

9. David's Preparation for the Throne of Israel

It is common among Christians for Saul's life and reign to be viewed primarily as an example of moral and spiritual failure. Starting from the correct premise that everything in the Scripture is of value to the Church, it is often concluded that Saul's contribution consists in his negative example: Saul shows the Christian community how *not* to live in relation to God. In this sense he is regarded in the same way as other Old Testament characters; his story, like theirs, is most often treated as if it were a self-contained religious narrative intended by God simply to communicate a moral lesson.

But when viewed as it should be within the larger redemptive storyline, it's clear that Saul's moral and religious failure *as such* is not the Scripture's concern. God intended that he would play a crucial role in the movement of salvation history and His progressive revelation of His coming redemption in Christ. The components and quality of Saul's life and reign served the cause of salvation-historical and revelatory development rather than being ends in themselves. Stated another way, Saul's relevance to the Church is found in his relation to God's outworking of His redemption in Jesus Christ. In isolation from that larger purpose and process, Saul's story is meaningless.

The meaning of Saul's life resides in his role in the ordained salvation-history, specifically in relation to the transition from the theocracy as established at Sinai to the theocratic monarchy. Two things about this transitional role are important to reiterate.

- 1) The first is that Israel's shift to a monarchy was not, in itself, a contrary development. God had ordained that the kingdom promised to Abraham – the kingdom then manifested in the form of theocratic Israel – would include a human royal component. The fact of Israel having a human king was not only acceptable to God, He had determined that it would be so. The Israelite kingdom embodied the first-level fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham; by design it was to serve as the prototype for His eschatological kingdom presided over by Jesus Christ.
- 2) From the beginning God purposed that His kingdom would be administered as a theocratic monarchy; His immediate displeasure with the *Israelite* monarchy was due to the fact that it would fall short of His design. It is precisely at this point that the significance of Saul's failure becomes evident. As the Lord predicted, Saul's reign was characterized by the "procedure of the king" and, in that sense, was indistinguishable from every manifestation of human rule; Saul's kingdom wasn't Yahweh's kingdom. *From the Bible's perspective, the calamity that was Saul's kingship was not so much an indication of his own personal failure as the failure of the Israelite kingdom under his rule to realize the divine intention.*

In accordance with His purpose for His creation, God had determined that His kingdom – hinted at in Eden and promised by covenant to Abraham – was to be a theocratic monarchy administered by a royal seed. Saul's ascension to the newly established throne of Israel affirmed that intention and effected the transition to a human monarchy. But most importantly, *Saul's reign demonstrated that Yahweh's kingdom was yet unrealized.*

God's rule over His creation was to be exercised through a human king, but a king who rules as His **son** (with all that entails and implies). As noted above, this design – first revealed in the creational kingdom – explains Yahweh's displeasure with Israel's request for a king and the true significance of Saul's failure. God's rejection of Saul showed that the fulfillment of His kingdom promise awaited another sort of human ruler.

Thus Saul's reign as Israel's first king formed a crucial salvation-historical bridge: As a point of realization, it reflected back on God's revealed intention to exercise His sovereign rule through His royal image-son. But, falling short of that intention, Saul's reign equally looked forward to a future fulfillment, *the hope of which was necessarily grounded in faith in the power of God*. For, whatever Saul's failings, they were universal human failings; his rule was consistent with every expression of human dominion in every place and time. What this means is that God's rejection of Saul as His king was effectively His rejection of all natural kingship. Yahweh's promised kingdom was to be one in which His own dominion is administered through human rule, but all men rule according to the "procedure of the king." This being the case, the only hope for the realization of God's true kingdom was the emergence of a new kind of man, and, in the absence of such a man, that meant living by faith.

Saul's life and reign pointed to the need for a different sort of ruler, and that expectation found its immediate referent in his successor David. The text leaves no doubt about David's distinction in this regard, introducing him as a "man after God's own heart" even before identifying him by name. Whereas men judge on the basis of temporal criteria, God applies an entirely different standard in his assessment of people. So it was that even Samuel misjudged which of Jesse's sons would receive the Lord's anointing (ref. 16:1-7). Left to his own judgment, Samuel would have chosen David's older brother, but God knew better. Whether David would prove to be the ultimate realization of Yahweh's design for a king was not evident at the outset. What was clear was that, even if he did finally fall short of that ideal, his person and reign would serve as a prototype of it.

From the point of his introduction, the text conspicuously directs its attention to distinguishing David from Saul. Starting from David's foundational distinction as a man whose heart was set fully upon Yahweh, the narrative demonstrates in numerous ways David's unique suitability to be Saul's successor to the throne of Israel. Saul acted as the point of transition into the monarchy; David would serve as the first true king of the covenant people and the fountainhead of the royal dynasty promised to the fathers.

- a. The first point of distinction between Saul and David is their respective genealogies. While David's lineage didn't necessarily establish his own right to the throne of Israel, it did disqualify Saul. God had revealed centuries earlier that the royal component of Abraham's line of descent was to be confined to Judah. The scepter would continue with him until the coming of the One to whom it rightly belonged ("Shiloh"). Thus, while Saul's reign served the divine purpose in the transition into the monarchy, the Lord's own determination precluded him from being the legitimate king of Israel. Only a descendent of Judah could rightfully sit on the throne of Israel and reign over the covenant kingdom.

