

1 Samuel 16:1-23

Introduction

For many, the New Year is as an opportunity for a new beginning.

It's why we have the tradition of making New Year's resolutions.

It's why our news feeds are full of top tips for healthy eating and new and exciting exercise regimes.

It's time to turn a new leaf and make a fresh start.

Well, if that's the case, then the Bible reading we just listened to is very appropriate.

Over the next few months, we're going to continue to read through the book of 1 Samuel. And the things we just read about in chapter 16 represent a new beginning.

In chapter 8, the Israelites had come to Samuel asking for a king. They wanted a king like the nations around them. And the king they got was Saul. But as we've seen, Saul's reign was a failure. He wasn't the king the people needed. So, chapter 15 ended with the Lord rejecting Saul as king and Samuel mourning for him.

As we come to chapter 16, Samuel is *still* mourning. But the Lord tells Samuel there's going to be a fresh start. He's chosen a new king.

As with New Year's resolutions, which soon get forgotten, the cynical might ask whether anything is going to change. Given that Saul's reign was such a failure, is his successor really likely to be any better?

But, as we'll see, this truly is a new beginning. In contrast to Saul, who let kingship go to his head. His successor will be a lowly king, whose heart is pleasing to God.

So, that's our first heading: a lowly king.

A lowly king

Let's pick up the story again in verse 1.

The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way. I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.'

In the original Hebrew, there's a change of wording here, which is significant. Back in chapter 8, when the Israelites asked for a king, God said to Samuel, literally, 'appoint *for them* a king'. Here in chapter 16, the wording is different. Here, God says, 'I have provided... *for myself* a king.'

In chapter 8, God gave the Israelites the king *they* wanted. Here, in chapter 16, he chooses the king *he* wants. This is *God's* king. It's a new beginning. So, Samuel needs to stop mourning and get going. He's to stop looking back and start looking forward. He's to fill his horn with oil and go to Bethlehem to anoint this son of Jesse.

But, of course, that's dangerous.

To proclaim someone king when the *current* king is still reigning isn't going to go down very well. It's the kind of thing that tends to get you killed.

So, God tells Samuel to disguise his real purpose by taking a sacrifice. Rather than inviting Jesse to a royal anointing, he's to invite him to a feast.

So, Samuel goes. Initially, the people of Bethlehem are wary. Perhaps they've heard that Samuel and Saul have fallen out, and they wonder whether he's come to cause trouble. But he assures them that he's come in peace. And preparations are made for the sacrifice and for the feast that will follow.

The stage is set for Jesse and his sons to arrive.

And when they do, Samuel is immediately struck by the appearance of the eldest son, Eliab. He's tall and regal looking. The kind of person that people immediately notice and pay attention to. If he were around today, he would no doubt be the kind of person who is always top of his class at school, captains the school football team, plays guitar in a local band, and has effortless good looks. Samuel's sure that he *must* be the one whom God has chosen to be king.

But look at verse 7... **the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'**

That's the key verse for this whole story, perhaps for the whole book. English words like the noun 'appearance' or the verbs 'to look at' and 'to see' all come from the same root word in the original language. It appears nine times in these 23 verses. How things appear, what we see with our eyes, is a very important theme in this chapter. And the key sentence is that final sentence: God does not look at outward appearance, as we do, but at the heart.

And thank goodness for that! Because, otherwise, Samuel's choice of king would have been a disaster.

The mention of Eliab's height here should remind us of Saul. Back in chapter 9, we were told that Saul was a head taller than anyone else in Israel. It's not that there's anything wrong with being tall. But in 1 Samuel height is symbolic of pride and self-exaltation. Saul was the kind of king the world admires. A tall, handsome, outwardly impressive king. Yet, his reign was a failure. In chapter 2, Hannah's prayer urged people to stop talking so

proudly. The word translated 'proudly' is the word for height. We might say, 'Stop talking so highly of yourself.' And she warned that it is not by strength that one prevails. So, when we read that Samuel is impressed by Eliab's height alarm bells should be ringing.

Thank goodness the Lord stops him before he does anything rash.

But if it's not Eliab, then who *has* God chosen?

One by one, Jesse presents his sons to Samuel, from oldest to youngest. And each time, he gets the same answer. 'It's not him.' 'No. It's not him.' 'He's not the one.' All seven are rejected. And Samuel seems mystified. 'Is that it?' he asks. 'Are these all the sons you have?'

'Well, there is still the youngest one,' Jesse says. 'But he's just a boy. I didn't think it was worth troubling you with him. He's far too small. He's out looking after the sheep.'

'What are you waiting for?' Samuel says. 'Go and get him. We're not sitting down to eat until he arrives.'

So, Jesse sends for him. And when he arrives, the Lord says to Samuel, '**Rise and anoint him; this is the one.**'

In Saul we found loftiness and self-exaltation. But the implication is that God sees something altogether different in David. The word 'youngest' in verse 11 could be translated as 'smallest' or 'littlest'. He is the youngest and probably, therefore, the smallest of Jesse's sons.

The contrast with Eliab couldn't be greater.

It's not that there's anything wrong with how he looks. We're told that he's glowing with health and has a fine appearance and handsome features. But what matters is what God sees in his heart.

Remember verse 7: '**People look at the outward appearance**' God says, '**but the LORD looks at the heart.**' By implication, what God sees in this small boy is lowliness and a shepherd's heart.

