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Sermon

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God Looks on the Heart

1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13; Mark 4:26-34

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Last week, we heard the people of Israel demanding a king. This week we have passed over the appointment of the first king, Saul, to the anointing of David.

Do you remember in the Narnia books, how time passed more quickly in Narnia than in England? The Pevensie children would pass return from an adventure in Narnia and when they next returned after months or a year, decades or centuries had passed in Narnia. We are like that with ancient Israel – in the last week, a few Israeli years have passed!

After the people demanded a king, God had brought Saul to him and Samuel appointed him as the first king. He was a fine looking, young man – head and shoulders above the others in height – a commanding figure. However, it turned out he did not have the moral courage to match.

Fall of Saul

Twice in this intervening period Saul failed to obey God because he was afraid of the people. Samuel announced that God had rejected Saul as King and the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him to be ruler over his people.¹

Our reading picks up with the fact that Samuel mourned for Saul. He was stuck at home and inactive. Often we are immobilized when things do not turn out as we had wanted. Grief especially knocks us back.

Note that God also grieves for Saul – he is not unfeeling or uncaring about what happens to us. However, there comes a time for action and so God tells Samuel to get up and be on his way to do what needs to be done.

Samuel goes to anoint David

The task God set Samuel was to anoint the next king who is one of the sons of Jesse who lives in Bethlehem. Now it is a dangerous thing to anoint the next king during the reign of his predecessor and Samuel protests that Saul will kill him but God provides a way to go forward. He says Samuel should take a calf and say he is coming to make a sacrifice – that will give him a cover for his visit.

¹ 1 Samuel 13:13

How often have we been afraid to do what God told us to do. We can learn from Samuel. Tell the Lord what you are afraid of and ask for his plan.

God looks at the heart

Samuel sets off for Bethlehem and finds Jesse. It looks as if Samuel does not let on what his mission is. That would be sensible for both his own safety and the boy's. Jesse brings out his oldest boy – who else would you consider first? This was a fine strapping young man Eliab. Surely this would be a good candidate Samuel thought. But the Lord said, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Well if not the oldest, the next oldest surely. But again the Lord says no. And so through all the sons of Jesse. Samuel who heard the Lord so clearly had to wait and trust. "I'm running out of boys and you keep saying, 'No!'"

All gone! But Samuel knew God had said it would be a son of Jesse and it was none of those presented to him. The only solution was that there was still another.

Sure enough, there was the youngest, David. They hadn't even thought to include him when the invitation went out to dedicate themselves for the sacrifice.

Not the big; not the bold – the Lord looks at the heart. It was the obvious choice: the All Black, the surf lifesaver, the Iron man - just an insignificant youth but God said, "This is the one." So Samuel anointed him as King of Israel and we are told the Spirit of God came mightily on him from that day.

God often seems to choose the younger rather than the older: Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Reuben, Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Ephraim over Manasseh, Moses over Aaron, Solomon over Adonijah. Why might this be? Maybe the oldest child easily developed a pride or arrogance – especially in a culture which elevated his station and importance. Maybe the younger child knew more about being the underdog, the servant rather than the master, the inferior rather than the superior. "God hates haughty eyes."²

What about you? Do you think you are too insignificant for God to use? Were you under the burden of an older brother or sister's ability? They could always do better being older and you felt compared to their superior ability?

Well, we have just seen that God does not automatically choose the older sibling. Break that lie off yourself. Realise that God can use you.

A Man after God's Own Heart

God declared that the one he would choose for king would be a man after his own heart. What does that signify? We see in David's life that he was passionate for God and God's honour. He worships God as no one has before him. He writes songs (psalms), later on he organises others to worship. He is a man who puts great trust in God. He hears God and obeys – the opposite of Saul who seemed not to hear and certainly chose not to obey when the pressure came on him.

When David brought the ark of the Lord into Jerusalem he danced with exuberance before it to the disdain of his wife who thought he demeaned himself. But David was rejoicing before the Lord rather than being concerned about his dignity.

