

Truth for Today

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Men who met David: Ittai

This series of talks relate the stories of men who met David. David, the shepherd boy who became Israel's most famous king! David the giant killer! David's history occupies a significant portion of the Old Testament. He is the king against whom all of the other rulers of Israel would be judged. His life is also often a picture of the Lord Jesus. The story of Ittai, one of the men whose life was greatly influenced by David, is an interesting and instructive one. His story is told in a few verses in just two chapters of the Bible but he obviously became a valued and trusted friend to David and a commander in his army.

Let's read these two Scripture portions; the first is in 2 Samuel 15:19-23. "Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, 'Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner and also an exile from your own place. In fact, you came only yesterday. Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you.' And Ittai answered the king and said, 'As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be.' So David said to Ittai, 'Go, and cross over.' Then Ittai the Gittite and all his men and all the little ones who were with him crossed over. And all the country wept with a loud voice, and all the people crossed over. The king himself also crossed over the Brook Kidron, and all the people crossed over toward the way of the wilderness."

To set the story of Ittai in its historical context we need to briefly review what has happened to David so far in his life. David was the youngest son in the family of Jesse, a shepherd by nature and occupation, though he is probably best known as the giant killer! He was the only Israelite prepared to take on Goliath the giant because David had great faith in God. He went on to become a great leader of King Saul's army and eventually, following Saul's death in battle, to become Israel's king. He is described as a man after God's own heart, and was undoubtedly Israel's greatest warrior king. Through his exploits, he extended the borders of Israel and brought freedom and prosperity to the land. He reigned many years over the Israelites and was a much loved king. As was the custom in those days, he also had several wives, one of whom, Maacah was the daughter of the king of the neighbouring kingdom of Geshur. She was the mother of Absalom who plays a prominent part in the story of Ittai.

We learn from Scripture that Prince Absalom was a very handsome man who had been thoroughly spoiled by his father. He was guilty of the murder of his step-brother Amnon and had fled to his mother's homeland, Geshur, to escape punishment. After three years, Absalom had returned to Israel but was never repentant for his deeds. Knowing that his father David would not allow him to succeed to the throne, he planned a palace coup. Just like politicians today, he cultivated the affection of the people with meaningless promises and charming words and, when the time was right, proclaimed himself to be king.

It is remarkable and also shameful that so many people followed Absalom in his rebellion. David had served the nation fairly and faithfully for many, many years. He was responsible for their peace and prosperity. He had been their hero, the theme of their victory songs; but this is all forgotten. Rather than plunge the country into civil war, with all its horrors, David flees Jerusalem, and this is where our story really begins.

Picture with me that desperately sad scene. King David, with those followers who were still faithful to him, leaves the palace at Jerusalem. They go out through the gate of the very city that David himself had taken in battle and make towards the brook Kidron to the east of the city. I am sure that from the vantage point those high city walls offered, many were watching these events unfold. Years later another rejected king, our Lord and Saviour, would go over this same brook on the night He was betrayed.

It is here, on the banks of the Kidron, in clear sight of the city that Ittai meets David and today's story really starts. Ittai was clearly a leader of some experience, who was attracted to David's character and leadership. The remarkable thing is that Ittai was born in the city of Gath! Gath was the birthplace of Goliath the giant whom David had killed many, many years earlier. It is impossible to believe that Ittai didn't know the story; the repercussions of that victory had been so significant for both nations. Goliath was the champion of the Philistines who had hounded and ruled the nation of Israel for many years. The defeat of their champion, Goliath, heralded the start of Israel's deliverance from

their power. Ittai, a resident of the same city, comes to King David, at the very moment of David's rejection to declare his loyalty to him!

David tests Ittai, to make sure he understands what he is committing himself to. "Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner and also an exile from your own place. In fact, you came only yesterday. Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you" (2 Samuel 15:19 and 20). In the sight of his own people, and in plain view of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Ittai had declared himself as a supporter of David at the very time when David had been rejected. It was remarkable loyalty! The other inhabitants of his home city, Gath, must have loathed David, the defeater of their champion! David's own people were in open rebellion against him. "Ittai, do you really know what you are doing?!"

Apparently David had little to offer Ittai. Had Ittai come a few weeks earlier, David would still have been king and could have rewarded his loyalty. Now all he could offer Ittai was his company as he wandered the mountains of Israel in rejection. But that was more than enough for Ittai! His reply to David's probing question is absolutely emphatic! "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be" (2 Samuel 15:21). Not just in the sight of the people, but in the sight of God, Ittai declares his allegiance to David. He says "As the LORD lives". Ittai also acknowledges that, naturally speaking, the outlook was not too bright! He goes on to say "surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be." The prospects were bleak; the shameful rebellion against David had popular support.

