

LOOKING ON THE HEART

1 Samuel 16:1-13

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Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel" (1 Sam. 15:26).

Chapter 16 marks a major transition in the books of Samuel, but more than that, it begins of one of the most extraordinary accounts in all of the Bible or any other literature. The coming of David has been alluded to earlier in Samuel, but now the sacred text turns directly to the story of Israel's great champion, poet, prophet, and king. Three millennia after David lived, his memory burns brightly in the hearts of God's people and his passion and faith continue to inspire. Walter Chantry writes:

Only the supreme providence of God and the unfathomable depths of divine grace could have conceived and forged the life of David. God made the son of Jesse into the emblem of the kingly office which only Christ would fulfill more gloriously. He embodied all the qualities of manly nobility and charm.¹

Vestiges of David's story can be seen in practically every noble myth beloved by Christendom, such as those of King Arthur and Saint George. But no accolade could possibly be higher than the one given by God himself. For when Israel's Messiah finally appeared, the Savior was identified as God's own Son, "who was descended from David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3).

¹ Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007), vii.

GOD PROVIDES A KING

No playwright could excel the opening scene in which David first takes the stage. As the curtain rises, a dim light reveals an aged man. He is the greatest man of his time, one of the mightiest of God's servants. At one time, this man had been God's instrument to rescue his people in one of their darkest hours. But now Samuel, Israel's former judge and still God's prophet, trembles and weeps. The cause for Samuel's grief is Israel's king, who Samuel had tried to serve and help. King Saul, chosen by the people because of his worldly qualifications, proved to have none of the spiritual qualities for leading God's people. Saul would not obey the voice of the Lord, so that Samuel was called by God to rebuke and ultimately reject Saul. In the end, "the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel," and "Samuel grieved over Saul" (1 Sam. 15:35).

Perhaps Samuel realized what would soon become evident to everyone: Israel's king was going mad. Samuel's last bitter meeting with Saul had revealed an evil spirit within the king. This grim situation seems to have sapped Samuel's spirit, as the once bold servant of God was reduced to grief and fear. After his long and great life as Israel's judge and prophet, Samuel felt defeated by the sin at work among God's people.

Many others have concluded life with the sense of grief and dread that Samuel now felt, but the prophet had one great advantage on other people: he was a man who heard the Word of God. This is the advantage that each of God's people today have through our Bibles. Where do we look to find a light in darkness? The answer is always the Word of God. Paul explains what it means to possess and know the Holy Scriptures: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts" (2 Cor. 4:6). Thus, in grief, Samuel finds comfort. In fear, he is given faith. In his darkness, God shines the light of good news. God told Samuel the very good news he needed: "I have provided for myself a king" (1 Sam. 16:1).

We are reminded here of the sovereignty of God. Just as Israel was the people of God's own choosing (Dt. 7:7-8), and as believers today are those chosen by God for salvation (Eph. 1:4), so also was Israel's proper king to be chosen by the Lord. It is noteworthy that the word

translated as “provided” is a form of the word ordinarily meaning “to see”. By his sovereign provision, God sees what his people in darkness cannot see, just as later on we will note that while man can only see appearances, God can see the heart. God sees the true king he has desired, because God has himself provided this king: he is the product of God’s providential oversight, and God’s gift to his people: the king whom God has himself chosen.

We should notice two effects of this message of good news, both of which are usually seen when Christian good news is heard and believed. The first was that God brought comfort to his grieving people. Saul was not grieving, after all, over matters of merely personal concern. Samuel was not depressed the way that we so often are: because our sports team has done poorly, our car needs repairs, or our lifestyle is not as high as we would like. Samuel was grieving over the sin of God’s people and the misery they were sure to experience. Samuel was grieving over a man in whom he had invested his life, the king of God’s holy nation, who had now made clear that he would chart his own direction, apart from God’s will. Do we know what it is like to grieve over things like these: to grieve over the indifference to God and his glory in our generation, the ignorance of the Bible even among professing Christians, about the lack of holiness or zeal for gospel missions within our churches? When Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt. 5:4), he was speaking about people who grieved from a heavenly perspective. Samuel was such a person, and to him the Lord came with good news of what he had seen and was providing for his people.