We're told that, Samuel anoints him with oil, and that the Spirit of the Lord comes powerfully upon him.

And, finally, we're told his name. This is David. God's king.

It's another one of those who-would-have-guessed moments that we find in the Bible, when God turns human logic on its head and chooses the most unlikely person to do his will.

Who would have guessed that Jesse's youngest son, still just a boy, was the one that God had chosen?

Who would have guessed that a lowly shepherd boy, from a small, insignificant town called Bethlehem, would become the greatest king the Old Testament people would know? A shepherd-king, who cares for God's people as a shepherd cares for his flock.

It's preparing us for the greatest who-would-have-guessed moment in the Bible, when we meet Jesse's great, great, many-times-over, grandson: Jesus.

Who would have guessed that a little baby, laid in a manger, the lowly son of a carpenter, from that same insignificant town called Bethlehem, would become *the* Shepherd-King, the Messiah? Who would have guessed that a poor, itinerant preacher, who rode a donkey and died the death of a common criminal was the King of the world?

To the eyes of many, he might look unimpressive. Isaiah says of him: **He has no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.** (Isaiah 53:2). He might seem an unlikely person to be God's King.

But not if we see things how God sees things.

As we read of God's choice of king, here in 1 Samuel, it's asking us a question: what kind of king will you choose?

By nature, we all choose the wrong kind of king. It might be a person. It might be a particular worldview or ideology. Or a physical possession. But we all choose someone or something to rule over us. And by nature, we look for bigness. We choose people and things that are outwardly impressive or powerful or pleasing. We allow them to govern our lives. We give our allegiance to them. We serve them.

But this passage is teaching us to see things differently. Not to choose that which is outwardly impressive. But to see things as God sees things and to value what God values. Because all those other things that seem so big and impressive will, ultimately, fail us.

What we *need* is a humble king who will rule over us in obedience to God.

A king who will care for us, and protect us, and lead us, as a shepherd cares for his flock.

Jesus is that king.

Though he is fully God, Philippians 2 tells us that **he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!** (Philippians 2:7-8)

As we read of him in the Gospels, we find him living under God's word; hearing and obeying God; seeing things as God sees them.

And we see his shepherd's heart.

In Mark's Gospel, we're told: **When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.** (Mark 6:34)

In John's Gospel, he says: **'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'** (John 10:11)

In Matthew's Gospel he says: **'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'** (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus is God's king, who has been given to us by God for our good and blessing.

He is the king we need.

And he is a king to emulate.

The world says, 'Look at me! See how big and impressive I am!' God says, 'What I see is your heart.'

If we've learnt what the Bible's teaching us here in 1 Samuel, then we won't try to be like those we see in the world around us, who are outwardly big and impressive, who are popular and powerful. We won't seek to be like Influencers or Celebrities. Rather, we'll seek to be like Jesus.

We'll listen to what God says to us in his word, the Bible, as Jesus did.

We'll gladly and willingly obey it, as Jesus did.

As Paul writes in Philippians, we'll value others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests but each of us to the interests of the others.

Humility before God is a quality of heart that God values greatly. It's a quality to be cultivated and learnt and practised.

That's what God prized in David. It's what God prized in his Son, Jesus Christ. And it's what God prizes in us as we follow Jesus today.

'The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'

That's the main message of our passage this morning.

But this passage also tees up the rest of the story that will follow. So, let's look at it very quickly.

As we come to the second half of our passage, we're introduced to an ironic twist. And, very briefly, that's our second heading: an ironic twist.

An ironic twist

Verse 13 tells us that the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. The very next verse, verse 14, tells us: **Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.**

Saul is still king in name, but he no longer has the anointing of God's Spirit. He has forfeited God's presence. And as a result, from this point on, his ability to rule gradually unravels.

In place of the Spirit, an evil spirit from the Lord torments Saul.

If you look down at the footnote, you'll see that 'evil' could be translated 'harmful'.

It's a harmful spirit that God sends to trouble Saul.

Saul's attendant suggests that music will help to relieve his torment. And one of them suggests a son of Jesse.

And look at the glowing write-up he gives him, in verse 18: '...[he] **knows how to play the lyre. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And, most importantly of all, the LORD is with him.**'

You could hardly ask for a better reference!

So, Saul sends for David, who comes and enters his service.

And that introduces the irony of these verses: the rejected king seeks relief from the newly anointed king, who will replace him.

It's the chosen king who keeps the rejected king from completely falling apart. Verse 23 says: **Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.**

And Saul loves David.

Our translation says that **Saul liked him very much.** Literally, verse 21 says that Saul loved him.

He's the first of a long list of people who love David.

In chapter 18, we're told that Saul's son Jonathan loves him, and that his daughter Michal also loves him.

In fact, in that same chapter, we're told that all Israel and Judah love him.

But in Saul's case, his love for David will give way to envy and jealousy and eventually fear. Saul will come to see David as an enemy and a rival. And he will end up trying to kill him.

Conclusion

So, the two halves of this chapter mark a new beginning for Israel. And they set the scene for all that follows.

And that's what we're going to read about over the weeks ahead.

For now, let's pray.

Loving Father, at the start of a new year, please help us to see things as you see things and to value what you value. Make us more like Jesus and teach us to live in humble obedience to your word, so that our lives might be pleasing to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.