

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

C. The Kingdom of Israel

8. The Golden Years

Although the prophet Samuel resisted Israel's desire to have a king like other nations had, he was impressed and optimistic when he saw the man the Lord had chosen. Samuel said, "There is no one like him among all the people." (1 Sam 10:24) But his appraisal was later replaced by bitter disappointment when Saul failed to obey the Lord in crucial matters. Even so, Samuel mourned for Saul until God told him to stop, and to anoint a son of Jesse as Saul's successor. David would eventually preside over the beginning of the golden years in Israel.

David was probably around age fifteen when anointed for his office. But, although the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him at that time, it would be another fifteen years before he ascended to the throne. More than half of that time David was a man on the run from Saul, who was trying to kill him. That's one reason that he is seen as a "type" of Jesus who, despite being anointed by God for his ministry of reconciliation and authority, talked at one point about having no place to lay his head.

Another sense in which David has been seen as a type of the Messiah is in his willingness not to seek revenge against his oppressors. David was not as consistent in this attitude as Jesus would be. Yet, he was mostly content to wait for God's timing. Over the years he had more than one chance to take Saul's life, but refused to do so. As he told his men on one of these occasions: "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the LORD lives...the LORD himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed. (1 Sam 26:9-11a)

David's time finally came with Saul's final defeat by the Philistines. At this point the way was open, but not entirely smooth for David to ascend to the kingship of Israel. At first only his own tribe—Judah—accepted him as king; the other tribes advocated for a relative of Saul. The ensuing civil war lasted more than seven years with David growing ever stronger and the house of Saul, represented at the end by Ish-bosheth, growing weaker and weaker (2 Sam. 3:1)

Eventually Ish-Bosheth was killed by some of his own men, paving the way for David's ascent to the throne of the whole of Israel. David was then thirty-seven years old and would reign over Israel and Judah for another thirty-three years.

David's reign was very significant for the growth of Israel into a strong nation. It is noteworthy that he regularly inquired of the Lord before he began a new endeavor. Clearly, he did not want to repeat the willful disobedience of Israel's first king.

One of David's first acts as king of a united Israel was to attack the Jebusite stronghold of Jerusalem, which, to this point had been considered impregnable. But David managed to take the city, perhaps by way of the shaft that supplied it with water. Afterwards, he built a palace for himself and continued to improve the city's defenses; Jerusalem ever after became known as the City of David.

David's next great victories were over the Philistines, who had assembled in force to take him down. But Israel's army defeated them in successive battles, each time, after David had inquired of the Lord and received the assurance that they would be delivered into his hands.

No doubt it was because David knew himself to be so dependent upon the Lord's help, that he longed all the while to bring the pre-eminent sign of God's presence—the Ark of the Covenant—from where it resided at Kiriath-jearim to his capital in Jerusalem. David took 30,000 men to do this—a sign of the ark's great importance. But the transfer—in a cart pulled by oxen—did not go off without a hitch. At one point, one of priests accompanying the ark reached out to steady it and was struck dead for his violation against the holiness of the Lord. Scripture says that David was both angry and afraid because of this. He had been trying to honor the Lord, but he knew that he bore some guilt for failing to take seriously enough the authority and directions of God in how this sign of his presence was to be transported.

After leaving the ark for three months in the home of Obed-Edom—whom we're told the Lord blessed while the ark was in his household—David made another attempt to get the ark into Jerusalem. This time the Levites carried it on their shoulders while David danced before the Lord with all his might and a great crowd of Israelites exuberantly shouted for joy and played their trumpets. Meanwhile, one of David's wives, Michal, a daughter of Saul, is said to have despised David in her heart when she saw him dancing and celebrating.

