

God - The Promise-maker and Keeper

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

6th in a seven-part series

September 8, 2024

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2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (NIV)

After the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

³Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you.”

⁴But that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying:

⁵“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? ⁶I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. ⁷Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

⁸“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. ¹⁰And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning ¹¹and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you:

¹⁶Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.’”

Promises made are often not kept. But that cannot be said of God.

I recently found a fun website (ok . . . at least fun for me!) called “This vs That.”¹ It is all about comparing ideas and concepts. I asked it to compare “promise” and “covenant.” Here is a summary:

Covenant vs. Promise -- What's the Difference?

Covenant and promise are two terms often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings. A covenant is a formal agreement or contract between two or more parties, typically binding and enforceable by law or a higher authority. It involves mutual obligations and responsibilities that each party must fulfill. On the other hand, a promise is a verbal or written commitment made by one person to another, without the same level of formality or legal implications as a covenant. While both involve commitments, covenants are usually

¹ <https://thisvsthat.io>

more significant and binding, while promises can be more casual and flexible.

That's how I've always thought of it. A promise does not entail a corresponding commitment from the recipient of the promise, but a covenant is explicitly about mutual commitment.

In the Bible, God makes promises, such as the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and God's promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah. But God enters into a covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Both God and the people make commitments with attendant blessings and curses that follow from keeping or breaking the covenant. Which brings us to David and the promise God makes regarding the future of David's family or in biblical parlance, his household.

Some background

Last week, we saw David on the run from Saul and that chase went on for a long time. But eventually, Saul and Jonathan were killed in a battle with the Philistines, after which David became the chieftain of the tribe of Judah though not the other tribes. David would rule over Judah as their king for six and a half years. Sadly, Saul's death and the rise of David brought division among the tribes and a civil war broke out. It was brief and the forces of David prevailed. Sadly, this struggle would break out in full rebellion and permanent division after the death of Solomon's son.

After David's victory over the forces faithful to Saul, David became the king of the united tribes, making him the second king of the united Israel. He proceeded to conquer Jerusalem, winning it from the Jebusites, defeat the Philistines, and bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem.

After all this, in today's passage from 2 Samuel, he sat down and contemplated what he might do for God.

Build a temple for God?

Well, David lands on the idea that it is high time for him to build a temple of stone, a permanent dwelling place, for God. So he went to a prophet, Nathan, and told him what he had resolved to do. But that night, God has something to say about this.

Professor John Goldingay tells this story so much that I could so I'm turning it over to him, with apologies for the length of the quoted material . . . but, really, it is good.

One of my colleagues likes to remind people that Jesus never talks about our establishing God's kingdom or furthering it or building it or extending it. In the Gospels, the only things we do to God's kingdom are wait for it, see it, enter it, seek it, receive it, inherit it, and declare that it has come. In other words, we don't have an active relationship to it at all. In U.S. culture, this is an unpopular point to make, because people like to feel they can make a difference. They want to achieve. I enjoy watching students shift in their seats unhappily when I repeat my colleague's point. We don't like the fact that the gospel is about what God has done for us and not about what we do for God. (Yes, I know, we do have responsibility, and we are challenged to serve God and serve the world and so on, but we will not understand our role—and avoid disillusion—unless we see the point about the way Jesus talks.)

So David is our patron saint. Oddly (but like us), David started off as the person God simply selected. He did not become God's anointed because of what he had done. Indeed, for a long time he was rather good at not seeking to bring about the fulfillment of God's purpose and rather good at waiting for God to bring things about. Now he has seized history by the horns. He has determined on a capital city and moved the covenant chest [the ark of the covenant] there, and next he wants to build a proper house for it. He is amusingly embarrassed at the fact that he lives in a proper house, a rather splendid one at that, nicely roofed and/or pillared and/or paneled with the cedar wood from Lebanon that was the gift of the king of Tyre (2 Samuel 5:11). God's sanctuary has always been portable, like a Bedouin tent. On the way to Canaan it moved around as Israel moved around, and it has moved around within the country since Israel arrived in Canaan, but now it can and surely should become a proper house, shouldn't it?

