

## MY THOUGHTS ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS

### Introduction

Would we not be glad if God said to us, 'It was good that you wanted to do this for me'? That is what God said to David when he wanted to build a temple (1 Kings 8:18). The surprise is that God did not allow him to do it.

It was not as if the idea was wrong. The reason God gave was that it would be inappropriate for someone who had been so involved in warfare to do this. Instead David's son would build the Temple for God.

When we look at what went on in David's mind, and how God dealt with him, we gain helpful insights into things that happen in the life of a Christian – for the relationship is the same now even though the incident took place in Old Testament times.

We might divide it into negative lessons and positive ones.

### Negative lessons

It is good to see people enthusiastic about serving the Lord. When we get an idea we think is good, and want to pursue it, there can be a number of factors operating.

His motivation was good. As he looked at his own home he could see how much God had blessed him. By contrast, the symbolic dwelling place of God was inconspicuous; it just seemed so inappropriate that David's house was much grander than God's house.

Sometimes we are very conscious of the privileges God has given us, and we want to do something for him in return. God says, 'It was good you wanted to do this for me'. Indeed, ingratitude is a grievous sin; Jesus' comment about the lepers whom he cleansed reminds us of that.

David's morale was high. This happened when he was at the height of his career. He knew that God had subdued his enemies and would use him to bless the people. Things couldn't get better than this. Yet he still had so much energy left. He always had a 'Can do' attitude, and now he wanted to take on another challenge – what better than doing something big for the God who had done so much for him.

It is wonderful to see successful people turning their hand to the work of the gospel. They are confident, and for the right reasons. God says, 'It was good you wanted to do this for me'.

Although the idea seemed right David decided to check it out with Nathan, God's prophet. Nathan agreed with him. It is encouraging when a child of God asks advice about a project that is on their mind. It shows wisdom, and humility. And if there is nothing obviously wrong with the idea we are inclined to answer, 'Go ahead and do it'. God also says, 'It was good you wanted to do this for me'.

But that night God gave Nathan a message for David. 'You will not build me a Temple'. What was wrong?

Sometimes an idea is good in principle but the timing or circumstances are not suitable. And we may not be aware of that. There are lots of examples. Marriage is good, but God's gift to some people is to be single. Preaching the gospel is good, but God has not called or gifted everyone for it. We should all promote the spread of the gospel but we are not all gifted and called as evangelists. 'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven' (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

William Farel did wonderful work in the city of Geneva in the early days of the Reformation. But he realised that circumstances were changing and he was not the best person to take that work forward. So he twisted John Calvin's arm to give up his life in academia and become pastor of the Genevan church. Sometimes our idea is good, but someone else would be better at doing it.

It also shows that good men make mistakes. Nathan was a prophet; David assumed he had the mind of God. But on that occasion he did not. There is a tendency in the church today to ignore the Bible and look for God speaking through other men and women. It is highly dangerous to put confidence in someone who claims a prophetic gift, or to rely on someone with a reputation for wisdom. 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man' (Jeremiah 17:5). We can easily mistake our own thoughts for the influence of God's Spirit. The only sure word is the Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible. The Spirit gave the Bible; and the Bible is the Spirit speaking afresh to us.

Those were the days before the Bible was complete, and when Nathan sought the Lord he was given a message; his earlier reply was only his human mind speaking. So we ought to take everything to scripture expecting God to show us his will, either by the general principles it contains or by drawing our attention to a particular teaching.

There is also a lesson here for church leaders. Beware of thinking your ideas must be God's ideas; they may not be. And beware of an authoritarian approach to your people; it may be the flesh speaking, not the Spirit of God.

All this may sound a little negative, if important. It is what we should beware of, not what we should do. So are there positive lessons we can learn from the incident in David's life?

### **Positive lessons**

What interested David and what interested God were not the same, though there were overlaps. When we see what God's priorities are we learn what direction we should take in our own lives.

The first difference is that we are often concerned about a place or a building; God is more concerned about people. David wanted to build him a temple; but God's real temple is the body of people where his name and Spirit dwell.

Buildings are useful and necessary. We may be entrusted with them to use for the work of the gospel in our generation and the next. But they are only means to an end. God's answer to David showed he was not concerned with outward pomp or ceremony. It was his relationship with the people that mattered – 'I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel out of Egypt to this day.'

Many people made the same mistake in Jesus' day. The Temple and its rituals seemed all-important. The result was a legalistic spirit that cloaked godless living – 'hypocrites', Jesus called them; 'You do not have the love of God in you'.

