



WILL THE REAL DAVID STAND UP?

Reflections on the life of King David

Wann Fanwar, PhD, October 2021

When David was anointed as the next king of Israel (1 Sam 16), he was still just a teenager. When I was a kid, David's story was narrated numerous times through the lyrics of a children's song:

Only a boy named David, only a little sling.
Only a boy named David, and five little stones he took. . . .
And one little stone went up in the air,
And the giant came tumbling down.

This song has warped the view about David in the minds of generations of church kids. Additionally, the majority of the sermons I have heard about David concentrate on two events in his life, the Goliath and Bathsheba episodes. The former is supposedly the epitome of David's heroism, while the latter records his worst failure. I have heard sermon after sermon about 'facing the giants' almost *ad nauseum*. I cannot help

but wonder, 'Is this all there is to David?' and 'How can this explain God's assessment that David was 'a person after his own heart'?' (1 Sam 13.14).

In this essay I am re-examining the life of David, the man after God's own heart, through relational lenses. These stories reveal the kind of person David really was and yet they have been largely ignored from the pulpit. We already know what God thought of David, a view that did not change through David's life and reign. I think we get a clearer handle into this divine evaluation by exploring vignettes of truth from David's relationships with people around him.

David and Saul: Patience in adversity

David was introduced to King Saul via a 'big bang' event, the Goliath episode (1 Sam 17). Initially, the relationship between these two 'kings' went surprisingly well. However, once Saul became fully aware of the situation, David became his number one nemesis. For the next 13 years, Saul would ignore Israel's chief enemy, the Philistines, to pursue David with the intention of ridding himself of this upstart. The remaining chapters of 1 Samuel focus exclusively on this insane pursuit. Saul declared David *persona non grata* and David became a hunted fugitive, in the ilk of the Robinhood folklore. He had to flee from town to town, cave to cave, crevice to crevice and even go in hiding among the hated Philistines. Saul would commit horrendous acts of violence against anyone who dared to assist David in any way as the massacre of an entire clan of priests at Nob illustrates (1 Sam 22).

This is where we see the unusual heart of David. Twice during these turbulent year (1 Sam 23; 24) David was afforded opportunities to rid himself of Saul and twice he refused to do so. His stance was simple and befuddled his own men. David maintained that that was not his task but God's. Furthermore, when Saul and his son Jonathan were finally killed in battle, David mourned for them as though they were family. He even wrote a poignant lament for Saul and Jonathan in which he praised their

valour. There was not even a hint of bitterness against Saul or relief about his own predicament.

During those difficult years, David learnt patience in adversity and how to grow a heart which carried no sense of getting even. Truly a man after God's heart.

David and Jonathan: A friend more than a brother

If anyone had the right to resent David, it should have been Jonathan. Theirs was an exceptionally unique relationship. Jonathan was the crown prince who would never be king. David was the shepherd boy and king-designate. Against all expectations, the two young men struck up the most barely believable friendship.

Two things underpinned this relationship, a special personal covenant between the two and Jonathan's willingness to risk his father's ire to protect David (see 1 Sam 18-20). Contrary to how it may sound, Jonathan remained loyal to his father and even died in battle alongside Saul. This did not preclude Jonathan's ability to love David, a love fully reciprocated. Their special friendship is best encapsulated in these words, 'There is a friend more than a brother' (a literal reading of Prov 18.24). Jesus corroborated this idea when he stated that 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15.13 NRSV). This biblical idea contradicts the human adage that 'blood is thicker than water'.

The Hebrew name Dawid means 'loved' or 'lover'. In Jonathan, David found a loved friend who is more than a brother. This is the ultimate human need which is why Jesus came as God on foot to meet this need.

David and Abner: Honouring an archenemy

A rather unattended episode in David's life concerned David's relationship with Abner, the commander of Saul's army. After Saul had been killed in battle,

Abner led the armies of Saul and initially stood in the way of David becoming king. However, an altercation with Saul's supporters compelled Abner to switch sides and he requested a face-to-face with David. He also sent messages to all the tribes stating his intention.