One insight we may glean from this episode is that the first sign that God intends to act out of his mercy for his people is that he places a burden on many of them for the distress of their times. Many Christians today ask when God will reach out with grace and power to reverse the spiritual collapse of our times. But a better question might be this: do we, who long for revival, feel a burden of sorrow for unbelief and evil? Roger Ellsworth asks, “Are we burdened and distressed over the condition of the church today? Until we are conscious of such a burden we need not scan the horizon for the thunderclouds of God’s mercy. They only break upon the heads of

those who feel the burden of the times.”² We will know that the burden of today’s darkness is felt by Christians when they turn anew to the Lord in the kind of fervent prayer that is so lacking today.

Samuel’s life has come full circle in this scene, for his own story began with the tears of his grieving mother, Hannah. Her song of praise, when God answered her prayer with the promise of a son, set the theological agenda for the books of Samuel, providing one of the main themes of the Bible’s gospel as well. She sang that the Lord “raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam. 2:8). When Hannah prayed, God heard and answered. Now, in Samuel’s grief for God’s people, the Lord’s mercy came again with good news of a king whom he would provide of his own choosing.

God’s good news has a second effect that we also see in this occasion: it challenges those who have lived in fear to renew their courage in faith.

God had a new mission for Samuel: he was to fill his horn with oil and go to the house of Jesse the Bethlehemite, “for I have provided for myself a king among his sons” (1 Sam. 16:1). Samuel responded to this calling with an almost craven fear. We need to remember how intrepid this prophet had been on many prior occasions. His reaction now suggests that he had perhaps overindulged in his sorrow over King Saul. The Lord seems to rebuke him for this, even as his good news offers comfort: “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel?” (1 Sam. 16:1).

This reproof reminds us that while grief is natural and proper at times, grief should never be indulged along with unbelief or a fear of man.

This seems to have been Samuel’s problem, for he answers the Lord: “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me” (1 Sam. 16:2).

Samuel’s sorrow has clearly gone amiss: if he, one of the great and courageous heroes of the faith in the Old Testament could respond to God’s call with such fear of man, how greatly must we all guard our hearts against a craven spirit of unbelief.

² Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King: Learning from the Life of David* (Evangelical Press: Durham, UK, 1998), 17-18.

While the Lord's rebuke is evident, God also kindly offered Samuel a way around his difficulty: "the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you'" (1 Sam. 16:2-3). Some readers are agitated over God's apparent deceit in urging Samuel to travel to Bethlehem under false colors. What they fail to realize is that Samuel was merely concealing his purpose, not denying an honest answer to one with a right to the information. It would be perfectly legitimate for Samuel to travel to the home Jesse with an ox brought along for a sacrifice, and this was a convenient way to avoid trouble with Saul.

Even though the Lord accommodated Samuel's fear, his message of good news was intended to drive his servant from fear to faith. We think of similar episodes, when stammering Moses was given a staff with which to work wonders before Pharaoh (Ex. 4:1-5), and when Gideon fretfully laid out his fleece not once but twice in order to confirm his calling to lead Israel (Jud. 6:36-40). In these cases, as with Samuel's, God helped the weakness of his servants but also roused them to a holy boldness through renewed faith in his Word. Likewise, Christians today who imbibe from the Bible's promises of good news in Christ will be those who are comforted in their grief and roused from fearful doubt to a bold belief.

SELECTING FROM JESSE'S SONS

If Samuel had been afraid to travel to Bethlehem, the men of Bethlehem were even more afraid to see him. This town was not on Samuel's normal circuit (1 Sam. 7:16), so "the elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, 'Do you come peaceably?'" (1 Sam. 6:4). Samuel answered, "Peaceably" (1 Sam. 6:5). Why the elders were so frightened is not stated, although the arrival of so high and holy a figure as Samuel naturally invoked fear of God's rebuke for some sin. But Samuel explained that he had merely come to make a simple pastoral inspection and give the Lord's blessing. "Consecrate yourselves," he told them, "and come with me to the sacrifice."

