

David Defeats the Philistines

Second Samuel 5:17-25 and First Chronicles 14:8-17

DIG: What did David's victories here do to the long-range plans of the Philistines? What would have happened if David had lost these battles? What changed the Philistines view of him? What strategic steps did David take to ensure success against the Philistines? What significance for a revived Isra'el do you see in his action, prayers, speech, removal of pagan idols, and obedience to YHVH?

REFLECT: Do you inquire of the LORD when making important decisions? David's first victory was insufficient. How do you react when "your best shot" requires a second effort? Give up? Try something new? What factors help you tune in better to ADONAI's game plan? What idols have you gotten rid of lately? The second time the Philistines came up and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim, David might have reasoned that he had guidance the first time, so he didn't need to ask ADONAI again. How wrong he would have been! Ponder the implications of this for your own life.

1002-1001 BC

As long as David was only king of Judah, the Philistines were content to tolerate his rule, but when he was proclaimed king over all Isra'el and captured Jerusalem and made it his capital, he became too powerful to be trusted. At that point they stopped tolerating David's exploits and saw him as a serious threat to their power. Therefore, they made two concerted efforts to divide his territory and weaken his effectiveness.

David's decisive campaign against the Philistines, which freed Isra'el from all further danger of the domination, reduced the ancient foe to the status of a minor power and destroyed once and for all their hopes of dominating the Mediterranean seaboard, is briefly described. Had the Philistines been successful in defeating David at the beginning of his reign over the united tribes, it is doubtful whether he would have been able to command the allegiance that enhanced his reputation among the peoples of the region. Isaiah made a passing reference to David's victories (Is 28:21) and expected it to be immediately meaningful, more than two centuries later. For Isra'el it must have had the same emotional effect as the Battle of Britain and the D-Day landings during the Second World War.²⁵¹

The First Campaign: Once more the Philistines! Both armies relied on military intelligence reports as they deployed their forces, when the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Isra'el, they went up in full force to search for him, but David heard about it and went down to the stronghold at Masada by the Dead Sea, about thirty-five miles southwest of Adullam. The Hebrew word *mesuda* means *fortress* or *stronghold*. (Second Samuel 5:17; First Chronicles 14:8a). But this time they knew that David was not merely a rival to Ish-Bosheth, and furthermore, the capture of Jerusalem let them know that he was no longer their vassal. As the sole ruler of Isra'el, David was challenging their control over the entire area and was their enemy. David's retreat to Masada suggests that his tactics were to resort to the kind of guerrilla warfare that he had been accustomed.

Now the Philistines had come and spread out and raided the Valley of Rephaim, a broad upland plain extending for some three miles southwest of Jerusalem. Their purpose was to attack at the point where David's fortifications were arguably the weakest, for this was an area that the Israelites had not yet been able to build up their defenses. Their purpose was to capture Yerushalayim and crush David before he got any stronger. So David, as always, inquired of the LORD by means of the Urim and Thummin that gave only "yes" or "no" answers (see the commentary on Exodus 6b - The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions). He asked: Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you deliver them into my hands? ADONAI answered him with a one-word answer: Yes. In effect, saying: For I will surely deliver the Philistines into your hands (Second Samuel 5:18-19; First Chronicles 14:9-10).

Therefore, David and his men went out to meet them at Ba'al Perazim, and there he defeated them. The name of the place commemorates the fact that David was able to break through the enemy lines so decisively, as waters break through a dam, that it seemed to him as if YHVH had broken through ahead of him. So that place was called Ba'al Perazim or *Lord of the breakthrough*. In full retreat from the forces of Isra'el, the Philistines abandoned their idols there. Far from saving the Philistines, those idols couldn't even save themselves! This time it was the Philistines leaving their gods behind, rather than the Jews leaving the ark of the Covenant behind (First Samuel 4:1-11). So David and his men carried them off the battlefield, and in obedience to the Torah (Deuteronomy 7:5 and 25), burned them in the fire (Second Samuel 5:20-21; First Chron 14:8b and 11-12).

The Second Campaign: On another occasion, the Philistines came up again because the first defeat was not decisive enough for them. And once again they spread out in the Valley of Rephaim to attempt to capture Jerusalem. So David inquired of the prophet Nathan. He did not take for granted that his God-given strategy in the first battle would succeed a second time, nor did he trust his own expertise. So he asked anew for guidance and ADONAI answered: Do not go directly after them, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the poplar trees. This surprise attack from the rear would have the advantage of cutting off the Philistine retreat route. As soon as you hear the sound of marching (the wind would make the sound of marching feet in the tops of the poplar trees), move to battle quickly, because that will mean YHVH has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army. David needed to move quickly with the Ruach HaKodesh if he was to fulfill God's purpose to defeat the enemy. There was a time for waiting and a time for action. David knew the difference (Second Samuel 5:22-24; First Chronicles 14:13-15).

David accomplished what Sha'ul had failed to achieve because David did as ADONAI-Tzva'ot commanded him and triumphed once again. Obedience was the secret to David's success just as disobedience caused Sha'ul to fail. Indeed, David was in a rare company of people, rare even in the Bible, of whom it could be said that they did as YHVH commanded them. And he struck down the Philistine army all the way from Gibeon near the Valley of Rephaim to Gezer, a distance of about sixteen miles. The defeated Philistines, knowing that their direct line of retreat westwards was blocked by David's army, had to make a detour northwards to Gibeon before they could turn downhill towards the Valley of Rephaim and on to Gezer. This time the battle was so decisive that from that time on the Philistines ceased to be a serious menace to Isra'el.²⁵² Therefore, David's fame spread throughout every land, and ADONAI made all the nations fear him (Second Samuel 5:25; First Chronicles 14:16-17).