The New Testament emphasises the church in all its relationships – its members with one another, its members with Christ, and the Spirit's activity as they interact with one another. Peter describes Christians as living stones in God's temple who are there to offer good works to God (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Paul warns us not to 'grieve the Spirit'. He lives and operates in the communal life of his people, not just their individual actions. It is relationships that are all-important, not the building. If these are not godly the building will become desolate – as happened to the Jerusalem Temple.

So we learn to prioritise Christ's 'new commandment', 'that you love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34). That must be a love for Christians as Christians; if our love is only for our own little group it is merely natural, not spiritual.

Another difference between David's priorities and God's is that David was thinking short-term whereas God was thinking long-term. David did not realise that, for the building he had in mind would last for many years. But God inhabits eternity.

God gave a promise for the long-term future of his people – 'I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; not shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore' (verse 10).

He also gave a promise that David's royal house would continue 'forever'.

With hindsight we can see that God's people were removed from their land, on more than one occasion. We pray God's protection and blessing for them in that land today, as for others, but it is clear the promise must be wider than the physical descendants of Abraham. Paul speaks about believers in Messiah as 'children of believing Abraham'. Even they will be removed by death. So the promise must have a greater fulfilment when this world passes away, and Christ's people inherit the kingdom prepared by his Father (Mathew 25:34).

We need to take this to heart. We can easily become despondent in a day of small things. We may even be tempted to give up. But Christ will work till the end of time, and he points us to the great white throne, telling us that he will bring his reward with him when he returns. 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain the Lord' (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Another difference between David's approach and God's approach was that David was thinking about himself, while God was thinking about Christ.

Part of what motivated David was gratitude at how God had rescued him from all his enemies. And his concern was how he could serve the Lord. God ignored that part of it; instead he focused on the Son of David, a personage of whom David had been unaware till then, someone who would 'sit on his throne' to rule God's people forever.

Down the centuries that promise was linked to other promises God had made. The Messiah was known as 'the Son of David', as we see in the gospels. Bartimaeus asked the 'Son of David' to have mercy on him. When Herod asked where the king of the Jews should be born he was immediately told it was Bethlehem, for he would be the 'Son of David'.

We often think a great deal about ourselves. So does God, in his mercy, just as he took good care of David. But his main interest is in Christ Jesus and his wonderful work. 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear him!' (Matthew 17:5).

Like the needle of a compass we tend to focus on ourselves, especially in times of success or sorrow. But if we want to live the Christian life we have to rise above ourselves and focus on Christ to whom the Father is always pointing. That is where our comfort, strength and wisdom lie. We need to put his interests first, and we can be confident that God will take care of ours. 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you' (Matthew 6:23).

David thought that God's care of him was only for his sake; it was for his sake, but it was also to preserve Jesus' ancestor alive and allow the Christ to be born. We are thankful for God's mercies to

us; who knows what greater purpose he had in mind? Has he spared your life? Perhaps he meant to use you as a blessing to other people.

God's purpose for Israel was to be a light to the nations. When they abandoned that task his 'righteous servant' took over and they lost what was most precious to them. Jesus' Letters to the Seven Churches show what happens when a church rejects its God-given role in society – he rejects that church.

All this should make us reflect on what we are really doing to promote the cause of Christ and the welfare of our fellow-men. 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? (Luke 17:17). If we are grateful that God has saved us from sin we should promote the work of Christ so he may save others also.

A fourth difference is that David was concerned about what he could do for God; God was more interested in what he could do for David. Instead of David building a house for him, he would build a household for David.

That is always God's way. When we begin thinking about God we tend to ask ourselves what might please him so we can find favour? But he tells us that he already shows us favour and has given us his Son to be our Saviour. Then we try to live in a way that pleases him (or should try), and wonder why we so often fail? He shows us that his grace is sufficient; the wisdom and strength to do his will comes from the work of his Spirit in our heart. 'How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?' (Luke 11:13).

### **Conclusion**

David's reaction also teaches us a great deal. He did not resent God's refusal of his offer. Instead he expressed profound gratitude for the promises God had given him. He was content to relinquish his pet project and rejoice in the work of God.

This is the godly way to respond to Christ. We find the same spirit in greater measure in his prayer in Gethsemane, 'Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done'.

That does not mean we should be passive; nor does it mean we should not use our initiative in the Lord's service. Instead, we should seek his will – what would be in accordance with the Bible? What will he permit in his holy providence? Then we should do it with our whole heart.