

A Promise Fulfilled

Purpose

To grasp the ways that God's covenant blesses us by replacing human presumption with divine promise



Listen

The Scripture for this lesson is 2 Samuel 7. Selected verses are printed below. 2 Samuel 7:8-17

8 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 prince over my people Israel;

9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.

10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly,

11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.

15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

17 In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Key Verse: Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.(2 Samuel 7:16)

Look

An old saying by Ludovico Ariosto is, "Man proposes, but God disposes."¹ Human beings are full of great ideas, even ideas about how we might do great things for God. Not every "great idea" we think is what God has in mind, however. Simply put, our plans may not fit into God's larger perspective. More than that, many of our human aspirations are little more than thinly veiled means of accumulating glory for ourselves. Even our struggles for right against wrong sometimes arise out of a self-centered desire to be the hero who mans the bulwarks against the forces of godlessness. Thankfully, we do not fool God, who can see right through our self-serving vainglory.

King David in our Bible Lesson is now firmly established on his throne. He has moved into a new, luxurious mansion and is looking about for more great things to accomplish. One day it occurs to him to build the Lord a house, a temple in which the ark of God could repose. God, however, had other ideas. Instead of David making him a house, he proposed to make David into one. God proposed to do far more for David than David would ever have dared to imagine.

Live

When King David told the prophet Nathan that he wanted to build a temple for God, it sounded to the court prophet like a good idea at first. What a good way to honor the Lord, Nathan thought. Nathan, however, had jumped on the king's bandwagon too quickly; that night he received a message from God. David was to desist. He was not to build the Temple. God had something else in mind.

God was fully aware that David's motives were mixed. One need not be a cynic (much less omniscient!) to recognize that David's purposes would have been served by building this temple. He would become known to future generations as the king who built the Temple for the Lord. The building would be the crowning monument to David's kingship. By building the Temple, David would further consolidate his power in Jerusalem. His kingship would be identified with the central cult-site of his people. The kings around Israel usually were the high priests for their gods. Having both types of legitimacy consolidated their power. In Israel, however, there was a religious community of influence in the priests and prophets who had not been co-opted by the ruling power. So what David was proposing to do for God was more than just a little presumptuous. Acting ostensibly for God's glory, David was essentially enhancing his own.

God's response to David through Nathan was pointed: "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel" (2 Samuel 7:8). It was the Lord who made David who he was and defeated his enemies; it was God who would make David's name great (7:9). The implication was that, apart from God, David would still be tending sheep. More than that, God had never even suggested to previous leaders in Israel that he needed a house in which to live (7:7). Did David think that God in his divine freedom now needed a house? Worse, was David trying to tie God down by building a house? "Since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day," said God, "I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle" (7:6). The mobility of a tent had sufficed before, and nothing as far as God was concerned had

changed.

David was presuming too much. God was not in need of anything from David. It was David who was dependent on God. The nature of their relationship needed to be made clear. God then made a stunning counter-proposal: Rather than David making him a “house,” God would make David into one. This was a play on words, of course. “House” could mean a building, like a temple; or it could mean descendants; or, in David’s case, it could mean a dynasty. In response to David’s proposal to do something great for God, God counter-offered with a promise to do something even greater for David.

Do you ever focus more attention on what you are going to do for God than on what God is doing for you? If so, in what way?

Royal Theology

When God covenanted to make David into a dynasty in Israel, this was a new thing in Israel’s history. Kingship had come hard to the nation. Although the countries surrounding Israel had had kings for ages, Israel had been resistant to having one. Judges such as Jotham (Judges 9:7-15) and Samuel (1 Samuel 8:1-22) had severely criticized Israel’s desire to have “a king to govern us, like other nations (8:5). In our Bible Lesson, however, not only has David been established as king, the kingship for all future days is promised to David’s descendants. One of them (Solomon) would build the Temple as a national sanctuary. God’s faithful love would never be withdrawn from David’s line. This unconditional promise on God’s part was grounded in God’s loving kindness or “steadfast love” (2 Samuel 7:15). *Hesed* (HESS-ed), or steadfast love, which the psalmist will later say “endures forever” (Psalm 136), is God’s eternally binding decision to act with mercy.

As one can imagine, this unconditional promise to David had profound effects on the future of the nation, both for good and for ill.

This “royal theology,” as it is sometimes called, implied that thereafter Judah’s king had a divine right to kingship and rule. This promise provided a measure of stability to Judah that the northern kingdom of Israel (which split from Judah after Solomon’s death) never enjoyed. Israel had many more assassinations and regime changes than Judah had. Yet the notion of the king’s divine right to rule also promoted a kind of arrogance at the expense of the nation, an arrogance that could also be witnessed in monarchs in the Christian West who claimed the divine right of kingship.

