

1 Samuel 16

A man after God's own heart

Samuel's visit

Some time had passed.

Samuel was still in anguish.

He still grieved over God's rejection of Saul.

And Yahweh knew it.

But Yahweh also had plans.

And so, in 1 Samuel 16 he speaks again to Samuel.

He rebukes Samuel for his continued grieving.

He reiterates his irrevocable rejection of Saul.

And he urges Samuel to fill his anointing horn with oil.

Samuel is to set out on a journey.

The target is a Bethlehemite family, the household of a certain Jesse.

When Israel had first asked for a king they asked for a king for themselves (8:22).

But now Yahweh says to Samuel, 'I have found a king for myself.'

But Samuel is full of fear.

He knows Saul well.

And Saul knows that God has someone else in mind.

And so if Samuel is known to be around armed with his anointing horn filled with oil then he is sure to do something.

In fact, Samuel is convinced he might even kill him.

Samuel's fear of Saul now overwhelms his willingness to obey the word of God.

But Yahweh gives no ground.

But he does offer him some practical support.

He allows him to go under the camouflage of offering sacrifices.

He is to ask Jesse to the sacrifice.

And then God will show Samuel what he shall do.

And then God says it again.

Again he talks about the anointing.

And it is an anointing 'for me'.

This king will be a king for Yahweh.

And so Samuel does what the Lord commands.

The people from Bethlehem do what people often do in the face of God's representatives.

The wonder if they are in trouble.

And so they ask if Samuel has come in peace.

He assures them that he has.

And the sacrifice proceeds.

Samuel has done the first two of God's three directions.

He has gone to Bethlehem.

He has offered sacrifices in Judah.

But he has still not found God's candidate.

In my own mind, I wonder what it must have been like for Samuel.¹

He came to Bethlehem with mixed feelings.

He was in grief over Saul.

¹ This section draws heavily on a paragraph from Fokkelman.

But he knows this is an historic day for God and God's people.
And he has no idea of the identity of the man he is looking for.
The family is there.
And it is no small family.
There are a whole tribe of sons.
The choice won't be easy.
Perhaps tensions well up in Samuel and he doesn't wait for God's word.
He sees the first son.
Impressions fill his eyes.
But his eyes deceive him.
Seeking to dissipate the tension, he acts hastily.
Surely the Lord's anointed is before him now!
The man who had talked so strongly to Saul about listening to the voice of God and not acting hastily is about to do the same.
Samuel ought to have known better.
But God catches him.
He gives Samuel a lecture.
He marks Eliab out as a second Saul.
He is impressive like Saul.
He is tall like Saul.
But he is also rejected like Saul.
And God utters those crucial words.

The Lord does not see as mortals see.

They look on the outward appearance,

But the Lord looks on the heart.

And with this perspective the sons are brought before Samuel.

The first three are named.

And then the rest of the seven sons pass by unnamed.

No indication comes from Yahweh.

Samuel asks the question.

Jesse lets him know that there is another.

Not a tall one.

Not an impressive one externally.

No, a small one.

The youngest one.

No warrior but a keeper of sheep.

He is sent for.

He comes in.

But he has looks that cause people to immediately love him.

And Yahweh urges Samuel to rise and anoint him.

The anointing proceeds before the brothers.

And God's endorsement comes.

For the Spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon him.

And finally we hear his name.

This is David.

God's king.

What is verse 7 all about?

- Clarifying the meaning

So, there is the story.

Now it is clear from that the critical verse is verse 7.

And there are some difficulties in the Hebrew and the English could be translated differently to our main translations.

This is not the time or place to go into the details and alternatives.

Suffice to say that I think that the general thrust of our translation here is right.

That is, I think that this passage is saying that humans look at outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart.

And God appears to be saying that this is what he has done with Eliab and rejected him.

An implication of this is that he has also done this with David and this is why he will be anointed a few verses later.

- Anointing for a task

Now because I think that there are some significant problems that might arise out of this verse, I'd like to spend a few moments thinking about it.

The first thing that I'd like to say is that verse looks like a general principle.

And verses such as Jeremiah 17:10 support the principle.

And that principle is that God searches the hearts of people.

He is not a God who acts toward people according to what is presented externally.

He acts toward people according to what he finds in their hearts.

Having said all of this, this general principle is being applied to a specific case here.

The case is not salvation or the like.

The case is the choice of a king over God's people.

- Background hints

The second thing that I'd like to say is that the context has already given us some hints as to what this verse might mean.

Let's have a look at some of those hints.

Chapter 12 told us that kingship was about following Yahweh.

It was about submitting to his commandment.

It was about accepting the direction of his prophet.

Saul has failed to do this.

In chapter 13 we are told that he acts foolishly (13:13).

That is, he does not fear Yahweh and he demonstrates this by the fact that he does not keep God's commandment.

In chapter 15 Saul fails again.

Again God tells him that he is going to replace him.

And when he does, God says that he is going to give the kingdom to another.

And he then goes on to say that this other person is 'better' than Saul.

Now whether the Hebrew word has moral connotations or not, the implication is clear.

There is something better in this new candidate.

In my view, God is explaining here what it is that is better.

It is something that God sees that humans don't see.

- Not told

Having said this, we must recognise that we are simply not told what it is that God has seen in David's heart.

No details are given as to the nature of David's heart.

So, anything we say is guesswork.

It may be educated guesswork, but that is what it is.

- Something to think about

And having said all of this, I'd like to give you my own view.

Take it with a pinch of salt.

Taste and see if you think it makes sense and fits the evidence.

So, here we go.