Most likely, Samuel next slaughtered the heifer he had brought and sacrificed it to the Lord. The meat would then be used for a feast, which would take some time to prepare. This gave Samuel the opportunity to perform the task for which he really had come. He asked to see the sons of Jesse, to consecrate them for the feast. As the sons were presented to Samuel, the first, and we may presume the oldest, Eliab, was extremely impressive. Samuel thought to himself, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before him” (1 Sam. 6:6).

According to the Lord’s response, Samuel’s problem is seen in the description that “he looked on Eliab and thought” (1 Sam. 13:6). That is, his thinking was based on what he could see. Eliab was undoubtedly “a handsome young man,” and it might have been said that “from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people” (1 Sam. 9:2). Those words are quoted from what Israel had seen in King Saul the last time Samuel had anointed a king. We would think he would now be on his guard against such a quick and external impression. But how common is this way of thinking! Kenneth Chafin writes: “Like Samuel, we are too impressed by the things that can be seen with the physical eyes. Consequently we live in a world where physical beauty outranks spiritual depth, where success in business and in church tends to be defined in materialistic terms, and where charisma is prized above character.”³

We can well imagine Samuel reaching for his anointing horn of oil, when the Lord spoke to halt him: “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 sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart’” (1 Sam. 16:7). Here, the Lord rebukes the entire worldly approach to evaluation. “This is your problem,” he says to Samuel, “that you only look at outward appearances!” This is why we so often suffer from bad leadership today: because we consider only how someone appears: the cultivation of an image, the practice of clever sayings, the pandering to baser motives – all of which the Saul’s of this world are easily able to master. But God is not hampered by our limitations

³ Kenneth L. Chafin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Preacher’s Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 122.

or folly: he looks on the heart and sees the truth about a man or a woman's character, faith, values, and desires.

This is why God wanted to provide Israel's king! This is also why God wants to raise up leaders for the church today by his own calling. This is why when churches are approving leaders, we need to follow strictly the criteria given in God's Word, all of which are spiritual qualifications. Lacking our own wisdom, we need to obey God's Word. In doing this, we are especially warned against the impressiveness of external appearances. It is not easy and it takes time and discernment to assess character, values, and true beliefs. We need to pray for God's help and wisdom and we need to seek to look upon the heart.

Having been rebuked by the Lord, Samuel passed from Jesse's first son to the next. Abinadab was sent forth and was also rejected. Next came Shammah: "Neither has the LORD chosen this one" (v. 9). Altogether, seven sons of Jesse came before the prophet, to which Samuel replied: "The Lord has not chosen these." So he asked Jesse: "Are all your sons here?" (1 Sam. 16:11). After all, God had told him to anoint one of Jesse's sons, but none had gained approval. We can sense the reluctance in Jesse's demeanor when he admits that there is yet one more son: "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for he we will not sit down till he comes here" (1 Sam. 16:11). Samuel knew how to motivate action, and the company would not get to eat until this youngest son was fetched and brought before the prophet.

Dale Ralph Davis points out that what happened next is "the stuff songs are made of."⁴ In comes David, fresh from the fields, unwashed and still smelling of the sheep. From what we learn later of his family life, his older brothers perhaps stood aloof as he drew near, looking down on the runt of their pack. Our text tells us that he "was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome." As soon as he appeared, the Lord spoke to Samuel: "Arise, anoint him, for this is he" (1 Sam. 16:12). So "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers" (1 Sam. 16:13). In the most unlikely

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 139.

and humble place, God had found the king of his own choosing, the youth whom God himself had fashioned for his own purpose of grace.

