

Meet the King

2 Samuel 5:1-16

The December 29, 2005 *Sydney Morning Dispatch* carried the following sports item:

ROGER Loughran stood tall and proud in the saddle of Central House at the end of the Paddy Power Dial-A-Bet Chase on Tuesday, and waved his whip at the packed grandstand. He was celebrating his first winner as a professional jockey, and in a grade 1 event, too. Just for good measure, he swung a looping underarm punch into the air.

There was just one problem with this picture of sporting delight: they still had 80 metres to run. Loughran had mistaken the end of a running rail for the winning post, and as he eased up on Central House, Hi Cloy and Fota Island galloped past and relegated him to third place.

For two weeks, we have quickly reviewed the first half of David's life, from shepherd boy to the threshold of the throne of Israel. For over a decade, David has been running from King Saul, who thinks that if he can kill David, he can thwart God's plan to strip the kingdom from his heirs. David fled to Philistia, an act of utter faithlessness. Upon his return to Judah, he ran from one cave to the next. Finally, the running would end. Once the crown was placed on David's head, one might think that his life should be smooth sailing. Even David must have thought in such terms. But, beware of premature celebrations, for as we shall soon see, for David reigning would prove as challenging as running.

In many ways, David's story is our story. As we progress toward Jesus, we arrive at great landmarks, but the journey is not over, and if we allow ourselves to rest on our spiritual laurels and accomplishments and cease to move forward, we will inevitably stumble.

I. Israel's Unity Is Restored under David's Crown (1-5)

¹All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "We are your own flesh and blood. ²In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.' "

³When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a compact with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

⁴David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. ⁵In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

A. What Had Been Going on for the Last Seven and One-half Years?

That last verse tells us that before all of Israel recognized David as their king, he had reigned over the single tribe of Judah. He was anointed king of Judah, his native tribe, upon the death of Saul, but it took seven and one-half more years before Israel was united under David's crown.

King Saul had been pursuing David, but he became distracted in his murderous intents when Israel's old enemies, the Philistines, once again raised their ugly heads. Saul and his son Jonathan, David's dearest friend, died in that conflict. David became king of Judah, and a bloody war between David and the house of Saul followed. Abner, who formerly had served Saul, realized that to fight David was to fight God, for the prophet Samuel had made God's intentions clear. Abner began to work for the unification of the twelve tribes under David, but David's chief general, Joab, did not trust Abner. Joab murdered Abner, much to David's displeasure.

A son of Saul named Ish-bosheth was recognized as king by those who remained loyal to the house of Saul. However, when it became clear that this arrangement would be short-lived, two fellow-tribesmen of Ish-bosheth murdered him in his own bed. They did this to impress David, but David found their actions despicable and immediately had them executed. He knew that such gratuitous bloodshed would only complicate his ascension to Israel's throne, and he was right. David was generally known as a man of blood. The other tribes had to move beyond that impression. Much of these seven and one-half years simply passed as David proved himself to be an effective king over Judah and as his more diplomatic servants brokered a new alliance.

B. A Three-fold National Realization

Eventually, "all the tribes of Israel" came around and sent their representatives to Hebron, the seat of David's one-tribe government, with the intent of naming him king. The talking points that had been used to bring this to pass were reiterated when the elders came to David.

First, they said, "We are your own flesh and blood." They realized that they were all descendants of Jacob, whom God had named Israel. It was immoral and politically scandalous that they were not a single nation, but had in fact been at war with one another.

Then, they added, "In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns." In a sense, they were conceding that David had already earned the job and had proven himself even in the days of Saul. David had been recognized as the warrior and deliverer of Israel, which, of course, was precisely what drove jealous Saul over the edge.

Finally, they acknowledged, "And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'" It seems that this should have been the first consideration rather than the last one, but God was content to allow His word through the prophet Samuel be confirmed over the course of time. The nation had to see in David not so much the ability to rule as the heart to shepherd. It wasn't David's fault that so much blood had been shed. In fact, it broke his heart. Still, David was identified with the violence and God gave the nation time to come around to the realization that David could reign as a shepherd rather than a butcher.