Now, those of you who have been listening carefully to these sermons on 1 Samuel will probably have noticed that I keep coming back to the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 and her song in 1 Samuel 2.

You see, my view is that the books of 1 and 2 Samuel don't primarily begin with this story because it tells us about how Samuel was born.

No, I think that the story and the song are designed to be the theological foundation on which the book is built.

And as the book goes on, there are constant allusions back to the story and the song.

And when Saul is measured by the theology of the story and the song he comes up wanting.

He is not dependent like Hannah.

He is more like the proud and arrogant one.

His kingship is not characterised by humility and poverty of spirit.

Rather, he exalts himself over God, over God's prophet, and over God's word.

What is more, as we noticed a few weeks ago, he does not appear to have the intimacy of relationship with God that Hannah has.

He talks about God as the God of Samuel but not as his God.

My own view, therefore is that it is in this area that David is different.

We can see that immediately in the way he is presented here in this passage.

He is not the tall and impressive and prospective warrior that Eliab is.

In fact, he is small.

He is cute.

And he is a shepherd boy.

Our very first introduction to him is that he is from the right sort of stock.

He is from the stock that God has always chosen leaders.

Following the theme

1 and 2 Samuel

So, with this in mind, let's quickly see how David shapes up in the rest of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Now the first thing that we must say is that the writer is clear that he is not perfect.

He is not flawless.

In fact, the writer of 1 and 2 Samuel clearly presents him as a flawed human being.

He repeats some of the sins of Saul.

And he adds some that look even worse.

So, whatever God sees in David it is not perfection.

Having said this, we do see David looking like Hannah and the people of Hannah's song.

That is, we see him as humble and dependent.

In the very next chapter he will depend upon God and do battle with Goliath.

In the chapters that follow he will not take the kingship off Saul by force even though he had opportunity to.

He will wait for God to remove Saul.

When he sins in the incident with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, he will readily acknowledge his sin and accept God's judgment.

As he flees from his son Absalom, he will depend upon God in prayer and admit that God alone can determine his future.

David will not always be consistent, but when he is at his weakest he will be the sort of anointed pictured in Hannah's song.

He will look to God to give strength to his king.

And to Yahweh to exalt the power of his anointed.

He will humble himself before the Lord and seek to live dependently upon him.

He will accept the discipline of God when he needs to.

This is the David we meet in the Psalms.

And this is the David we will meet at times in the books of Samuel.

This is kingship as it is designed to be.

Mark 10 and Philipians 2

And it is this characteristic of humble dependence that marks out the kingship of Jesus in the New Testament.

In Mark 10:35-45 James and John come to Jesus and raise issues of rule.

They want to sit at the right and the left of Jesus in his glory.

But they do not know what they are asking.

For the way of true rule is one of suffering.

It is not one of lording it over others.

On the contrary, true rule, true kingship is about being a slave of all.

It is not about being served but about serving and giving your life as a ransom for many.

And In Philipians 2 we see the kingly rule of Jesus seen even more clearly.

For although he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

He emptied himself.

He took on the form of a slave.

Being born in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

He consistently did what David did not manage with consistency.

He consistently did what Adam had not done.

He lived as a true human and as God's anointed king.

And as Hannah prophesied, the Lord raised the poor from the dust.

He gave strength to his king.

And exalted the power of his anointed.

He highly exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name.

So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue should confess.

That Jesus the anointed, Jesus the Christ, is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This the king after God's own heart.

This is he who will rule the at his right hand.

This is Jesus the Christ, God's king.

Thinking about Christian ministry

Friends, what I am saying is that what we see consistently in Jesus is what we see every now and then in David.

And perhaps this is what God sees in David.

It is not what saves him.

As he himself acknowledges in his Psalms, only God's grace can do this.

But it is what characterises him in his relation to God.

Even when caught in his deepest moment of sin, he acknowledges it.

In Psalm 51 he says,

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit.

A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, most of you are here at Ridley because you want to exercise Christian ministry.

Well, there is a great lesson to be learnt here today.

There is a lesson that should lie at the root of every Christian, but particularly every Christian involved in ministry.

And that lesson is that at the core of Christian ministry is character.

It is character that God values above all other personal characteristics.

So, are you heading into ministry?

Then cultivate this character.

Cultivate the heart.

Pray for a heart of humble dependence.

Pray for an attitude of humility that has no time for selfish ambition or conceit.

Are you choosing people for ministry positions or training people for ministry?

Then make sure that you look for the right thing.

Don't look for the entrepreneur.

Don't look for the person with great intellect.

Don't look at marks in exams.

Don't look for eloquence or power in personality.

Don't look as humans look.

But look as God looks.

Look to the heart.

Look to what makes this person tick.

Look for Christlikeness.

For humility.

For a willingness to obey at any cost.

And are you measuring those who minister to you in churches or here at college?

Well, again, look for character.

Look beyond external characteristics.

Look for Christlikeness.

For a readiness not to be served but to serve.

Look for humble dependence.

And finally, as you measure yourself, avoid looking as humans look.

You see, the great temptation in ministry will be to look around you and covet what others have.

Or it will be to work for success.

But God does not look at exam results as such.

He doesn't look at success.

But he looks at the heart.

And so, let me reiterate what I said earlier.

Cultivate the heart.

For the best thing you can give the people of God that you minister to is not success.

The best thing that you can give the people of God is a life of humble dependence upon God.

It is a poverty of spirit.

It is a willingness to serve.

These are the marks of God's person.

Let's together cultivate these things.

Yearn for them.

Make them the focus of our daily prayers.

For this is what God loves.

This is what will most benefit God's purposes.

This will enrich God's people.