LOOKING ON THE HEART

In reflecting on the anointing of David, we need to consider both the event itself and the instructive word that God gave as his explanation: “man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). First, we should see this event as God’s *rebuke to a principle at the heart of idolatry*: a focus on outward appearance. There is nothing wrong with a good appearance: we are told that David himself was handsome and bright-eyed. But the essence of the matter is what takes place in the heart.

This principle is vital, for instance, in the worship of the Lord. There is a tendency for worship to be focused on right appearances and forms. William Blaikie writes: “Let everything be outwardly correct, the church beautiful, the music excellent, the sermon able, the congregation numerous and respectable – what a pattern such a church is often regarded! Alas! How little satisfactory it may be to God.” What does God look for in a gathering of his people? Blaikie answers by directing us to the heart, where true worship takes place:

The lowly sense of personal unworthiness, the wondering contemplation of the Divine love, the eager longing for mercy to pardon and grace to help, faith that grasps the promises, the hope that is anchored within the veil, the kindness that breathes benediction all round, the love that beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things – it is these things, breathing forth from the hearts of a congregation, that give pleasure to God.⁵

What is true of worship is true of life in general, that we must repent of the idolatry of “keeping up appearances.” How many people in our society place themselves deeply into debt simply so that their lifestyle may give the false appearance of affluence? How many worthless (or nearly so) products are dressed up before consumers with false and misleading advertisements? Of all the world’s many idolatries, few are greater than the idolatry of outward appearances. God’s people are called to repent of this way of thinking, which if allowed to

⁵ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 258.

persist may endanger of very souls. After all, it was the Pharisee in Christ's parable who went home unjustified, because he paraded his appearance of righteousness before the Lord, as if God could not see his dirty heart (Lk. 18:11-14). Focusing on his outward appearance, he never sought the righteousness that comes only through faith in Christ.

More positively, we gain much instruction from young David's anointing as Israel's king. We do not know how much Samuel told David or his father on this occasion, but we do know that God had David anointed many years before he would actually take up the royal office. Why would the Lord do this? The best answer is that God knows that *high callings require early preparation*.

Regardless of how much or little Samuel let David know about the meaning of his anointing, David would go back to his fields with holy matters for reflection. Saul came to his royal ambitions in the middle of life, when his character and habits were long formed. David was still a youth, and his further upbringing in a godly family could be directed toward his anointed appointment for service to God.

In this respect, it cannot be coincidental that the young man whom God was providing as his king was found serving as a shepherd in the fields. Shepherding was a lowly occupation, yet one that commended itself to God and was likely to instill the most noble virtues. Blaikie writes, "The duties of the shepherd, to watch over his flock, to feed and protect them, to heal the sick, bind up the broken, and bring again that which was driven away, corresponded to those which the faithful and godly ruler owed to the people committed to his scepter."⁶ Ultimately, God's promised Messiah, his own Son, would take up the emblem of the shepherd to depict his rulership of love: "I am the good shepherd," declared the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 10:11). When Jesse and his older sons deemed it unfit to include David among those brought before the prophet, they not only were looking only at appearances but they also revealed the most complete ignorance of God's ways and desires. Far from being thought ineligible because he was tending flocks in the fields, David was being specially prepared for God's selection as king.

⁶ Ibid., 260.

This principle applies to all Christians: if we would desire to be useful to the Lord, we should devote ourselves to preparing our character and tending our spiritual growth. We prepare ourselves to serve the Lord in the school of Scripture, in the discipline of prayer, and in the practice of serving Christ's church in even the most menial of ways.

The anointing of David especially instructs us in the preparing of our youths. Young David was given responsibility and honed real-life skills that would serve him well even in the near future. Later, when Saul sought to deny David the right to challenge the Philistine giant, Goliath, David answered by appeal to his youthful shepherding experience: "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth" (1 Sam. 17:34-35). From early years, David was challenged to live sacrificially and accomplish meaningful tasks for his family and for the Lord. In this way God was arranging his preparation for great things. Can we not expect God likewise to employ our youths if they are challenged not merely to the low standard of "staying out of trouble," but instead to live for boldly Christ in our dark generation?