"Of course," says the prophet Nathan. Excuse me, who are you, we haven't heard of you, where did you come from? Nathan is not the first prophet who has been mentioned as advising David; a prophet called Gad has been doing so (see 1 Samuel 22:5). The best-known prophets, people such as Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, are pretty independent of the kings they are involved with, and that is a major reason for their existence. They are there to stand up to the king. Like other Middle Eastern societies, however, Israel also had prophets who were on the king's staff, to provide him with the guidance he needs. The trouble is, once you are on the payroll, it's very hard to bite the hand that feeds you, especially when it may not merely bite you back but order your execution. You get sucked into the institution. This is why it is virtually impossible for a pastor to be a prophet (my students hate me for telling them that, too). Pastors therefore have to cultivate prophets who will stand up to them, and so do kings. I have just listened to an inaugural lecture by one of my colleagues in which he commented on how important it is to see people who disagree with you as a gift rather than a nuisance or threat. They are the people who help you find out that you are wrong. We will discover that Nathan developed that capacity, but on his first appearance he is just the king's yes-man. He takes God's name in vain, assuring David that God is with him without asking whether this is so.

Then, deliciously, God taps Nathan on the shoulder that night. Did Nathan have a nasty feeling he might have been a bit hasty in saying yes to David? Was he tossing and turning? "Err, excuse me, Nathan. You know this house. It's for me to live in, right? Do you think that perhaps I should be consulted about it? Actually I don't care so much for houses. I like being on the move, you see." God's problem with us is that we like to tie God down, keep God under control. We don't want God on the loose. God likes being on the loose.

God's other problem is the one from which we started. David is getting too fond of taking initiatives for God. He is reversing the relationship between people and God. He wants to build God a house; God counters that declaration by announcing the intention of building David a house. The Hebrew word for house, *beth* (as in Bethlehem or Bethel), means both a house made of brick or stone and a house made of people, a household, and God makes use of this double meaning in reversing David's plan. When God has reestablished who has the sovereignty in this relationship by

starting to build David a household, in the sense that his son has succeeded him as king in the way Saul's son did not succeed him, then this son can fulfill David's plan and build God the house that God doesn't really want.

Thus when God agrees to the building of a temple, it has a similar significance to God's agreeing that Israel should have kings. God doesn't really want it, but God will let us have our way. Indeed, in both cases God goes much further than grudging agreement. The very commitment to the monarchy that God makes in this chapter shows how far God will go with us in connection with something that God doesn't really want. This is just as well, because the pattern that runs through 1 and 2 Samuel reappears in the church. The New Testament doesn't leave much room for the position of senior pastor or church buildings (our equivalents of king and temple), but the church soon invented them, and once again God shrugs shoulders and cooperates.²

Professor Goldingay's last couple of sentences are something to think about, aren't they. I don't agree with him, but we don't all have to agree about everything.

Back to David . . . He wanted to build a house of stone for God but God, instead, promised him a house of people, descendants, one of whom would always sit on the throne of Israel. It worked out that way, sort of, in that there was a successor king to David for four hundred years. However, with the arrival of the Babylonian Exile in 586 BC that line would come to an end. And so the Jews awaited a new king, a proper king, one from the line of David, a true Anointed One. They thought this king would arrive in power and might and wonder and glory. I guess they forgot the lesson of David, the shepherd, the least of Jesse's sons. Finally, the long-awaited Davidic King was born to a peasant girl from Nazareth and would be named Yeshua, or as we know, him, Jesus. The Son of David indeed. Promise made. Promise Kept.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Judges*

This class will continue our study of the book of Judges.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

This class will continue with our study of the book of Acts.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

² John Goldingay, [*1 and 2 Samuel for Everyone: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*](#), Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), 133–135.

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: Continuing *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.