

Study 4 — God's Covenant with David

God's covenant with Israel's King David, nearly a millennium before the coming of Christ, is important for us, and the world. It is his revelation of what manner of authority he uses to save the world and his assurance that he will do this. It provides part of the framework for what Jesus Christ came to do and the apostles freely used promises made to or about David in their proclamation of who Jesus is.

Before looking at the story of David, we note the lead up to Israel's monarchy. In Biblical language, kingship is not the largely ceremonial institution of the modern West but a combination of military, legislative and judicial powers. The idea is first introduced when God tells Abraham that kings will arise from his family (Gen. 17:6, 16). Then Moses anticipates that Israel will ask for a king to rule over them and gives instruction as to what manner of king they should chose (Deut. 17:14-20). This includes his writing a copy of the law for himself so that he can read it and rule by it all his life. At the end of Joshua's leadership, the nation is called to be faithful to the Sinai covenant but no mention is made of a king. During the reign of the judges, there is one fateful attempt by Abimelech to reign as king (Jud. 9) but otherwise, as the nation falls into moral and political chaos, the writer notes that 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Jud. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This chorus, written from the days of settled monarchy that follow, demonstrates how needful the appointment of a king is.

Then comes Samuel, one of Israel's greatest leaders. He has reasserted God's kingship over Israel and everyone knows that God will do whatever Samuel says will happen (1 Sam. 3:19). Under his leadership, the terrible chaos into which the nation has sunk is being pushed back and the nation again feels its unity. When his sons prove unlikely to give similar leadership the people ask Samuel to appoint a king. This is greeted with strong resistance from Samuel and the Lord explains that Israel is not rejecting their prophet but their God as King (1 Sam. 8:7; 10:19; 12:12)—not a promising beginning for the Davidic covenant!

The fateful leadership of King Saul shows Israel that kingship of itself does not secure God's kingdom. Saul begins to act like any other earthly king, securing his own position, and is no longer able to defend or lead the nation. So the stage is set for a king 'after God's heart' (1 Sam. 13:14).

Samuel anoints David as king (1 Sam. 16:13). He immediately begins to act as a servant king without any public appointment. After Saul's death, he is gladly recognised as God's anointed by the southern tribes, and seven years later, by the whole of Israel. Under his reign, all Israel's enemies are defeated. The occupation of the land God had promised to Abraham is, for the first time, fulfilled and the country prospers.

It is after his victories and when David wants to build a permanent temple for the Lord that God makes his promise to David. Through the prophet Nathan, God rejects the offer of David to build a temple and says God will do the 'building'. Some regard this event as the central point of the Old Testament. Everything has led to it and everything else flows from it. Here is what God said to David.

"Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. "I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth. "I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you. "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. "He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My

lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took *it* away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:8-16).

We note a few things. First, God is responsible for David's successes. Second, it is God who will make him famous. Third, it is God who will continue to provide security for his people. Fourth, God will make David's 'house' a permanent dynasty. Discipline will come on the iniquity of any king but steadfast love will not be taken away (as it had been from Saul). Fifth, his son will build a temple for God.

David's response is significant.

Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD. You have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for mankind, O Lord GOD! And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD! Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have brought about all this greatness, to make your servant know it. Therefore you are great, O LORD God. For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. (2 Sam. 7:18-22 ESV).

David sees this will be wholly God's doing, and, that this is 'instruction for mankind'. Other nations are mentioned in this promise—they will need to watch and learn and even obey as God raises up kings for Israel. Effectively, God is saying that the welfare of the nations is going to depend on this dynasty. The promise begins to find fulfillment in the visit of wise men to the infant Jesus.

This promise is not followed by any covenant making ceremony or sacrifice but David, at the end of his life, calls it a covenant.

For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire (2 Sam. 23:5 ESV)?

The covenant is 'ordered in all things and secure' (cf. our 'signed, sealed and delivered') and eternal. Part of the promise is indeed fulfilled in David's son because Solomon builds the temple, and the nation rises to great prosperity and fame under him. It is worth noting, however, that later history depends more on the nature of David's reign than Solomon's. Our understanding of the kingdom of God is shaped more by the trust of David's kingship than the successes of Solomon's.

Israel is greatly comforted by God's covenant to secure their king and celebrated it in song.

I will sing of the lovingkindness of the LORD forever; to all generations I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth. For I have said, "Lovingkindness will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness." "I have made a covenant with my chosen; I have sworn to David my servant, I will establish your seed forever and build up your throne to all generations" (Psa. 89:1-4).

"He will cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.' "I also shall make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. "My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and my covenant shall be confirmed to him. "So I will establish his descendants forever and his throne as the days of heaven. ... "My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of my lips. "Once I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. "His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before me. "It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful." (Psa. 89:26-29, 34-37).

We should note, first, that the covenant arises from God's steadfast love and faithfulness—again, a top-down grace relationship. Second, the kingship will be exercised in familial relationship with the Lord. This is expressed in the fact that the King lives next to the temple and can sit in God's presence to receive counsel and exercise power on his behalf (Psa. 110:1). Third, Israel's King will become the world's leader.