Another lesson of David's anointing is one that we see all through Scripture: *God's delight in elevating servants from lowly places*. God delights to bless those who are poor and low in the world, and it magnifies his glory to employ servants who possess no advantage save his gift of grace. We find this principle to hold true time after time in Scripture, just as it is generally true for God's calling of the humble and poor to find their salvation in Christ. Paul thus reminded the early Christians that "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:26-27).

Moreover, David's anointing shows us that *the most important qualities are those that commend us to God*. In choosing spiritual leaders, in hiring employees, and in personal matters such as the selection of a husband or a wife, how urgent is our need to remember the instruction of 1 Samuel 16:7: "Man looks on the outward

appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” The Bible commends many qualities, such as those we find in the book of Proverbs, in Jesus’ beatitudes, and in Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). None of us score very highly by these biblical standards, of course. But the quality we can and must possess if we wish to be faithful and godly servants, employees, spouses, parents, and friends, is a willingness and desire to obey the Word of God. Remember what Samuel stated in his rebuke to King Saul: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22).

Lastly, David’s anointing reminds us that the qualities that God desires in his servants are those *he grants by the sending of his Holy Spirit*. This is why after Samuel anointed David, “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from day forward” (1 Sam. 16:13). Today, God’s Spirit works in our lives through God’s Word and through prayer. Jesus promised to send the Spirit to all his disciples, the divine Helper who “will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:12) and by whose ministry we “are being transformed” into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). The way for Christians to grow in grace and prepare ourselves for future service to the Lord is to “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16) through faith in Christ and in obedience to his Word.

LIKE DAVID, LIKE JESUS

The anointing of David marked a significant advance in God’s redeeming plan for history. Moreover, it pointed forward to the greatest advancement in God’s salvation, which would come with the entry of his own Son, Jesus Christ. Of all the types of Christ in the Old Testament – that is, people, events, and institutions intended to foreshadow the coming of Christ – David is the greatest and clearest. That Jesus is known as “the son of David” was originally intended as a compliment to Jesus, although from our vantage point we see it as an instance of amazing grace to David.

The selection of David points us forward to several features that draw us to faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus was not distinguished for his outward attractions. Neither did Jesus conduct himself so as to appeal to the

fads and fashions of his day in Jerusalem. He did not take the expected route of first attaining the approval of the religious power-brokers. He did not set out to win over the people by flashy eloquence or studied expressions. Even while Jesus performed miracles that set forth his divine power, he accompanied it with teaching that confounded the wisdom of the age. His oratory, though indeed profound, was directed to the deep matters of the heart and the stirring realities of God. “He conquered by gentleness, by forbearance, by love, by sympathy, by self-denial. He impressed men with the glory of sacrifice, the glory of service, the glory of obedience... to the will of God... He inspired them with a love of purity of heart.”⁷

Most importantly, Jesus came to obey the will of God his Father. For this reason, he did not receive the accolades of the world, and for this same reason, he did receive the power of God’s Holy Spirit. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17), God said, on the occasion when the Spirit fell on Jesus like a dove. Jesus was, after all, the Savior God himself provided for his people, who brings the salvation that comes from God and restores us to God’s favor.

Let us, honoring Jesus and trusting in his Word, follow his example in believing and doing God’s will. We may lack the approval of the world and we may be denied the world’s methods of advancement and success, but if we have the anointing of God’s Holy Spirit, then God will see in our hearts those things that cause him pleasure and prepare us to be useful to him. And if, like Samuel, we are downcast and defeated by the influence of sin and darkness around us, perhaps thinking that all is lost, God has good news to lift our hearts and challenge us to renewed boldness in faith. Speaking of his own Son, of whom even great David was but a type and symbol, God says, “I have provided for myself a king.” Believing in Jesus, our true king, we may be uplifted in spirit and renewed in faith to serve his kingdom boldly in this world.

⁷ Blaikie, *I Samuel*, 262.