

A KING AFTER GOD'S HEART (I SAMUEL 16:4-13)

Central Thought: *God chooses David, an unlikely choice by man's standards, as successor to Saul.*

THE SETTING. Saul's rule began well. With a humble spirit (9:21), a generous heart (11:12-13), splendid appearance (9:2; 10:23), and great courage (11:6ff.), Saul immediately won the favor of Israel's tribes (11:14-15). Like the judges of previous days, Saul rallied the tribes to a united front against Israel's enemies. But also like the judges, Saul failed to establish any long-term administrative policies. He developed no lasting national organizations and basically left intact the internal tribal structure of Israel. As Leon Wood suggests, "He should have begun to institute policies and measures toward unification before many years had passed. If the tribes were to be welded into a nation, these were needed. But no evidence exists that Saul ever tried to do this."¹

Saul's failure to bring about greater tribal cohesiveness through broader religious, political, and social structures opened the door for external pressure from surrounding nations. Under such pressure, Saul proved to be of quite a different temperament—a volatile one that caused him to swing like a pendulum between good and bad moods and made him incapable of intelligent, consistent action.² When under pressure, Saul displayed pride, self-sufficiency, and spiritual instability, and his rule deteriorated. For example, when the Philistines advanced to a

¹Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 243.

²See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1981), 191.

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site near Gibeah, Saul panicked at Gilgal. He became impatient waiting for the prophet Samuel and wrongly took it on himself to perform priestly functions (see I Samuel 13). Later, when fighting the Amalakites, Saul once again acted rashly (see I Samuel 15). He spared King Agag and the best of the livestock, and by doing this he violated the sacred “ban” or “curse” [the Hebrew word *herem*] of holy war. Saul clearly disobeyed God. He acted from the impulse of his own spirit rather than from the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. He violated the fundamental requirement of his office as Israel’s king, the requirement to “fear the Lord, serve him, obey his voice, and do not rebel against his commandment” (12:14). Saul had rejected the word of the Lord, so the Lord rejected Saul (15:23). The time had come to select another man for king. The time had come to choose a man who would honor the Lord’s word. The time had come to anoint a man “after God’s own heart” (13:14; cf. Acts 13:22).

THE TEXT. Verse 4. The Lord sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse’s sons in a private ceremony (v. 1). The initiative is the Lord’s (v. 3). Hans Hertzberg comments:

The Lord is concerned not to let the kingdom fall with the “rejected” king, but, on the contrary, to take care that it is preserved. The fact that this is to be affected by an anointing is a sign that a call from the Lord is the decisive factor for taking up the office. Both Saul and David are wholly elected by divine grace. A man no more “becomes” king through human initiative that he “becomes” prophet by such means.³

Samuel is reluctant to go, since he fears Saul. But the Lord instructs Samuel to take a heifer with him, and Samuel goes to Bethlehem under the guise of offering sacrifice (v. 2). The elders of the

³Hans W. Herzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1964), 137.

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city receive Samuel apprehensively (v. 4). Perhaps they fear entanglement in the discord between Samuel and Saul (cf. 21:1ff.).

Verse 5. Samuel greets the people with *shalom* (e.g., “I have come in peace”) and announces his reason for coming (i.e., “to sacrifice to the Lord”). Samuel’s reason for coming is true, but it is incomplete. He does not tell the people everything.

The elders are to purify themselves for the sacrifice, but Samuel himself consecrates Jesse and his sons (see Exodus 19:10ff.). This gives Samuel the opportunity of meeting privately with Jesse’s family in order to anoint David. In this way the true purpose of Samuel’s visit remains hidden from the elders and from King Saul.

Verses 6-7. The text does not specify the *where* of the anointing of David. It simply says “when they arrived.” Is it at the house of Jesse during the sacrificial meal (see vv. 11, 13)?

When Samuel spots Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab (cf. 17:13), he thinks him to be “the Lord’s anointed.” The appearance and height of Eliab impresses Samuel. Eliab like Saul stands out in a crowd (cf. 9:2; 10:23). So Samuel naturally assumes Eliab to be Saul’s successor. But Samuel judges by human standards. The Lord tells Samuel, “I have rejected him” (cf. 15:23; 16:1). The Lord does not judge according to outward appearance; the Lord judges according to the heart. “The Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (I Chronicles 28:9). “His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of a man; the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love” (Psalm 147:10). Eliab is impressive in his outward appearance, but he is not God’s man.

