

2 Samuel 5

'Piety and Pragmatism'

A strange encounter

The day had been full.

God had come to him in a vision.

He had spoken his word.

He had given a sign.

And Abraham believed him.

And then God spoke again.

This time he didn't speak to him about children.

This time God talked to him about the land.

He promised that he would give him the land to take possession of it.

But Abraham needed confirmation and assurance.

After all, he knew the people of the land.

He had just rescued his family from the powers who occupied the land.

He had met the king of Salem, a great and impressive king to whom he had given tribute.

And that night God came to him in the most remarkable and bizarre way.

Before night fell, he told him to cut up various animals and birds and to arrange them on the ground in a particular fashion.

And then, as night fell, Abraham fell into a deep sleep.

A dreadful darkness enveloped him.

And the Lord spoke again.

Abraham,

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own.

They will be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves.

And afterward they will come out with great possessions.

You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age.

But in the fourth generation your descendants will come back here.

For the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.

And then in the darkness it happened.

A smoking firepot and a blazing torch appeared.

They passed through the middle of the carcasses on the ground.

God made a covenant with Abraham and promised.

To your descendants I give this land.

From the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.

The land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.

And so it happened as the Lord had promised.

Abraham's descendants did suffer in Egypt.

They did return to the land.

God did give them the land.

Many nations were conquered.

But one small group proved resilient and resistant.

The Jebusites remained in the land.

They congregated around one particular town.

It was a fortress town, almost impregnable.

And this town was a reminder that the promises to Abraham had not yet been fulfilled.

The Jebusites had still not been dislodged (Joshua 15:63; Judges 1:21).

Now let me tell you a bit about the fortress town of the Jebusites.

Throughout its history this town was known by a variety of names.

Sometimes it was known as Salem (Genesis 14:18; Psalm 76:2).

At other times, Jebus.

But mostly, it is known as Jerusalem.

And it is this town that we hear about in our passage today.

And today we will hear how God's promises to Abraham will be fulfilled.

For Abraham's descendant will scale the stronghold of the Jebusites.

Where we are now

A king (2 Samuel 5:1-5)

So, let's have a look at our passage for today.

2 Samuel 5 is the culmination of a long struggle by David.

You see, God had him in mind as king as early as 1 Samuel 13.

God anointed him as prospective ruler in 1 Samuel 16.

As the leaders of Israel acknowledged in 2 Samuel 5:1-2, everyone knew that God had appointed David as shepherd of his people Israel.

But David had refused to take the kingship by force.

He distanced himself from those who urged him to use politics and manipulation.

Patiently he waited.

His own tribe had made him king over Judah.

But he was still not king over the rest of the tribes of Israel.

But now, in 2 Samuel 5:1-5, the leaders of Israel line up with God and anoint David as king over Israel.

These verses are a fitting end to David's wait.

He has refused to take the crown by force.

Now he is given it by his subjects.

Not only is he a man after God's own heart.

He is also a man after the heart of God's people.

A city (2 Samuel 5:6-15)

But let's now move to 2 Samuel 5:6-15.

Now I must confess that when I initially came to look at this section I was reminded of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

I wonder if you remember the scene.

King Arthur is off on a quest to find the Holy Grail.

He and his knights come to a castle and call up to it.

There is a response from a French soldier.

Anyway, this soldier begins to play with Arthur.

He persuades him that they have their own holy grail.

Arthur wants to see it but the Frenchman steadfastly refuses.

Arthur responds with threats.

The Frenchman responds with these words:

You don't frighten us, English pigdogs.

Go and bite your bottoms, you silly person.

I blow my nose at your, so called Arthur King.

You and all your silly English k...nigh...its.

[Blows raspberry.]

This is then followed by a series of taunts and threats.

Well, here David is besieging Jerusalem.

The Jebusites have time and time again repulsed these new invaders of their land.

And here, in their pride, they taunt David.

Look at their words in verse 6.

'You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off.'

As Israel later put confidence in Jerusalem as impregnable, so do the Jebusites.

And as Israel will in turn be overturned for its false confidence, so the Jebusites are finally conquered.

David captures the fortress of Zion.

And it becomes his city; the city of David.

And verse 10 tells us that his rise continues.

Blessed by God he becomes more and more powerful.

So there is the second stage in our story.

