

The Least will be First

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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1 Samuel 16:6-13(NRSV)

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

2 Samuel 7:8-17 (NRSV)

⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. ¹⁵But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. ¹⁷In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

God doesn't see us as others do. God doesn't look at our outward appearance, whether we've gained or lost ten pounds, whether we are wearing the latest styles. God "looks on the heart." When God looked on the heart of young David, what did he see?

This week, we embark on a series of studies looking at the stories of King David through the lenses of his personal relationships, beginning with David's relationship with God. It will be a fascinating journey, as the Bible devotes more narrative space to the stories of David than to any other person, with the exception of Jesus. The question is why. Granted, David came to be seen as the idealized king of Israel. And yes, he was the one with whom God made an everlasting covenant. But still, what will find in these stories that God wants us to see? What will we learn about our own life with God from David's life with God? Eugene Peterson writes:

“The way of David is rich in so much of what is involved in dealing with all we deal with – men and women, enemies and friends, sex and children. The story is woven in a rich tapestry of love and war, deeply textured in all the emotions that express the highs and lows of daily existence. David is nothing if not *interesting*. There is a charismatic verve to his life that compelled the attention of everyone. The stories about him quickly developed in Israel into something approaching a national myth. The people of Israel remembered and talked about everything and everyone that had to do with this man.”¹ Our question will be simply, why?

The Book of Samuel

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are actually one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls couldn't hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well. However, it is not true of New Testament books such as 1 & 2 Corinthians or 1 & 2 Thessalonians which are all different letters written by the apostle Paul.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a monarchy roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. During the time of the judges, the Israelites were organized into a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. Though God was to be the king of the Israelites, the people demanded a human king like everyone else had. Samuel warned the people that they didn't understand the consequences of their demand for a king, but the people would not relent and God let them have a king. The first was Saul. Under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon the twelve tribes were organized into a monarchy with centralized wealth and military power.

Not only do kings emerge in Israel during this time, but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

Setting the stage

When the twelve Israelite tribes conquered and settled in Canaan, they were not ruled by kings. Instead the LORD God was their king and they were led by men and women called judges. Samson, Gideon, and Deborah were a few of these leaders.

Things did not go well in the time of the judges. The people drifted further and further from God. They even began to clamor for a human king, so they could be just like all their neighbors. The last of the judges, a prophet named Samuel, confronted them about their desire for kings. Kings are *takers*, he warned. Kings *take* sons for his armies and daughters for his cooking. Kings *take* the best of the fields and the vineyards. Kings *take* property. *Take, take, take* (1 Samuel 8).² But the people didn't listen; they persisted and God relented, granting their wish.

So God found a king for his people. His name was Saul and he certainly looked the part, for “there was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else” (1 Samuel 9:2). Interestingly, so far as the people were concerned, Saul was chosen by lot (1 Sam. 10:17-27a).³

But despite Samuel's anointing of Saul as the first king of a united Israel, Saul proved to be a disappointment. He might have looked like God's king, but he showed himself to be disobedient to God, figuring that, as king, he knew better. Saul even tried to supplant Saul

¹from Peterson's book, *The Jesus Way*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2007, p. 80

²This theme of kings as takers is one to keep in mind as we move through the stories of David. Nathan, Samuel's successor as prophet to the king, would accuse David of this very charge. In the end, the people of God could count on one hand the number of good kings they had over a period stretching four centuries! Of course, good didn't mean a capable military leader or a competent administrator, but a king who would lead the people back toward God.

³Choosing by lots, i.e., throwing the dice, was seen as a way of leaving the decision up to God, figuring that God would make the dice come out the way God wanted them to. This is the same method that the disciples used to replace Judas after Jesus' ascension.

in some of his duties (see 1 Samuel 13-15 for more on Saul's disobedience). And so, "The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Sam. 15:35).

David

David is a towering figure in the story of God's people for several reasons. First, the Israelites came to embrace David as their greatest king, the man who consolidated the nation. For example, David conquered the city-state of Jerusalem, which was a neutral location belonging to none of the twelve tribes, and made it his capital. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. His son, Solomon, would build God's temple there. Later, Solomon, would take Israel to its zenith of military power and wealth, but Solomon also sowed the seeds of Israel's division into two kingdoms.

Second, David was more than just Israel's king. He was its poet, the composer of many psalms. The stories of David, Saul, Jonathan, Bathsheba, Absalom and the rest are the most skillfully drawn narratives in the Old Testament. It is as if the writers and editors of the Hebrew Scriptures devoted their best and most poignant story-telling to the story of David, from his defeat of Goliath to his affair with Bathsheba to the tragedy of his son, Absalom.

But there is another reason that the Israelites and we are so drawn to the figure of David. David may have been Israel's greatest king and he may have been a "man after God's own heart," but David, like us all, made terrible and tragic mistakes. It is a little surprising that the writers of Samuel told the story of David and Bathsheba at all. The book of Chronicles leaves it out. In it we see the story of a powerful man who yielded to temptation, eventually arranging the murder of his pregnant lover's husband. Later, David would fail his own overambitious sons. Such stories reassure us that even David, anointed by God, could make terrible choices against God and others, and yet remain within God's loving, gracious grasp.

God chooses a new king . . . well, yes and no

God decides to replace Saul and sends Samuel to the home of Jesse, who lives in Bethlehem. Jesse has eight sons. Samuel is to fill his animal horn with oil for he is going to anoint a new king, though Samuel doesn't yet know who it will be.

