

STUDY 6

David: The Shepherd-King of Israel

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DAVID THE IDEAL SHEPHERD-KING

David is the classic figure of a shepherd-king in Israel:

He chose his servant David,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
from tending the nursing ewes he brought him
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel, his inheritance.
With upright heart he tended them,
and guided them with skillful hand (Ps. 78:70–72).¹

The designation of David as ‘shepherd’ of God’s people is not just because he started off as a shepherd of sheep. It was a common way of speaking of kings and rulers.² But in David’s case it was particularly appropriate, since he began as a shepherd of sheep before he became a shepherd of people.

David was also the standard by which other kings of Israel and Judah were judged. Of David’s son Solomon first of all:

... his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David (1 Kings 11:4).

To Jeroboam of Israel God says:

... you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my sight (1 Kings 14:8).

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² As in Jer. 6:3, where foreign kings with their besieging armies are spoken of as ‘Shepherds with their flocks’ coming against Jerusalem and pitching their tents around the city. See also Isa. 44:28; Jer. 12:10; 25:34–37; 49:19; 50:44; Nahum 3:18. Hence also its use in Israel: Jer. 23:1–6; Ezek. 34:1–24. “Shepherd” was used figuratively as a “stock” title of both the gods and kings (and occasionally lesser leaders) throughout the ancient Near East’ (Thomas Alan Golding, *Jewish Expectations of the Shepherd Image at the Time of Christ*, unpublished dissertation, 2004, p. 114).

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Note that these words spoken by the prophet Ahijah are the word of ‘the LORD, the God of Israel’ (1 Kings 14:7)—they are God’s own assessment of David. Abijam of Judah is assessed by this same standard:

... his heart was not true to the LORD his God, like the heart of his father David (1 Kings 15:3).

By contrast, it is said of Josiah:

He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left (2 Kings 22:2).³

How are we to understand and appreciate David as the paradigm of good rulers, in a way that may be instructive for our own pastoral ministry?

DAVID’S LAPSES

That David ‘kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my sight’ falls rather strangely on our ears, when we consider some of the things we know that David did. The chronicler at one point clearly shares our misgivings, when he says:

... David did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, *except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite* (1 Kings 15:5, emphasis mine).

A pretty big ‘matter’—especially when we consider James’ axiom that ‘whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it’ (James 2:10)! But there was not only David’s adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah. We could add a number of other incidents in which David’s lapses were evident, that are not mentioned here. Contrary to God’s instructions that the ark of God should be carried only by the Levites (see Num. 4:5–6, 15; 7:6–9), David arranged for the ark to be carried on a cart (as had been done by the Philistines; see 1 Sam. 6:7–12), and then got angry with God when Uzzah died on account of this (see 1 Chron. 13; 15:2, 11–13). David also ‘sinned greatly’—incited by Satan (1 Chron. 21:1)—in seeking to count the people of Israel and Judah, and brought pestilence upon his people (2 Sam. 24:1–17).

Much of what David did that jars with us no doubt was constrained by the politics and customs of the day—his insistence that his first wife Michal be returned to him, though she was now the wife of another (2 Sam. 3:12–16); the putting to death of two rows of captives (2 Sam. 8:2); hamstringing a large number of horses (2 Sam. 8:3–4); killing eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt (2 Sam. 8:13); the handing over of seven grandsons of Saul to the Gibeonites to be impaled (2 Sam. 21:1–14)—but David being a warrior who had ‘shed much blood’ was sufficient to debar him from building a house for the Lord (1 Chron. 22:8; 28:3; 1 Kings 5:3).

David’s family life was a particular area of weakness. Not content with one or two wives (1 Sam. 25:39–44; 27:3), David had six wives at Hebron (2 Sam. 3:2–5), then

³ Compare 2 Chron. 34:2—even though we are told later that Josiah was ‘opposing God’ and ‘did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God’ (2 Chron. 35:21, 22).

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‘took more concubines and wives’ in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:13–16). Things got bad after the Bathsheba episode, when God had said, ‘I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house’ (2 Sam. 12:11). Firstborn son Amnon raped third-born son Absalom’s sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1–19). David, compromised as he was by his own recent behaviour, declined to take disciplinary action out of misjudged love for his firstborn (2 Sam. 13:20–21), so Absalom took matters into his own hands and murdered Amnon (2 Sam. 13:22–37). Again, grieving over Amnon, David did not discipline Absalom, but rather yearned for him (2 Sam. 13:39). Yet neither did David revoke Absalom’s self-imposed exile, until Joab intervened in a rather contrived way to bring Absalom back (2 Sam. 14:1–27). Even then, in his vacillating indecision, David would not let Absalom into his presence for another two years, until Absalom lobbied Joab in a ruthless way to gain access back to the king. After that, Absalom was given sufficient leeway by his inattentive father to be able to rally enough support to mount a rebellious threat to David’s throne, such that David had to flee in a hurry (2 Sam. 15:1–37). After Absalom was defeated, David was more preoccupied with his lost son than he was considerate for all of his own troops that had stayed with him, and only Joab’s insistent intervention saved David from a worse disaster (2 Sam. 18:28–19:8).