However, Joab, David's commander, did not trust this move of Abner and suspected it might be some kind of Trojan horse attempt to prop up the failed regime of the late King Saul. Joab gathered some of David's special forces and they undertook a secret mission to eliminate Abner, much to the anger and chagrin of David. He responded by writing a short lament for Abner, arranging a hero's funeral for the fallen commander and even went on a fast to mourn for Abner and establish his own innocence in Abner's assassination.

The man after God's heart found a way to honour an archenemy and embody Jesus' comment that loving one's enemy is what makes somebody a child of God (Matt 5.43-48).

David and Absalom: Caring for the people

Arguably, the strangest episode in David's life was the attempted *coup-d'état* by his own son Absalom (2 Sam 15-18). Some background to this is necessary. First, David, even though he was anointed by God, was never a very popular king (Saul was far more popular as king) and was always viewed by many as a usurper. Second, altercations among David's sons after the rape of Dinah (David's daughter and Absalom's full sister) set up these events. Absalom was a dashing and charismatic prince and took little time to win the loyalty of the people and much of the army. He was quite the politician and soon marched upon Jerusalem.

When word reached David about Absalom and the switching loyalties of his own army, David made an incredible decision. From a military point of view, it could be deemed as classic tactical withdrawal. After all David was a master of open field, insurgency-type warfare; not so much urban warfare. Such a move was to be expected. However, closer examination of David's policy statement reveals his stated reason for leaving Jerusalem: to spare the city and its citizens from an attack. How many world monarchs and rulers would do what David did and for the reason David gave?

David demonstrated in this story that he was truly God-like. He was prepared to sacrifice his own throne for the sake of the people. This is truly the heart of God.

David and Mephibosheth: Keeping promise even when it is not reciprocated

When David and Jonathan made their personal covenant, they committed to taking responsibility for each other's families. The prime beneficiary of this covenant was Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, who as a young child had had a nasty accident which left him a paraplegic. After the demise of Saul and Jonathan, David took in Mephibosheth and virtually adopted him. He made the boy one of his own, treated him like a prince and provided him all the privileges enjoyed by his own sons. David kept his promise to Jonathan and lived up to his covenantal responsibilities (2 Sam 9). So far so good, right? Not quite!

During the Absalom rebellion, after David had withdrawn from Jerusalem, Mephibosheth remained in Jerusalem. The political vacuum gave him an unexpected opportunity and he attempted a power move to restore Saul's kingdom. He failed to do so but when David was told about it, the only thing he did was to remove Mephibosheth's ownership of his father's lands. No vengeance was forthcoming and, even though the text does not say, it does imply that Mephibosheth was permitted to remain in Jerusalem as part of the royal household.

Mephibosheth did not reciprocate the kindness of David but this did not deter David from living up to his word to Jonathan. Like God, David kept covenant in the face of ingratitude.

David and God: Know yourself!

We live in a world that has convinced itself that a person's value is what others say about him/her rather than what the person thinks of himself/herself. Our professional and personal lives are all driven by these external recognitions. We hanker after awards, certificates and diplomas. We convince ourselves that our identities are tied in to such external assessments. Because of this approach, most Bible readers do not even notice David's own personal

statement where he clearly delineated his understanding of who he was in God's eyes (2 Sam 23).

David tells us four things about himself (vss 1-4):

- 'The man whom God exalted'. He knew that he was king only because God put him in that position. His spiritual feet were well and truly planted
- 'The anointed of God'. He knew that God had chosen him and this knowledge was the fuel of his spiritual and political life. It kept him strong during his fugitive years and steady during the years of rejection.
- 'The favourite singer of Israel' ('sweet singer' is an alternative translation). He had a clear view of his contribution to the worship of Israel. A large chunk of the Psalms was most likely written by David. He even wanted to build a Temple for God.
- 'The spirit of Yahweh speaks through me'. He did not really see himself as king but as God's messenger. He imbued a strong sense of mission.

David was never distracted from this self-assessment. He knew who he was, especially in his relationship with God. He did not allow the opinions of others to dictate his self-estimation. We ought to ask ourselves, 'Do I know myself'? I would say, 'Know yourself as God knows you'. That is the essence of being a person after God's own heart.

Shalom!