This was no mere marital squabble, but implies a profound religious difference between David and his wife, who shared neither his heart for God nor his desire to see the Lord at the center of Israel's life. For her scorn Michal was banished from the marital bed and suffered one of the worst fates that could befall a woman of Israel; she had no children to the day of her death

Once the Ark of the Covenant had arrived in Jerusalem David wanted to build a suitable home for it. The place where it had been housed, the Tabernacle, had been constructed long before in the time of Moses. But apparently it was no longer in service. Besides that, the Tabernacle had been built for a nation on the move, and David now wanted to build a permanent home for the Ark of the Covenant as demonstration of his commitment to keep God at the center of Israel's life. It was a commendable desire and a good commitment. The prophet Nathan recognized it as such and told the king that he was sure of the Lord's approval in this.

It wasn't long however, before Nathan had to come back to David with revised instructions. God confirmed that he did want a house. But he had his own ideas of what the house would look like and who would build it for him. And it's wasn't going to be David. In fact, God turned things around for David, telling him that he was going to build David a house instead. It would be a house in which the king would no longer be disturbed and oppressed, but would have rest from his enemies.

The house that God was talking about, of course, was a dynasty—the greatest honor that a king of David's day could have imagined. And furthermore, as God went on to tell David, his offspring would sit on a throne that lasted forever, and this offspring would build the house for God that David had wanted to build. That astonished David, who exclaimed, "Who am I Oh Sovereign Lord, and what is my family that you have brought me this far."

And then he continued with a prayer to God that expressed his gratitude, extolled the Lord's goodness, and asked him to keep forever the promise he had made so that God's name would forever be held in the highest esteem and so everyone would confess that the LORD Almighty was God over Israel! (This is a very significant chapter in the Old Testament, and one with multiple fulfillments, which we'll come back to in the lecture "From Paradise Lost to the Eternal Temple.")

The next chapters of 2 Samuel (8-10) describe David consolidating his power over the surrounding nations. Normally, for a king of this time and place, this would also have included killing off all of the previous king's descendants so there would be no possible rivals to the throne. But, for the sake of his friendship with Jonathan, David not only did not kill the last of Saul's descendants—Mephibosheth—he brought him to Jerusalem to be treated like one of David's own sons. It was a laudable act and one, by contrast, that makes the next story about David all the more disgusting.

Chapters 11 & 12 describe David's affair with Bathsheba and the aftermath of it. In the midst of David's great successes and blessings is this disgraceful example of the depths to which even someone who is described as "a man after God's own heart" can fall. David was tempted sexually. His temptation gave rise to lust, which then resulted in adultery, and afterwards, in the attempted cover-up of Bathsheba's pregnancy, and finally to the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. All of this would not have been unusual for an oriental king, who could do pretty well as he pleased. But it was especially disgraceful for a king who wanted to serve the Lord God and who served as the head of a nation called to that same purpose.

This story gives a pretty clear picture of the progress of sin as it grows into a monster, and of the wages of sin—the aftermath, both for the sinner and innocent people affected by it. (Note that Bathsheba was probably entirely innocent in the whole affair, since she could not have refused the king's advances.) But David did not get away with this; it became clear that God saw and judged him. One consequence was that the baby of their union died; another was God's announcement that he would bring calamity upon David's household. And to David's credit, he repented. The depths of his misery and regret are seen in Psalms 32 and 51. In his mercy, God did eventually bring one piece of good out of the whole mess: the birth of another son: Solomon

But the very next chapter then begins a recitation of some of the calamities that fell on David's family. One of his sons raped his half-sister, and for it, was killed by her brother, Absalom. As a result Absalom was exiled. David had to do it, but he grieved over Absalom's absence. General Joab connived to resolve the situation (ch 14) with the result that Absalom was allowed to return, but he could not have personal contact with David for two years. But far from being grateful for permission to return to Jerusalem, Absalom started to conspire to take over his father's throne, and gathered so many supporters to himself that David's life was endangered again.

David had to flee Jerusalem. Although it was dangerous for anyone to help him at this time since the conspiracy was so well organized, Mephibosheth sent his servant with donkeys and provisions to help David's party. David also received assistance from his chief advisor, Hushai, who pretended to defect to Absalom's side. Absalom took Hushai's advice that he not pursue David immediately, but wait for further support among the Israelites before he finish him off.