DAVID’S CONTESTED REIGN

Nor can we say that David’s reign was an ideal model of peace and joy. Rather, it was violently contested at every point, with a large number of very narrow escapes. From the inauspicious beginnings when, on the run from Saul’s unrelenting life-threatening opposition (1 Sam. 18:6–11, 28–29; 19:1, 9–17; 20:30–33; 22:16–23; 23:8, 19–29; 24:1–2; 26:1–2) David became a rallying point for all the disaffected elements—‘Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented’ (1 Sam. 22:2); taking refuge in one place after another (1 Sam. 19:18; 20:1; 21:1), in the wilderness (1 Sam. 22:1; 23:13–15, 24; 24:1; 25:1; 26:1–2), on foreign soil (1 Sam. 22:3), including among the enemy Philistines (21:10–15; 23:5; 27:1–28:2; 29:1–11). After Saul died, David was able to secure the loyalty only of Judah for seven years, while fighting a long and bitter conflict with the rest of Israel (2 Sam. 2:1–3:1). His attempt to bring them together suffered a setback because of Joab’s vendetta against Abner, over which David was ‘powerless’ (2 Sam. 3:6–39). But eventually all the tribes of Israel rallied to him, in a somewhat uneasy alliance (2 Sam. 5:1–5). David then conquered and occupied Jerusalem, which still needed to be retaken from the time of Joshua (2 Sam. 5:6–10; see Josh. 10:1–27), and was still engaged in defending and extending his borders against the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:17–25; 8:1; 21:15–22), the Moabites (2 Sam. 8:2), Hadadezer of Zobah and the Arameans of Damascus (2 Sam. 8:3–8), along with the Edomites, Ammonites and Amalek (2 Sam. 8:9–14; 10:1–11:1; 12:26–31). No sooner was the major rebellion of Absalom defeated (2 Sam. 15:1–19:43), than Sheba son of Bichri fomented a secession of all the northern Israelite tribes, with another war to follow (2 Sam. 20:1–22). Before David died, Adonijah, the next in line of his sons, seized the throne, and the aged David, at the instigation of others close to him, needed to take decisive action to instate his appointed son Solomon (1 Kings 1:5–53; see 1 Chron. 28:5–7).

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DAVID'S GOOD POINTS

None of this is to detract from David's ruddy complexion, beautiful eyes and handsome appearance (1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42), as 'a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence' (1 Sam. 16:18); his great courage (1 Sam. 17:31–54), his military prowess (1 Sam. 18:6–7, 30; 2 Sam. 17:8), his principled sense of justice and protection (1 Sam. 25:5–13; 30:1–6, 16–25), his great generosity of spirit (1 Sam. 30:26; 2 Sam. 6:18–19; 19:31–40; 1 Chron. 22:2–5; 29:1–5), his loyalty to Saul (1 Sam. 20:1; 22:14; 24:1–22; 26:1–25), his tender love and loyalty to his friend Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:1; 20:13–17, 41–42; 23:15–18; 2 Sam. 1:17–27; 9:1–13; 21:7), his attachment to his own sons (2 Sam. 13:21, 39; 18:33; 1 Kings 2:1–4; 1 Chron. 22:6–19), his political adroitness (1 Sam. 18:5; 26:9; 27:8–12; 29:6–11; 30:26–31; 2 Sam. 2:4–7) and powers of conciliation (2 Sam. 3:20–21, 31–39), and his clemency towards his enemies (2 Sam. 19:16–23—though this is tarnished a little by David's admonition to Solomon that full retribution be exacted; see 1 Kings 2:5–9)—to say nothing of David's skill in music and in writing the Psalms (1 Sam. 16:18, 23; 1 Chron. 23:2–6; 2 Chron. 7:6; 29:30; 35:15; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:24, 36)—perhaps his most significant and lasting contribution. It is just to say that David's virtues were not unmixed, and his valour was flawed by weakness.

DAVID—A MODEL FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY?