David was the first king in history to be called a shepherd for his people, but he established a popular new paradigm. Kings, sheiks and suzerains throughout the Middle East appropriated the designation of "shepherd" when they wanted to convey to their rule a character of watchfulness and gentleness. Few have lived up to the moniker. In fairness, David himself did not always live up to it, but God's purpose for David was not that He be a perfect shepherd-king, but rather, that he would establish a new way for the world to think about kings. That way, when the one perfect Shepherd from heaven came, many souls would be willing to embrace Him also as their King.

C. David Reigns under a Holy Contract

David and the elders of the tribes made a "compact" ... "before the LORD" or "in the presence of *JEHOVAH*." Saul had abused his power. Once, in his pursuit of David, he executed the high priest and 85 of his associates. Then, he slaughtered their entire town. The elders, understandably, were telling David, "We don't want a second king who forgets that he is to shepherd God's nation." I don't know precisely what this "compact" entailed, but I suspect that it relied heavily on the ancient words of the Law that spoke to the day when Israel would appoint a king:

¹⁴When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," ¹⁵be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. ¹⁶The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." ¹⁷He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

¹⁸When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. ¹⁹It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees ²⁰and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. – Deuteronomy 17:14-20

II. Israel's Government Is Established in David's Capital (6-12)

A. Jerusalem Was Not Always the City of David

It was likely that during those years David had been cave-hopping in Judah that he first looked up and set his sites on Jerusalem as an ideal capital city for a newly-restored nation. Jerusalem was situated between Judah and Benjamin, but it was not controlled by either tribe. It was a bit like a city-state that was occupied by the Jebusites, descendants of one of the ancient Canaanite nations. It was a city of hills. In the days of Joshua, Israel had secured the low-lying areas of Jerusalem, but not the formidable mountain citadel called "Zion." By David's day, the Jebusites pretty well ran the whole place once again. Jerusalem was almost impregnable, it was neutral turf so far as Judah and the other tribes were concerned and taking it from the Jebusites was an item of unfinished business for God. It would be perfect for a royal city.

B. Jerusalem and the Citadel of Zion Are Taken verses 6-8

⁶The king and his men marched to Jerusalem to attack the Jebusites, who lived there. The Jebusites said to David, "You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off." They thought, "David cannot get in here." ⁷Nevertheless, David captured the fortress of Zion, the City of David.

⁸On that day, David said, "Anyone who conquers the Jebusites will have to use the water shaft to reach those 'lame and blind' who are David's enemies." That is why they say, "The 'blind and lame' will not enter the palace."

We are a week away from the Super Bowl. Inevitably we will hear references to what the talking heads call "Bulletin Board Material." Some dumb lineman will say something that will be construed as disrespecting Seattle or implying that granite-jawed Bill Cowher likes to watch *Dancing with the Network Stars*, and that will get the other team fired-up to play. It seems that few things riled David up for a fight quite like pagans poking fun at Israel's soldiers. Years ago, even when David was just a shepherd-kid, taunting Israel's armies had cost Goliath his head.

The Jebusites were so proud of their defenses that they said, "We don't even need our fighting men to handle you" ... "the blind and the lame can ward you off." David construed a plan to penetrate the citadel through its water system. The rest is history. David was so annoyed by that "blind and lame" crack that he barred "the blind and the lame" from his palace. Evidently, he was only referring figuratively to Canaanites, because the crippled son of his old friend Jonathan, a young man named Mephibosheth, would become a regular face at the royal dining table.

C. David Improved Jerusalem throughout His Reign verses 9-12

⁹David then took up residence in the fortress and called it the City of David. He built up the area around it, from the supporting terraces inward. ¹⁰And he became more and more powerful, because the LORD God Almighty was with him.

¹¹Now Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, along with cedar logs and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a palace for David. ¹²And David knew that the LORD had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel.

These verses represent an overview of what David accomplished over the course of many years. Some scholars suggest that he didn't start building his palace for anywhere from eight to 25 years, because this Hiram, the king of Tyre who was so helpful to David in his construction endeavors, was still alive years later to support Solomon, David's son, in his building projects.