The Temple in Jerusalem, which Solomon built as a national shrine, was also associated with royal theology. The Temple’s existence was construed as an unconditional sign that God dwelt in the midst of his people. If a king of David’s line was destined to be king forever and if the Temple was the abiding place of God, then the future of the nation seemed secure, no matter what happened or what kind of faithless behavior the nation should demonstrate.

The unconditional nature of the covenant God established with David was fundamentally different from the covenants God had previously made. The Mosaic covenant, for instance, was conditional on the people’s obedience (Exodus 19:5). In Lesson Four, we learned that Joshua warned the people not to affirm their loyalty to God too quickly. God “is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will

turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good" (Joshua 24:19-20).

The "royal theology" of God's promise to David was so fundamentally different that it seemed to be in conflict with the Mosaic covenant. Previously, the Lord had given to the nation a covenant that demanded proper allegiance or the people would suffer loss and destruction. Yet, in giving an unconditional promise to David that his descendants would sit on the throne forever, God seemed to be securing the nation unconditionally.

The interplay of these two covenants would have profound implications for Judah's later history. In the late seventh and early sixth century bc, the prophet Jeremiah was a proponent of Mosaic covenant theology. When the Babylonians invaded, Jeremiah believed that it was the Lord's will that they destroy the nation. This was the just judgment of God against their unfaithfulness in accordance with what Joshua had said. Other prophets, who were optimistic proponents of royal theology and believed that king and Temple guaranteed their future, opposed Jeremiah. Undeterred, Jeremiah went to the gate of the Temple and loudly proclaimed, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever" (Jeremiah 7:3-7).

Notice how Jeremiah spoke against those who believed that the existence of the Lord's sanctuary was a sign that God would not allow the nation to be destroyed. Notice also the conditional character of God's promise: Only if the people would do certain things and stop doing other things would God dwell with them in the land.

Unfortunately, buoyed by their hope in God's unconditional commitment to the Temple and to the king of David's line, the people of Jerusalem were unwilling to entertain the possibility that Jeremiah might be right. They opposed the Babylonians to the end; and disease, death, defeat, and exile were the result. A king of David's line never again ruled the nation. At this point in Judah's history, the conditional Mosaic covenant and not the unconditional covenant with David seemed to do a better job of explaining the events of history.

How do you react to the saying, "Once saved, always saved"? If salvation is by God's grace alone, can one endanger one's salvation? Why do you think this? Not Quite the King That Israel Expected

Israel, however, refused to let go of God's covenant promise to David that there would always be a king of David's line. A remnant of the nation eventually returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile to try to reestablish an independent nation now called Judea. There they found themselves successively dominated by Persian, Greek, and Roman rulers; but their hopes for another Son of David did not die. The covenant that regulated their day-to-day lives remained the Mosaic covenant. The people sought to be faithful to it in ways superior to what they had achieved before the Exile. Even so, the people persisted in their belief that somehow God would prove faithful to the promise made to King David.

The people of Judea longed for an anointed, or messianic, king from the line of David who would do for them what David had done. They expected God to reestablish a kingdom wherein the shackles of foreign dominance would be cast off and the covenant God made with David would be shown to be

true.

Jews today still await a messianic king from the line of David, but Christians believe that God has already proved himself faithful to his covenant promise to David. The Lord Jesus was a Son of David, as Luke's Gospel is quick to point out. Although not a king in the ordinary sense, Jesus, Christians believe, rules in kingly triumph over the world from the right hand of God the Father. His kingship is of a peculiar kind, however. He is not the king of one people only but of all people. He rules, not with the sword of military might, but by the sharp two-edged sword from his mouth (Revelation 1:16); that is, he rules by the Word of God, the preached gospel. The Temple, so much a part of Old Testament royal theology, is not seen by Christians as the primary dwelling place of God. Rather, destroyed in ad 70 by the Romans, the cultus of the Temple has been replaced by one wherein God is worshiped "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Looking back on Nathan's report of God's word to David, it would seem that God never was terribly keen on the Temple, not even when first proposed.

In the destruction of Judah by Babylonia at the command of God and in their loss of a legitimate king from then on, God was preparing the world for a reign vastly superior to that of an earthly king. Jesus, the Son of David's line, continues to model a kind of glory that David, Solomon, and their ancestors never even dreamed of.

To what covenantal promises of God do you cling as you serve Jesus and worship God?

Almighty God, who governs our world from the perspective of eternity, instill in us the humility to realize that what is really important is not what we do for you but what you do for us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1 From Orlando Furioso, by Ludovico Ariosto; Canto 46:35.