Does that make David, then, a poor example for those in pastoral ministry? It may not be so—indeed it may hearten us. It may be all of this that enabled David to pray a prayer such as Psalm 18, which is used by the writer of 2 Samuel 22 to summarise and characterise the whole of David's reign:

David spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation,
my stronghold and my refuge,
my savior; you save me from violence.
I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies.

For the waves of death encompassed me,
the torrents of perdition assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me,
the snares of death confronted me.

In my distress I called upon the LORD;
to my God I called.

From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry came to his ears (2 Sam. 22:1–7; quoting Ps. 18:1–6).

If David, for all his giftedness, was a man of publicised lapses, who most of the time was not in full control of his kingdom, that sounds very like most of us who are in

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pastoral ministry! That he also called to God, and was rescued, may help to show us a way forward.⁴

GIVEN A HEART FOR GOD

How do we square all this with the claim that David ‘kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my sight’ (1 Kings 14:8)? Was the writer looking at David through rose-coloured glasses, or pushing a particular political agenda in favour of the Davidic dynasty? Sound principles of biblical interpretation prevent us from going down that way.⁵ In the overall scheme of the Scriptures, and with careful attention to the text of particular passages, how can we, in the light of all we have looked at so far, say truthfully that David kept the commandments of God and followed God with all his heart, doing only that which was right in God’s sight, such that God had great pleasure in David?

It is clear that David was chosen by God, and that David, unlike his predecessor Saul, had a heart for God:

Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which he commanded you. The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you’ (1 Sam. 13:13–14; quoted by Paul in Acts 13:22).

It is also evident that the heart of such ‘a man after [the LORD’S] own heart’ is known only to God, and to others only by God’s revelation. Samuel sought to discern the Lord’s choice of a successor to Saul among Jesse’s sons by looking on the outward appearance, but God corrected him:

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart’ (1 Sam. 16:6–7).

It was only when David appeared before Samuel and God said, ‘Rise and anoint him; for this is the one’, that ‘Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him’ (1 Sam. 16:12, 13). It could be that we need a similar revelation from God ourselves to be able to see in David a man after God’s own heart.⁶

⁴ A missionary who admitted at a mission conference that at one point he had nothing left to exercise his ministry, even doubting that he had any faith, was asked how he came out of it. He circumspectly quoted another person in ministry who had commended the power and effectiveness of a set daily quiet prayer time (personal reminiscence from CMS Summer Encounter at Victor Harbor SA, January 2010).

⁵ ‘... it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another’ (Article XX, Anglican Church of Australia. *A Prayer Book for Australia* Shorter Edition, Broughton Books, Alexandria, 1995, p. 480); see Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2006), pp. 72–112.

⁶ Edmund Randall, our Old Testament lecturer at St Barnabas’s College in Belair SA in the 1960s—a man with a heart for God himself (his favourite hymn was Wesley’s ‘O Thou who camest from above’)—wondered why a number of us students had a propensity to see David only as a politically-motivated charlatan, with his eye on the main chance!

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When we try to look into God's own heart, what do we find? What was revealed to Moses when he asked God, 'Show me your glory, I pray' (Exod. 33:18)? 'God's glory is His being in its essential action'⁷—Moses was shown God's very heart. And what came to him there? A revelation of God's strong forgiving love that does not seek to ameliorate guilt but meets it head on:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty . . . (Exod. 34:6–7).

If that is what is in God's own heart, then 'a man after [the LORD'S] own heart' will have this at the centre of his life, as his entire reason for being, and the whole justification of his existence. Was this the case with David?

What did David say about his own heart?⁸ David clearly knew and trusted in this revelation to Moses of God's essential nature, and found in it his own hope of salvation:

. . . I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation (Ps. 13:5).

There are times when it sounds (to the unregenerate mind) as if David is claiming for himself sinless perfection:

Vindicate me, O LORD,
for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.
Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test my heart and mind.
For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
and I walk in faithfulness to you (Ps. 26:1–3).

A later verse in the same Psalm makes it plain that any talk by David of his 'integrity' is not a denial of ever having sinned, but is absolutely dependent upon his much-needed redemption by the grace of God:

But as for me, I walk in my integrity;
redeem me, and be gracious to me (Ps. 26:11).

Only on account of having received this redemption can he then say:

My foot stands on level ground;
in the great congregation I will bless the LORD (Ps. 26:12).

This comes through most clearly in the Psalms in which David seeks and receives God's forgiveness of sins:

⁷ Geoffrey Bingham, *I Love the Father*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, p. 127.

⁸ Each of the Psalms quoted below have the heading 'Of David', which we take to be an indication of Davidic authorship.