When Saul disobeyed God and sinned, and he was confronted with his rebellion, he first denied it, then tried to whitewash his sin and finally blamed the people. By contrast when David was confronted with his sins of adultery and murder, he acknowledged his guilt and repented before God.

How much use do you think you are to God?

What God looks for is not our ability but our availability.

² Proverbs 6:16-17

Let me tell you a true story about someone who was thought to be no use but proved them wrong.

Gladys Aylward was a parlourmaid from London. She developed a longing to be a missionary. She tried to prepare herself for study to be a missionary but the mission agencies would not believe she was capable of the necessary academic work because of her poor education. Furthermore, in her twenties she was too old to learn another language.

So she saved, and at 28 she bought the cheapest ticket to China, travelling overland through Siberia by herself in the 1930's!

She worked with an older missionary running an inn for travellers which gave them contact with people. Then the local mandarin made her the government foot inspector. There had been a cultural practice of binding girls's feet tightly because it was thought attractive for women to have small feet. It also showed they were too wealthy to work in the fields like peasants. The government had decided the practice should be stopped. Her appointment gave her private access to all the women which allowed her to preach the gospel to them.

She established an orphanage and finally led 100 children to safety in a desperate 12 day hike across the mountains to escape the Japanese invaders during WW2. And this was just a London parlourmaid. God looks for our availability.

Responsibility

Psalms 138 adds a comment about God's choice of David: "God chose his servant David and took him from the sheepfolds, from tending nursing ewes, he brought him to be shepherd of his people Israel, his inheritance. With an upright heart he tended them and guided them with skilful hands."

God knew David's heart from early days. He watched his faithfulness as a shepherd. David speaks in a later chapter about rescuing lambs from the attacks of lions and bears. He was brave and ready to risk his life for a lamb. He was responsible.

We need to be faithful in the responsibilities we are given too. How you perform them is the only available measure of how you will perform greater responsibilities.

Growth

With the anointing completed, Samuel simply goes home. He doesn't stay around to train David or have any influence on him. It would be dangerous for both of them if he had done. He entrusts David to God – still working as a shepherd.

The seed was sown, without tending it would grow. The seed was a word over a boy's life, but that boy would grow into a man who would be the greatest of Israel's kings. As Jesus said in the gospel parable, the tiny, mustard seed grows into the great tree.

The Kingdom of God has within it life and growth. We tell people about God's rule, about forgiveness in Jesus, about new life. This is the sowing, but the development of those words into changed lives and spiritual growth has an independence from us. If you are a gardener or a farmer, you don't make the plant sprout. You sow the seed in favourable soil and provide the necessary support – water, protection. The seed has life of itself and develops into the plant to bear fruit.

On one of our trips to Finland, I met a man called Erik at a conference. He came for prayer saying that he could never sense God's love. When I prayed, I felt God said, "Ask him about his father." It turned out that his father had been a drunkard who had abandoned his family when Erik was 5. He resented that. Over the weekend I taught him to forgive and led him in forgiving his father. By the end of the conference, he had said that he was aware of God's love for him. About 18 months later, we were visiting a town well to the North for another conference. There in the Finnish prayer team was Erik. In conversation I asked him casually whether he ever felt God's love. He beamed at me and said, "All the time!" He went on to tell me that he was now the leader of his church's prayer ministry team. I thought then of this parable of Jesus, that the Kingdom grows like a seed planted without the farmer even tending it. He plants it and up it sprouts. That is what happened with Erik. I was very grateful to be allowed to see the fruit of my prayer.

So how about you then? I am sowing a seed into you by speaking these ideas. That seed is the idea which could grow in you. It is the idea that God can use insignificant little me or you for his purposes. Will you let take root or will you trample on it? If you let it take root, the gospel says it will grow by itself into a large tree. It will grow until it bears fruit.

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