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Verses 8-10. The others sons of Jesse pass before Samuel—Abinadab, Shammah (cf. II Samuel 13:3; 21:21), and the rest (cf. I Chronicles 2:13-15; 27:18). The answer is the same: “The Lord has not chosen these.” The one whom the Lord had chosen beforehand (see 13:14; 15:28) is not among them.

Verses 11-12. David is absent from the gathering. He is young, and he is busy tending the sheep (see Psalm 78:70-72; II Samuel 7:8; cf. Saul’s instruction as a donkey herder, 9:3ff.). Jesse evidently does not even consider David as a possible choice. Jesse, like Samuel, judges by human standards.

Samuel sends for the youngest son. The matter is urgent. They will not even sit down (i.e., for the sacrificial meal) until he comes. When the young lad arrives, he is seen to be “ruddy” (e.g., red hair and fair skin) and “handsome” (cf. 17:42). But as Hertzberg notes, “Nevertheless, the establishment of David’s suitability is not, as with Eliab, a result of his appearance or of Samuel’s or Jesse’s judgment; rather it is based on the command of the Lord immediately given to Samuel.”⁴ The Lord chooses this younger son (cf. God’s choice of Jacob instead of Esau, of Judah instead of Reuben), and by such a choice the Lord contradicts human expectations. He raises up a shepherd boy to be king of his people. In doing this the Lord anticipates his handiwork in raising up another shepherd king who is Jesus (see II Samuel 7:12ff.; cf. Matthew 2:6; and Luke 1:31-33).

⁴Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary*, 138.

Verse 13. Samuel immediately obeys the divine imperative (cf. 9:17; 10:11). In confirmation of the divine choice, he anoints David with oil. David thus becomes “the Lord’s anointed” (the Hebrew word *mashiah*; see 2:10; II Samuel 22:51; Psalm 20:6; 84:9). He is a consecrated person, and he shares the Lord’s holiness (see 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 23). The Spirit of the Lord now falls on David, as the Spirit did at Saul’s anointing (cf. 10:6, 10). The Lord empowers the new king he has chosen. He furthermore removes his Spirit from the disobedient vessel (v. 14).

Whether Jesse, his sons, and even David himself fully understand at this time the meaning of these events, it is hard to know. Clearly Eliab does not understand David’s high office (see 17:28; cf. the attitude of the brothers of both Joseph and Jesus). But at a later time they will come to know and accept the truth of God’s unlikely choice.

THE LESSON. David was the youngest boy in his family. Unlike the firstborn, he had no position of honor and status. David was a shepherd boy. His livelihood was a simple one. David was ruddy with handsome physical features. But unlike his brother Eliab, he did not stand out in a crowd. David would not have been Samuel’s choice for a king. But David was God’s choice for king. He was an unlikely choice according to man’s standards, but according to God’s standards he was the right man.

Take courage, O Christian, because God’s choice is not man’s choice. “Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly

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things and the despised things . . . so that no one may boast before him” (I Corinthians 1:26-29).

Take courage when you think you are nothing, for you are everything beautiful in him. Don't look at yourself as the world looks at you, and find your boast, O believer, in him.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT & DISCUSSION

1. In what ways did Saul's rule parallel that of Israel's judges?
2. Why did God reject Saul as king of Israel?
3. Compare and contrast Saul and Samuel in their response to commands from the Lord.
4. Discuss the appropriateness of Samuel's actions in verse 5. Why does Samuel anoint David in a "private" ceremony "in the presence of his brothers" (v. 13)?
5. How does the Lord judge people (v. 7)?
6. In what ways do you judge people by outward appearance? In what ways do you judge people by the heart?
7. Give the names of seven sons and two daughters of Jesse.
8. How does God's choice of David parallel his choice of Jacob (see Genesis 25:21ff.; and Romans 9:10-13)? David and Jacob are similar in what ways?
9. With what does the Lord empower David at his anointing? How does the Lord empower believers today?
10. How is I Corinthians 1:26-31 illustrated in God's choice of David? In God's choice of you?