We have the symbolic conquering of one of the last bastions of resistance to occupation of the promised land.

We have a king over all Israel.

And unlike Saul, this king has the blessing of God.

Verses 11-15 then go on to tell us that a period of stability and security follow.

This is a very significant moment.

We are at the edge of something very special.

This is one of the great moments in the history of God's people.

It is a moment that will shape the history of God's people to the end of time.

The Philistines (2 Samuel 5:17-25)

And as though to seal this moment, we have verses 17 to 25.

You see, kingship was asked for because the people were scared of the surrounding nations.

They were particularly scared of the Philistines.

And in these verses God's king depends upon God.

He seeks God.

He inquires of God.

He trusts God.

And he obeys God.

And God goes out before the armies of Israel.

And God triumphs.

And the Philistines are struck down all the way from Gibeon to Gezer.

The Philistines were not totally destroyed here.

But they will never again be a significant threat to Israel.

Looking good

Again, here is a great moment in God's purposes.

This is a point in history to savour, to dwell on, to rejoice in.

Here are hopes realised.

Things are finally looking good.

It has been a long haul from Abraham's days.

It was a struggle for Abraham to become a father of a nation.

It was a struggle for that nation to escape slavery in Egypt.

It was a struggle to bring them into the promised land.

It was a struggle to oust the inhabitants of that land.

And it was a struggle to find a king who could rule over the people of God in the land.

But now they have arrived.

Things are looking good.

Some ominous hints

But are they?

You see, when I look at the passage here, I have some questions about just how good things are.

I see some ominous hints that things are not all that they seem.

I wonder if you noticed them too?

Let me show you what I mean.

First, I want you to think about the choice of Jerusalem as a capital city.

Jerusalem is a great choice politically.

It is a city that has not been occupied by any of the tribes of Israel.

It is therefore not owned by any tribe.

It is also a city that is on the boundaries of Benjamin and Judah, the two tribes from which kings came.

However, it is just within Benjaminite territory rather than Judah.

It is therefore a very strategic, politically cunning choice.

Second, I wonder if you noticed the reference to Hiram, king of Tyre.

He is not an Israelite.

He appears to have seen David's rise.

And so he sends messages to David.

And he helps him build a palace.

Now again, palaces are the accoutrements of kingly rule.

Kings must have palaces.

But there are things under the surface here.

After all, here is one of the earliest hints of the internationalising of Israel.

A united nation needs political and cultural allegiances.

It needs to make alliances.

But there is more.

You see, in the Bible cedar is associated with pride.

And Jeremiah 22 makes clear that cedar doesn't make a king.

In other words, there are hints here that David is becoming a king like the kings of the nations.

This is the language of trade, of international exposure, of possible compromise, and of the risk of pride and self-sufficiency.

And Deuteronomy 17 was explicit in this area.

Kings must not seek the symbols of pride.

They must be careful in their allegiances.

They must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

But there is one more hint in this chapter.

It occurs in verses 13 to 15.

There we are told that David took more concubines and wives.

We are then told that there are children born as a result.

Now there are some things to notice here.

First, notice the word 'concubine'.

This word has not appeared in relation to David up until this point.

But concubines are the stuff of ancient near eastern kings.

Increasing them and increasing your wives are a key mechanism of making your way in the world of ancient near eastern politics.

They are the way of sealing allegiances and making friends.

But there is a further thing to notice.

Again, it is no more than a hint, but it is there.

You see, one of the children named here is Solomon.

And Solomon is a child who is the result of David's pride and theft and misuse of kingly rights.

But there is more.

You see, the other children named here do not have names with the name of Yahweh in them.

They are not Yahwistic names.

And again we find ourselves asking why this is.

If it is indeed Yahweh, the Lord, who is giving David success, why is this not reflected in the names of his children?

Or is it that his wives don't see the importance of Yahweh.

Again, Deuteronomy was clear in this area.

A king over Israel must not take many wives lest his heart be led astray.

Please understand what I'm saying.

David has finally arrived.

He has arrived here in an entirely appropriate manner.

He has depended upon God.

And he continues to exercise a trust in God.

And through him God does wonderful things.

But even here we have hints of what David will become in the latter chapters of 2 Samuel.

Although he will continue to be a person of faith, his allegiances will become increasingly mixed.