Most noteworthy in these verses are what the text discloses about the reason David succeeded, "the LORD Almighty was with him." This is YAWEH Sabaoth, the LORD of hosts. This is the name Martin Luther used in his great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, when he speaks of Him Who protects us from "this world with devils filled" that "doth threaten to undo us." This name of God is significant because it emphasizes God's supreme power over every other power in the material and spiritual universe." What crazy king or Philistine army or Jebusite stronghold could prevent David from prospering when God, Who is powerful over every power, had His back?

Verse 12 says, "David knew that the LORD had established him." How did he know? How could He miss it? Could a shepherd in his teens really take down a giant by himself? Could he become Israel's best warrior simply with the training he picked up in his father's pastures? Twice, David resisted the temptation to slay Saul in his sleep. His men thought he had blown his big chance to secure the crown, but he ended up with the crown anyway. David knew God was for him.

How about you? David was a man of courage and passion, but sometimes, he was a man of cowardice, deception and sin. God's faithfulness to David through his failings may have said more to him than God's conspicuous presence in his victories. When the Bible reminds you that "... neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation ..." can separate you from God's love, do you grasp what it means for LORD Sabaoth to be on your side?

III. Israel's Glory Is Imperiled by David's Corruption (13-15)

¹³After he left Hebron, David took more concubines and wives in Jerusalem, and more sons and daughters were born to him. ¹⁴These are the names of the children born to him there: Shammua, Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, ¹⁵Ibhar, Elishua, Nepheg, Japhia, ¹⁶Elishama, Eliada and Eliphelet.

A. David's Multiple Marriages Defied the Word of the Lord

That passage from *Deuteronomy* addressing the proper behavior of a king included this little tidbit: "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray." As Israel's king, David needed to set a standard for righteousness unprecedented in the history of kings. But, for some reason, perhaps, because the practice was so broadly accepted by the surrounding nations, David allowed himself this particular perk of royalty. And, this wasn't a new vice. These verses only tell us about the wives and concubines he picked up while he was king in Jerusalem. Before this, while he was just a one-tribe king in Hebron, he has at least seven wives and/or concubines.

It used to perplex me how some sins that are so black-and-white in our own day were so commonplace among even the best of biblical characters. Polygamy would be a scandal among scandals in a modern church. In fact, polygamy is illegal in the culture at large. I often wondered, “How could God let it slide?” Eventually, I realized that I was only perplexed because I was assuming that the Bible’s heroes somehow had to be seen as models in virtue. I was uncomfortable seeing them as moral failures. Like all of us, they were guilty of sin, and God did not let it slide.

B. More than Any Sin, Polygamy Stained David’s Reign

Absalom was David’s third son by the third woman he had a son by before he ever became king of the united Israelite nation. In the weeks ahead, we will see how this devilish man so lusted after his father’s throne that he abandoned all natural affection for his father and declared war on him. Bathsheba became David’s wife when the king orchestrated her husband’s death to cover up her illegitimate pregnancy by the king. Another son would rape a half-sister. Life under the palace roof was marked by jealousy, intrigue, contentiousness and hatred. David never enjoyed a normal family life. The indulgences he allowed himself robbed him of that particular joy.

David was what he was – a man after God’s heart on good days and a man with a heart inclined toward evil on not-so-good days – all rolled into a single package of flesh, blood, muscle and bone. As the author of Israel’s songs of worship, a poet of praise and a capable king, David is an admirable character. But, when he falls, he might just make you blush.

What I hope will become particularly clear to you is the faithfulness of God, Who calls sinners to Himself. David was God’s anointed, and that was enough to sustain him through the numerous times that he will crash and burn. I hope you will be encouraged, because the New Testament tells us that we too have an “anointing from the Holy One.” That anointing is the Holy Spirit Who works to guide us back into the paths of truth whenever we stray. We won’t need for David to be a saint so long as we understand that the faithful God of David is also on our side.

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