The first son, Eliab, is brought before Samuel. Like Saul, Eliab looks like he is from central casting. But God tells Samuel that Eliab is not the one. God won't look at outward appearances but at the heart. So, one by one, Jesse parades his sons before Samuel, who says that none of them have been chosen by God. Finally, Samuel asks if there are any more sons and learns that the baby of the family is out back tending the sheep.

So the young shepherd is brought in and Samuel instantly knows that he is the one. Yes, young David looks both healthy and handsome, but we know that God has looked on his heart and seen what God wanted to see. So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David, after which the Spirit of the Lord "came mightily upon David from that day forward" 1 Sam. 16:13). And, in the next verse, we learn that the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.

Do David and Saul know what has happened, that the young shepherd has been handpicked to replace Saul? "No" is the simple answer and the ensuing tension grows inexorably as the lives of these two men, one king and one a young shepherd, become ever more entwined. God's king, David, *will* take the throne. The only questions are when and how.

Thus, David's relationship with God begins when God looks into David's heart and finds a heart to God's liking. Despite all that lies ahead, God would confirm this choice when David finally sits on the throne of Israel. Today's second Scripture passage is from 2 Samuel 7. The prophet Nathan brings God's word to David, word that David's family would always sit on the throne of Israel. This dynasty would last four centuries until the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and deposed the king in 587BC. By the time of Jesus, the Israelites/Jews waited anxiously for a Messiah (which simply means "anointed one") from the house of David who would lead the people to freedom.

Samuel's Story

It was more than a thousand years before Jesus, and darkness had fallen across the Promised Land. For nearly 200 years, the Israelites had conquered and settled Canaan. Though God had been their king, the generations of Israelites had been caught in a descending spiral of godlessness and violence. Unwilling to embrace and live out the covenant they had made with the LORD God, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). In the midst of this darkness, an Israelite woman named Hannah wept bitterly because she could have no children. She prayed to God that she would conceive, promising to dedicate her child to the LORD's service if God would only grant her request. Hannah did conceive, bearing a son whom she named Samuel. True to her word, when the boy was still very young, Hannah took him to be raised in the house of the LORD at Shiloh, by Eli, the priest, and his sons. She "left him there for the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:28).

But the darkness had settled even upon the LORD's house at Shiloh, for "the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:11). In this troubled house, all we are told about the boy Samuel is that he "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (2:26).

Samuel's call to ministry

One evening, the boy is sleeping in the tent sanctuary near the ark of the covenant when he is awakened by a voice. Thinking that he has been called by Eli, Samuel hops up and runs to Eli's room. But Eli, probably thinking that the boy has been dreaming, tells Samuel to go to bed. It happens a second time and, again, Eli sends the boy back to bed (if you are a parent, you can picture this). Samuel is awakened yet a third time and this time, Eli seems to realize that something big is going on. Eli tells Samuel to go back and say to the LORD, "Here I am, for you called me" (3:8).

And so God calls the boy Samuel to a life of ministry, saying, "See, I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle," for God would let none of Samuel's words "fall to the ground" unheard. The young boy would grow to be the one who would lead Israel from the darkness of the judges to the seeming hopefulness of the first kings. He was Israel's last judge and the first in a line of prophets who would anoint the kings of Israel and, later, Judah.

Though God had been their king, the Israelites insisted on having a human king like other people had. In 1 Samuel 8, the tribal elders gather to demand that Samuel appoint a king. God reassures Samuel that the people are rejecting God and not the judgeship of Samuel. So Samuel brought to the people God's words of warning: *they would regret that they ever asked for a king, for kings are takers*. But, in the end, God relented and told Samuel to anoint a young man named Saul as Israel's first king. When Saul proved to be a big disappointment, God told Samuel to anoint David as the second king of the united Israel, even while Saul was still king.

1 Samuel 25 records Samuel's death. We are told that "all Israel assembled and mourned for him." However, in 1 Samuel 28, Saul calls Samuel's ghost back from the grave to help out in a battle against the Philistines! But Samuel reminds Saul that God has handed the kingdom to David for a reason.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin this week by discussing what you already know about the stories. Most of us could say something about David and Goliath or David and Bathsheba. What else? How much have we learned about the man on whom Scripture lavishes so much attention?
2. God chooses David for his heart; he is a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). What would you expect that God looks for in the heart? How would you expect this heart to play out in David's life? What do you think God sees when he looks at your heart? How different do you think your heart might be from David's? David wrote nearly half the psalms. Read psalm 6 and ask yourself what God is looking for in David – on what will their relationship be based?
3. Saul turns out to be a bad choice. How could such a thing be? Didn't God send Samuel to anoint Saul? Could God get this wrong? The story of Saul poses some real challenges for how we think about God. We are told, "the Lord was sorry that he made Saul king over Israel" (1 Sam. 15:35). How could an all-powerful, all-knowing God be sorry about anything? What sort of God is sorry for something he did?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

In this week's readings, we'll look at passages related to freedom and liberty.

<p>Monday, 1 Samuel 1 The birth and consecration of Samuel</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Samuel 3 The story of Samuel's call to the Lord's service while he was still a young boy.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 7:15 – 8:22 Samuel warns the people that kings are takers.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Samuel 9:1 – 10:16 Saul's anointing</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Samuel 10:17-27a Saul is chosen king by lots.</p>	<p>Saturday, 1 Samuel 15 A story of Saul's sin and his rejection by God</p>

