we see in their books. But this is quite different from what God established, which was to portray, as in a painting and a mirror, what our Lord Jesus Christ would be. We know that kingship and priesthood are inseparable in Christ, and that he was anointed at the same time both Messiah and Christ. Thus, his anointing served for these two things – priesthood and kingship – in addition to his divine ordination as prophet.

Thus, David’s children could never have been priests, because that would have been an abomination to God. What this expression really means is that David took pains to have them instructed and taught the requirements of the Law. So we must conclude that they were considered excellent persons who were eminent among the people. But this passage extended their excellent reputation in one area by analogy to another area, as though it were saying that they were sacred persons. Still, these words show us that David attempted to make his children worthy, so that he might have good and faithful successors who could train the people in righteousness and maintain them in integrity. That is why he did not bring up his children only in pompous show, but gave them personal excellence so that they might know what it is to govern and might be trained in it for the future. This shows us that he was
not merely content with doing his duty during his life, but that he wanted a well-governed state to continue even after his death. He took great pains to carry this out, but was frustrated in his attempt. It is true that God raised up Solomon to succeed him, as he had promised, but what about Absalom and all the others? Why were they so disorderly?

Although kings may seriously attempt to have their children trained to govern themselves properly, yet they will not always be successful. This principle applies to everyone. Fathers, for instance, often try to train their children properly, and yet they do not get the fruit that they hoped for. This is not meant to make them lose courage, as if to say: ‘Why worry ourselves so much about this matter, since those who are so concerned to guide their children properly are only wasting their time? In fact, we should just leave them alone, since God has promised to take care of them.’

On the contrary, this is the conclusion that we should draw: ‘Since those who take such pains and spend so much to have their children properly taught are still frustrated in their hopes, what terrible things will happen if I care nothing about it, and put the reins in their hands so that they have freedom to become degenerate?’ The sad experience of David teaches fathers to strive even harder to instruct their children.

Fathers are further instructed by this principle to commend their children to God, asking him to instruct them by his Spirit. They must realise that all their labour, industry, and vigilance will be useless unless it is blessed by his Spirit. Even when fathers spare neither gold nor silver, even when they send their children to school, and give them good examples and keep them under a firm hand of leadership — still their whole duty has not been discharged. They can do all of that, and still miss the main thing, which is to call upon God and recognise their dependence upon him to prosper the instruction of their children.

This passage, however, warns us that it is a very rare thing for the children of princes to bear good fruit, even though they have been instructed in their childhood and youth. If ever a prince was concerned to keep his family in the fear of God and to guide and form them according to good rules, it was David —
yet some of his children were wicked and perverse. Absalom wanted to drive out his father and put him to death. Others caused great trouble and sedition in seeking to usurp the royal crown. In addition to that, many other problems arose. In the light of that, let us not be surprised today if the children of rulers are so disorderly, and are more like savage beasts than reasonable creatures.

How are they instructed? People simply make idols of them, and they think that the world is created for them. Far from training them in the fear and truth of God, people ‘stuff cruelty down their throat’ – as the saying goes – and when they are grown, they will not be considered sufficiently important unless they are inflated with so much pride that they could burst. Their best service may be to become a pimp in order to please them and then all the others follow him, being considered idiots and fools if they are not lawless and given over to all kinds of villainy and cruelty. We must not be surprised, then, if corruption is widespread in the world, since those who ought to show a good example to others are full of wickedness and delight in it (Rom. 1:32).

This warns all those whom God keeps in a low condition in society to realise that it is to their advantage when they can govern their families peacefully, and help their children to live in a modest way, and can earn their living honestly by their labour. We see, in fact, how those who have more status or money, even though they are neither princes nor kings, cannot get along with their own children when they grow up. Their children unconsciously become presumptuous and proud. They think: ‘My father is rich; why should I not be treated as my rank demands?’ Then they want to act brazenly and cannot be kept in line. They even despise work and want to live off their rents. Moreover, they spend everything without even thinking. Yet as I have said, those to whom our Lord has given nothing of official authority, or lordships, or great riches, should recognise that he does this for their good and profit. Hence, they ought to be content with their estate and stay in their small position. At the same time, they should rejoice as they teach their family to live properly and see their children trained in the fear of God.
and kept in modesty, as they faithfully earn their living. Thus, they can rejoice because their children are not inflated with pride and presumption, and are not rude, as many are who would like to be on top and climb over others.

So this is what we should finally remember about King David, whose just and righteous actions proved his concern for the welfare of his people. Let us remember that he took pains to instruct his children and also sought officials to help him govern. Furthermore, he asked God to make him prosper by granting his rich blessing to the people. This should cause us to realise that today he continues this same grace in us, and makes us aware of it even more at the right time. Let us realise, in conclusion, that since we are in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, from which flows our salvation, he is the one who naturally causes us to experience his favours, since he is the true substance of the things which were illustrated by figures in those olden times.

Now let us prostrate ourselves before the majesty of our good God, in recognition of the infinite faults of which we are guilty. Let us pray that he will make us so to feel them that this may make us displeased with them and make us always take refuge in his mercy. May we learn to govern ourselves in his obedience so that we will show, in effect, that we are truly the people of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we hold him as our King. And may we be so reformed by his Spirit that our trust in him and confession of faith in him will cause us to renounce all iniquities and everything that is reprehensible. May he not only shower this grace upon us, but on all peoples and nations of the earth . . .