- b. David belonged to the tribe of Judah, but that didn't make him personally suited to be Yahweh's king. That affirmation came first through God's attestation of David's character, but more importantly through the anointing of His Spirit. Following Yahweh's rejection of Saul and identification of David, the first thing the text records is His transfer of His Spirit from Saul to David (16:11-13). Most importantly, David is distinguished from Saul by the fact that he received the royal anointing of Yahweh's Spirit as a permanent endowment. Whatever might transpire in David's future or the future of his kingdom, his new status as Israel's king would not be set aside. This endowment lays the foundation for the balance of the David narrative and speaks particularly to two key aspects of it.
- 1) The first is the *manner* in which David would assume the throne of Israel. Though God rejected Saul, removed His Spirit from him and anointed David as the true king of Israel, Saul would continue to reign for many years. By Yahweh's own declaration (15:28), the kingdom now belonged to David, yet his ascent to the throne would be slow and agonizing. Throughout those intervening years the Lord demanded of David that he believe His word of affirmation rather than his circumstances.
 - 2) The second matter implicated in David's permanent anointing – the one to which it primarily pertains – is the *covenant* God would later make with him. Yahweh had chosen David to serve as His king over the covenant household throughout his lifetime, but the true permanence of his reign was to be realized in a perpetual royal dynasty to come from him. David's throne and kingdom would extend beyond his own life into eternity.
- c. The text thirdly distinguishes David from Saul by noting a particular circumstance indicative of their individual relation to Yahweh. After rejecting Saul and removing His Spirit from him, the Lord gave him over to be tormented by an evil spirit. At times Saul was nearly out of his mind, and then it was David's ministry to him that brought him comfort and alleviation from his torment. Though Saul continued as Israel's ruler, he depended upon David – the true king anointed with Yahweh's Spirit – to deliver him from his affliction and give him rest (16:14-23).
- d. In terms of its effect on his life and future circumstance, the most significant point of distinction for David was his encounter with Goliath (17:1-58). David's remarkable victory over the Philistine giant – and by implication, over the Philistine nation – was the turning point in his life as God moved him toward the kingship. That triumph saw David leaving his role as shepherd of his father's flocks to serve in Saul's house as commander of the armies of Israel (18:1-5).
- e. David's victory over Goliath was the start of a triumphal campaign against the Philistines that brought him increasing distinction in Israel. When Saul realized that his young officer was winning the hearts of his subjects, jealousy and fear began to grow and fester within him and his previous devotion to David gradually turned to an obsession with taking his life (cf. 16:21 with 18:6-15).

At first Saul sought to rid himself of David through guile and conspiracy (ref. 18:17-30), but soon his obsession so consumed him that concealing his designs was no longer a concern. All that mattered was David's death, even if that meant killing him with his own hands. Despite occasions of apparent repentance, Saul would never really depart from that goal (cf. 19:1-10, 24:1-22, 26:1-25).

- f. The balance of First Samuel focuses the distinction between Saul and David on their sharply contrasting attitudes and actions toward each other. For his part, Saul's early devotion to David degenerated into consuming hatred. Though he knew God had stripped him of the kingdom, Saul sought to retain his hold on the throne of Israel and the loyalty of the people. At every turn the Lord showed His favor toward David, but Saul's pride and blind commitment to preserving his reign wouldn't allow him to relinquish what had already been taken from him.

David, on the other hand, suffered terribly for a long season under Saul's obsessive wrath and yet remained steadfast in his dedication to the man he continued to regard as the Lord's anointed. It wasn't that David was unaware that God had rejected Saul and transferred the kingdom to him; he was simply expressing his patient faith in God and His timing: Until such time as Yahweh gave him the throne by removing Saul, David would yield to His providential hand. In that sense Saul remained Israel's king and the Lord's anointed.

The fact that God had already transferred the kingship from Saul to David makes the interplay between them all the more significant to the developing storyline. Both men were aware of what God had done (cf. 15:24-29, 16:1-13, 24:17-20), *yet both conducted themselves in a manner that seemed to deny it*. Saul continued to act as if he were the rightful king of Israel, managing by means of that delusion to justify the most outrageous behavior. He could even rationalize killing Yahweh's priests and the inhabitants of the sacred city of Nob as a justifiable response to David's treason.

On the other hand, David was Yahweh's anointed king, and yet he spent over a decade on the run, hounded and threatened at every turn by the man God had openly rejected. As Saul denied the reality of what the Lord had done, so it seemed with David. Why would Yahweh's king not take what was his? Why would he spend years running for his life when the Lord had given him the kingdom and surrounded him with a group of mighty men eager to help him ascend the throne? The text provides two answers to this:

- 1) First, David's preparation for serving Yahweh and His people as His king was to find its fruitfulness in the things he suffered. David needed to learn to trust and depend upon the Lord alone, and his long ordeal with Saul accomplished that.
- 2) But more importantly, David's ascent to the throne through patient, dependent faith in the face of persecution and unjust suffering was crucial to his revelatory role as the prototype of Yahweh's true king. David's person, reign and kingdom prefigured greater, ultimate counterparts, so that the manner and circumstances of his personal ascension had significance far beyond his own experience.