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Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit (Ps. 32:1–2).

David speaks of how this forgiveness came to him:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’
and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Ps. 32:3–5).

By virtue of this, David is able at the end of the Psalm to address all those to whom this forgiveness has come, despite their acknowledged ‘transgressions’ and ‘sin’, as ‘righteous’ and ‘upright’:

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart (Ps. 32:11).

This gives us the way in to understanding how someone as fault-prone as David could be one who, according to God, ‘kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my sight’ (1 Kings 14:8). David’s heart had been touched and reshaped by what was in God’s own heart—mercy, grace, the allaying of wrath, abundant steadfast love and faithfulness, and the strong forgiveness of iniquity and transgression that confronts and deals with guilt head-on (as in Exod. 34:6–7).

David is also clear that being a man with a heart after God’s own heart is not anything of his own doing. Any gladness or instruction that his heart receives has come from the Lord (Ps. 4:7; 16:7, 9; 19:8). David’s lack of fear and his desire to seek God’s face have arisen because ‘the LORD is my light and my salvation’—even though God rightly could hide His face from David or turn him away in anger (Ps. 27:1, 3, 8, 9). Any continuing in steadfast love and salvation comes by requesting it from the Lord (Ps. 36:10). When David has sinned, it is only God who can ‘blot out my transgressions’ and ‘cleanse me from my sin’; it is to God that David entreats, ‘Create in me a clean heart’ and ‘Restore to me the joy of your salvation’ (Ps. 51:1, 2, 10, 12). David’s steadfastness of heart in singing God’s praises is maintained only by God’s towering steadfast love and faithfulness (Ps. 57:7, 10). An ‘undivided heart’ to revere God’s name comes as God’s gift (Ps. 86:11).

DAVID AND CHRIST

Paul in Romans 4 takes David’s words in Psalm 32 about the not-reckoning of sin, and links them with the reckoning of Abraham’s faith as righteousness in Genesis 15:6, to speak of the justification that is ours in the death and resurrection of Jesus:

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For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin’ . . .

Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:3–8, 23–25).

Is it legitimate to link David’s righteousness with our justification by faith in Christ? To David was given one of the most profound revelations of the one who was to come:

. . . I will raise up your offspring after you . . . I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12, 13).

While this was partially fulfilled in David’s son Solomon (see 1 Kings 5:5; 8:24–26; 1 Chron. 28:6; 2 Chron. 6:10, 15–17), the establishing of the throne of his kingdom ‘forever’ would require one who finally deals with the death attendant on our sin (see John 12:34)—by taking into himself ‘all people’ in ‘the judgment of this world’ (John 12:31–33). David responded to this revelation as ‘the charter for humanity’,⁹ in awed, humbled, and emboldened worship (see 2 Sam. 7:18–29). Both Peter and Paul say it was the resurrection of this coming one that David prophesied in Psalm 16:

For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit
(Ps. 16:10; quoted in Acts 2:25–31; 13:34–38).

Jesus himself implied that it was this one David was alluding to in Psalm 110:

The LORD says to my lord,
‘Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool’
(Ps. 110:1; see Mark 12:35–37).

‘David himself calls him Lord’ (Mark 12:37)—can it then be denied that David entered into the full reality of forgiveness and justification that this one was to bring (compare Rom. 10:9–10)?¹⁰

SHEPHERDS AFTER GOD’S OWN HEART

In the face of the false rulers of Israel that succeeded David, God promised:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . (Ezek. 34:15).

⁹ See Martin Bleby, ‘The Agenda for History’, Study 6 in *They Will Reign on Earth: Christ’s Kingly Community*, Ministry School 2007, NCPI, 2007, pp. 47–54.

¹⁰ Was David’s reprieve by God from the death penalty (see 2 Sam. 12:13), when by the law both he and Bathsheba should have been executed (see Deut. 22:22), a foretaste of God’s mercy on this account?

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At that time, God said:

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken (Ezek. 34:23–24).

Jesus spoke the fulfilment of this when he said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11; compare 10:24–25).¹¹

Related to the promise in Ezekiel is this undertaking in Jeremiah 3:

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding (Jer. 3:15).

These leaders will have this same forgiven, justified, compassionate and emboldened heart that was given to David. The apostle Peter addressed the elders of the church as being in this succession:

... tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away (1 Pet. 5:2–4; compare Paul in Acts 20:28).

¹¹ There is a wider background to this: see Zech. 9–13, and Martin Bleby *Zechariah: God's Covenant from the Old to the New* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2009), pp. 41–53.