Clearly, the covenant with David points Israel beyond the ambiguities and failures of the kings who followed David. They could be a witness to what was to come but could never fulfill the salvation promised. As an earthly institution, the Davidic monarchy ends some 400

years later with a whimper as Zedekiah's sons are killed, and he is blinded and led into captivity. But like Abraham, the faithful in Israel 'hoped against hope' for the fulfillment of God's covenanted promise and looked for 'one who is to come'.

Again, God gives them this song to sing in Psalm 2.

Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!" He who sits in the heavens laughs, The Lord scoffs at them. Then He will speak to them in his anger and terrify them in his fury, saying, "But as for me, I have installed my King upon Zion, my holy mountain." "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: he said to me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you. 'Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance, and the *very* ends of the earth as your possession. 'You shall break them with a rod of iron, you shall shatter them like earthenware.'" Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning, O judges of the earth. Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, that he not become angry, and you perish *in* the way, for his wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

This is one of the Psalms most quoted in the New Testament to show that Jesus is King. It is used at his baptism (Matt. 3:17), his transfiguration (Matt. 17:5), his commissioning of the apostles (Matt. 28:18), in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 13:33-34) and explaining it to Christians (Heb. 5:5), and in the visions of Christ in Revelation (2:26-27; 12:5; 19:15).

The prophets see beyond the aberrations of Israel's life to the promise of God that cannot be thwarted. They declare that God will send his King to save his people and establish justice in the earth. Isaiah 11 tells us a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse; that is, the dynasty will be hewn down but will reappear. God's Spirit will be on him (v. 2), his judgement will be true (v. 3), the weak will be defended and the strong subdued (v. 4) and global peace will be the result of global knowledge of the Lord (vv. 6-9). All these promises add to our understanding of God's covenant with David, to be fulfilled in a coming anointed one or Messiah.

When Jesus comes to Israel, one has to ask why the nation is so slow to recognise Jesus as the King promised by God. When they do want to *make* him King it is only to benefit from his miracles (John 6:15, 26), but then, no human authority could *make* Christ King anyway! What Israel did not notice, and our flesh makes us prone to this, is that the King came to be one with his people. He was above them but not immune to their woes and sins and their standing under God's judgement. David had been told his sons would be chastened but not removed from God's steadfast love. How would this work out?

Isaiah answers this question with the revelation that the coming bringer of justice to the nations, that is, their King, will be the Suffering Servant. He will work in a gentle manner (Isa. 42:1-4). The one who will be a light to the nations will experience rejection (Isa. 49:1-6). He will suffer but gather those who trust in the Lord (Isa. 50:4-11). He will, in fact, be chastised, not for his own sins, but for ours (Isa. 53:5 with 2 Sam. 7:14). But then, by his scourging we will be healed. If the Davidic covenant assures us that we have a King against whom none can stand, it is also true that this King cannot be understood unless we recognise that he comes near to us, not just to provide a safe environment but to justify us, enable us to stand before a Holy God and lead us in paths of righteousness.

Jesus is born to be King (Matt. 2:2). He comes to fulfill the promises made to David and to establish the covenant made with him (Luke 1:69-71). He begins his ministry announcing that the kingdom of God is 'near' (Luke 10:9) or has 'come upon' (Luke 11:20) his hearers. He tells Pilate that he is king and that for this purpose he has come into the world (John 18:37). Jesus is killed because of this claim but is now raised from the dead to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

Given that we have been transferred into this kingdom (Col. 1:13), we have a great interest in the covenant made with David because our welfare and the future of the world are in Christ's hands and we are to seek it above everything else.

He is still hated because of this claim to absolute authority, even though he commands his subjects not to take arms to defend this kingdom. At his return, however, everyone will know that he is this world's King.

Some observations need to be made in closing. Our experience of democracy should not immunize us against living under Christ as King. All authority is given to him—period. We need to make much of Christ and to 'know the fear of the Lord' (2 Cor. 6:10-11). Second, the gentle healing modes of Christ should not hide from us that his tongue can be described as a sword with which he slays the nations (Rev. 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). His word is still final. Third, no earthly authority should object to his reign because it is he who has revealed the true nature of all authority and the dominion of God he came to secure allows for the exercise of all earthly authorities. Fourth, the sureness of Christ's Kingship should not lead us to have a theology of glory that avoids suffering. Christ has shown us, as David's true Son, that the kingdom of God is about righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) and about sharing in the suffering that makes this good news accessible to others.

Clearly, the Davidic covenant is still in place and will be fulfilled. Christ reigns until all his enemies are defeated, and then he will hand the kingdom to the Father so that he who gives us Christ may be everything to everyone (1 Cor. 15:28).

Until then, God summons the nations to obedience to Christ. He offers life without cost, and a covenant relationship that consists of God's sure mercies to David (Isa. 55:1-5).