He will increasingly do the things that are good for him but not for the people he is meant to shepherd.

Verse 12 tells us clearly that God established David as king and exalted his kingdom with a purpose.

And that purpose was 'for the sake of his people Israel'.

And increasingly we will see David living as though the kingship is for his sake.

He will use kingship for his sake.

The hints in this chapter are sobering reminders.

They tell us that the journey of hope cannot rest with David.

The journey of hope is not over yet.

For David is a human being.

And human beings are made of the same stuff as Adam.

No!

We must look beyond David.

We must look for another.

We must look for a king who will always act in the best interests of his people.

And this king is Jesus.

For this King Jesus always had the best interests of God's people in mind.

This King Jesus will not forge allegiances for his own good.

He will not accumulate wealth.

He will act in humility and not gather the symbols of pride.

He will not live in palaces made of cedar.

Rather, he will come not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.

Piety and pragmatism

Friends, I want to close by thinking a bit about piety and pragmatism.

You see, there are two things we see in this passage.

We see David the pious and godly man.

We see the man who is willing to trust in God.

He is a deeply religious man.

He loves God and wants to honour God.

And yet he is a man who also lives in a real world.

And in that real world, there are jobs to be done and decisions to be made.

And to do these jobs and make these decisions requires a certain pragmatism.

It involves weighing up choices, planning, and strategic thinking.

None of these things are wrong.

After all, God himself plans, makes decisions and engages in his own strategic thinking.

And so David engages in decisions.

He plans and prepares.

However, as we have seen from this passage, he is a man who is real danger.

And the danger is that things get out of balance.

Because of his humanity there is a real danger that piety and prayerfulness are pushed aside by pragmatism.

Now I don't think that this is only an issue for David.

It is an issue for us as well.

And we can see this is every area of our Christian existence.

Let me give you a few examples.

I'll start with a personal one.

Imagine you suffer from depression.

Some Christians would say that we should simply go to a doctor and submit to the relevant treatment and medication.

Other Christians would say that you should simply trust God to make us well.

But I'm not convinced of either of these views.

The first view is entirely pragmatic.

The second view forgets that God gives doctors and medicine.

So, how can we get the balance right?

Well, my own view is that we should start in the right place.

Because our tendency is toward sin and self sufficiency, we should work hard at starting in dependence.

So, if I'm depressed, I should start with prayer.

I should ask God to help me and heal me.

For I know that he has my health and best interests in mind.

But having done this, I should not restrict how God might help me.

He may very well use modern medicine and doctors.

And so I will visit the doctor.

And as the doctor gives advice and medication I will continue in prayer that God will use these mechanisms to help me.

And if God grants me relief and help I will continue to thank him as the source of that help.

But let me give another example.

Let's imagine a Christian congregation.

It is convinced that God has a purpose in his world and that purpose is that people come to know the Lord Jesus.

And so, it is committed to bringing more and more people to know Jesus.

Now at this point there are a couple of ways to go.

One group of Christians would say that we need to adopt this or that particular evangelistic program.

New strategies are to be put in place.

Other Christians would say that we should not do this.

Rather, we should simply be faithful in our ministry and pray for God's increase.

Again, I'm not convinced of either of these views.

The first view is entirely pragmatic.

The second view forgets that God has given us gifted people who can help us develop appropriate methods for growing churches.

So again, how can we get the balance right?

My own view is that we should start in the right place.

Because our tendency is toward sin and self sufficiency, we should work hard at starting in dependence.

So, we should start with prayer.

We should ask God to help us and to be at work in our efforts.

We know that he wants people in his kingdom.

And we know that he wants us to reach out to people.

But having done this, we should not restrict how God might help us.

He may very well use some of the innovative methods that he has helped people develop.

And so we may prayerfully take a look at some of these things.

We will think and plan in the context of prayerful dependence.

And we will realise that any growth must come from God himself.

Can you see what I'm saying?

David is in danger in this chapter.

And we are in danger.

And that danger is that we let pragmatism triumph over piety.

Pragmatism is not wrong.

And piety is not wrong.

We need to strike a balance.

And that balance is found in starting with our own weakness and God's strength.

Our weakness is our over confidence in ourselves.

Our strength is in God's strength.

So, let's start all our efforts in prayer and dependence.

And having done this, let's make decisions and act.