It was this action that gave David a chance to regroup and eventually defeat Absalom's forces. David's power was consolidated again. Perhaps he gave himself too much credit for this. Whether or not that was the reason, David undertook an action that appears to have been motivated by pride—a census of the fighting men of Israel. It's not clear why this was an act of disobedience, but that it was is indicated both in 1 Samuel 24:1 and the parallel account in 1 Chron. 21:1.

The first account, emphasizing that nothing can happen without God's permission, says that the Lord incited David to take the census; the second, putting the inspiration for this evil act where it belongs, says that Satan incited him. General Joab warned the king not to go through with the census, but David wouldn't listen. The people of Israel paid the price for his sin when a plague sent by God struck down seventy thousand Israelites. God's anger was assuaged finally when David built an altar to the Lord and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to accompany his prayers for mercy.

As David neared the end of his life, the question of who would succeed him became more pressing. Everyone probably knew that he had earlier promised that Solomon would be the next king. But unaccountably David had delayed making it official. So another son of David—Adonijah—made his case for the kingship by arranging for his own coronation. Understandably, he did not invite Solomon or his mother. But Bathsheba heard of Adonijah's plans and went to David to remind him of his promise concerning Solomon. At this, David arranged a coronation ceremony for Solomon and died shortly after.

Scripture's assessment of David is generally a good one, calling him a man after God's own heart and saying that he died at a good old age, having enjoyed long life, wealth and honor (1 Chron. 29:28). One of Israel's later kings, Jeroboam was told, "You have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes (1 Ki 18:8). And Jeroboam's son got essentially the same message, with this qualifier—except in the case of Uriah the Hittite (1 Ki 15:5).

Although David obviously had significant failures in his life, Scripture focuses on David's heart and readiness to repent when called to task, and also on his concern for building the temple of the Lord. In fact these are the things David emphasizes in his last charge to Solomon: "And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. Consider now, for the LORD has chosen you to build a house as the sanctuary. Be strong and do the work" (1 Chron. 28:9-10).

For his part, Solomon heeded his father's advice pretty well, at least in his first years as king. 1 Kings 3:3 says that *Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.* All in all, God was quite pleased with Solomon; he came to him in a dream and said, *Ask for whatever you want me to give you.*" What Solomon asked the Lord for showed that his priorities were right. For he didn't ask for wealth or long life but instead, for a discerning heart i.e. wisdom. Ruling God's people was an immense responsibility but Solomon knew that it would be possible as long, and only as long, as he had the Lord at his side. God honored his request.

So it was that Solomon soon became known worldwide for his wisdom. (1 Kings 4:30-34) *Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt...And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.*

After Solomon had been reigning for about three years, he began to build the temple of the Lord. He collected materials from all over the world, brought skilled workman from the entire country, and spent lavish sums of money on a great temple for the Lord God—to show the object of his and his country's devotion. The temple, which was built on the same general plan as the tabernacle, took seven years to build. And when it was completed the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the Holy of holies. And the result reminded people of the glory cloud that had accompanied the completion of the Tabernacle centuries before. *The priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple* (1 Kings 8:11).

Then followed sacrifices such as had never been seen before. For fourteen days, all of Israel offered sacrifices to the Lord their God—including 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats. It was a time of great unity in the land; the people were devoted to God's service.

In Eccl. 2:4-6 Solomon describes other projects he undertook: *I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces... I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.*

These were the golden years of Israel's monarchy. After a poor start by Saul, David had laid the foundation, and Solomon built upon it. The key to continuing to enjoy God's favor would be how well Solomon heeded the Lord's warning given to him at the time the temple was dedicated—that he and his people must never turn away and serve other gods or else Israel would be cut off from the land and even this magnificent temple would become a heap of rubble. How Solomon did with that mandate is part of the story for next time.