This is the first great challenge that Ittai's story brings to us. We, too, were once the enemies of God. "You, who were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works" is how Paul describes us in Colossians 1:21. Just as by birth and nature Ittai was one of Israel's enemies, so we by birth and nature are sinners and consequently set ourselves as enemies of God. In Romans 5:6-10, Paul reminds us that it was while we were sinners and enemies that God demonstrated His love towards us. He gave His only Son to die as a sacrifice for us so that salvation can be offered freely to those who trust in Him. But Ittai, once an enemy of David, now allies himself with David. And he does so in a very clear and public way! In the sight of thousands of people, quite possibly in the sight of those of David's enemies watching from the walls of Jerusalem, Ittai declares his allegiance to David. He had changed sides and was not afraid to let everyone know he had.

He had also counted the cost of his action. When questioned by David, Ittai declared that he wanted to stay with David "whether in death or life". At that moment, the former looked more likely than the latter! Do you not think that in many ways this is similar to Christian Baptism? Those of us who have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour have the opportunity to declare in a public way that we have changed sides; to declare plainly that our allegiance is now entirely to the Lord Jesus, the rejected King. Paul writes: "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

Baptism viewed in this way is a declaration that we have died to ourselves, to our own will and desires, and that the life we will live from now on will be lived for the Lord Jesus in the strength that He provides. Ittai's life would be utterly different from this point on. Everybody would know that he had committed himself to David. Ittai certainly wouldn't be welcome back in his home town of Gath! He was a friend of David who had killed their hero! He wouldn't be welcome in the palace at Jerusalem or at any of its social gatherings. The decisions he had made would change his life forever. Our lives, too, should be markedly different once we have publicly declared our allegiance to the Lord Jesus. It isn't that we should set out to be unwelcome and unpopular; far from it! But the truth is that once we determine to live our lives for the Lord Jesus, there are places and events that will no longer interest us and, quite possibly, people will no longer want us there.

For Ittai this was a price he was quite prepared to pay. His declared intention was that in death or life, he wanted to be in the company of David. Am I, are you also prepared to accept that sacrifices will have to be made in our lives if we want to enjoy the pleasure of the Lord's company each day of our life?

Ittai's story doesn't end here however. We'll read now a little further on in the Bible, 2 Samuel 18:1-5. "And David numbered the people who were with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them. Then David sent out one third of the people under the hand of Joab, one third under the hand of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, 'I also will surely go out with you myself.' But the people answered, 'You shall not go out! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us? But you are worth ten thousand of us now. For you are now more help to us in the city.' Then the king said to them, 'Whatever seems best to you I will do.' So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and by thousands. Now the king had commanded Joab, Abishai, and Ittai,

saying, 'Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.' And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains orders concerning Absalom."

We discover that Ittai is now one of the three leaders of David's army. I am not sure how much time has elapsed since David had been overthrown by his son, Absalom. David had fled Jerusalem and was a fugitive but still had many thousands of loyal followers who had joined him. The time had come for the rebel king Absalom to be removed from power. David was quite willing to lead the army as he had done on many previous occasions. However the people prevail upon him to remain in a place of safety; for the time being, others would do the fighting!

Three men are chosen by David to lead the army. Two are immediately recognisable, Joab and Abishai. Both were famous in Israel for their bravery and courage having fought alongside David for many years. The surprising choice is Ittai! A newcomer, could he be relied upon? Could he be trusted? Evidently he could; he had the confidence of David and of David's followers. What amazing progress Ittai had made in so short a space of time! Formerly from Gath, once an enemy of David and Israel, but now he is a trusted leader in David's army.

This challenges me as to what progress I have made in my Christian life. It does us no harm to consider this. I have a friend who each year goes to a particular Christian conference and uses the time to evaluate what progress he has made spiritually over the previous twelve months since he was last at that same conference. Has he stagnated or has he progressed? The truth is that we can never stand still; either we are like fishes that swim against the stream or we are carried along by the currents that power the culture all around us.

Ittai certainly wasn't standing still! He had come a long way and sacrificed a great deal. He wasn't about to give up or sit still. There was work to do, a battle to be fought and he was armed and ready for the fight. How about you, how about me? David himself had learned very hard lessons about resting or relaxing in this spiritual warfare. Indeed the present troubles that he found himself in could in many ways be linked to a desperately sad lapse in his personal integrity.

David had been a valiant and faithful king. He had led Israel in battle, risking his own life on many occasions to secure them peace and freedom from their many enemies. He had succeeded in establishing the borders of the land of Israel and securing its prosperity. In 2 Samuel 10 the story of one of these battles is recounted. Syria and Ammon, two strong enemy nations, are routed in battle by David who again led his armies personally. In the next chapter there are more battles to be fought but this time David sends his general, Joab to lead the army while he stays at home. It is here that David's problem begins.

From the vantage point of his palace roof he sees a beautiful woman called Bathsheba bathing. He lusts after her, and in spite of the fact that she is married, uses his position as king to satisfy his sexual desires and commit adultery with her. Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's child, and when David hears this he sends to General Joab to recall Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, from the battle on the pretext of bringing David news of the war. He expected Uriah to take advantage of his unexpected return home to spend the night with his wife so that when the child was born Uriah would accept it as his own. Uriah's attitude is a rebuke to David. Completely unaware of David's schemes, Uriah does not spend the night in the comfort of his own bed. The armies of Israel are out fighting for David. Why should he, Uriah, sleep comfortably when his fellow soldiers are out sleeping under the night sky? David might be in a nice bed but his soldiers weren't and nor was Uriah!

David now compounds his sin of adultery with that of murder. He sends word to Joab to place Uriah, a brave soldier, in the fiercest part of the battle and withdraw from him so that he is isolated and killed. Although he didn't actually kill Uriah himself, David is clearly responsible for his death. Premeditated murder! David, who had so often risked his own life for others, is now responsible for the death of a faithful, brave soldier, in a vain attempt to cover up his own sins. David, you should have been out with your army, fighting the battles of the LORD and none of this would have happened! God sends Nathan a prophet to David to confront him with his sins. David repents and is forgiven but he is told by God through Nathan the prophet that he has set a chain of events in play that will cause great misery and death in his own family.

This is not the only time in the Bible that a great victory is followed by personal failure. Elijah on Mount Carmel won a great victory against the prophets of Baal but then fled before the threats of a woman. It is a serious warning to each of us. One success in spiritual affairs is not an excuse to relax and take things easy. David should have been with his troops, fighting the battles of the LORD. Instead he is relaxing at home; he falls into temptation and sets in train a dreadful chain of events.

Let's return to the story of Ittai. He hasn't relaxed and sat about. Ittai had declared his intention to follow David in death and in life. He wanted to be where David was in rejection. He has made real and significant progress in his life. He was a general of one third of David's army! David himself acknowledged that Ittai had only just joined with them; surely there were those that David had known for years who could have led the army. Maybe; but David saw in Ittai,

progress, commitment and trustworthiness. A man who led from the front, by example; what a lot of progress Ittai had made in a very short time!

We can't all be leaders like Ittai, but we should all make steady progress in our Christian lives. One of the recurring themes in the New Testament is growth and progress. It is not that we need to grow and progress to secure our salvation, not at all. If we have trusted the Lord Jesus as Saviour, our salvation is absolutely and eternally secure. However, having become a Christian we should, as Peter writes, "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). The apostle Paul, in the letter to the Philippians wrote "that I might know Him" Surely Paul knew the Lord Jesus better than most! Yes, but he wanted to know still more!

Is this what makes the difference between some Christians who make steady growth and progress in their spiritual lives and some Christians who don't appear to make much progress at all? When I was a lot younger and in Sunday school, we would sometimes sing "Read your Bible, pray every day and you'll grow, grow grow." Simple, but true! If we regularly and prayerfully study the Bible we will grow, grow grow! In the New Testament we also have the picture used of a living healthy body to describe all Christians: "but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16). So as individuals we should be concerned to grow in our Christian experience and we should also be doing our part to help other Christians to grow as well. In our story, Ittai had made real and tangible progress as he stayed near David. So will we if we stay close to the Lord Jesus and study His word.

The other obvious parallel we can draw from Ittai is that we too are called to be soldiers. This is a familiar picture used of Christians in the New Testament. With our Lord rejected, we are effectively in enemy territory; all that goes on around us, whether apparently good or clearly evil, is energised and directed by Satan, the prince or ruler of this world. Satan will resist at every opportunity God's work in this world, he will never miss an opportunity to attack our faith and Christian witness. This is surely becoming increasingly obvious even in Britain. The Devil knew exactly how and when to attack David, and he knows how and when to attack us.

Paul however makes it clear in Ephesians 6 that we have every necessary resource available to us for our complete protection. There has been a lot of anger recently that our soldiers have had to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan without having even some basic equipment provided for them. The Christian is never in this situation! Paul exhorts us: "Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). If I am unprotected and vulnerable, it is because I have failed to use the armour that God has provided for me. The ultimate course to victory is assured. When David went to fight Goliath he said, "The battle is the LORD'S" (1 Samuel 17:47). Our concern should be that day by day we use the armour that God has provided, to be vigilant and to resist the attacks of Satan.

So Ittai has so much to teach us. His loyalty and devotion to David still challenge us today. Do we have the same degree of loyalty and devotion to our rejected King, the Lord Jesus? And if we do, are we prepared as Ittai was, to make the commitment to follow closely and serve the Lord Jesus faithfully in spite of what others do or think?

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