

The Last Words and Works of David

Many kings in history have added, or others have added the title “the Great”. Alexander the Great. Charlemagne is actually the two words: Charles, and the Latin, *magne*, which means great, to make the name Charlemagne. Alfred the Great, Catherine the Great, Herod the Great. In fact, over 97 monarchs in history have had the title “the Great”. It always struck me that when you have to add that title to your name, it probably suggests something of the opposite. Many of those with the title “the Great” were in fact only great in tyranny, evil, and immorality.

By contrast, how many kings would have added the subtitle “the humble” to their names? I wonder if David might not have. Of the many kings of history, David certainly deserved the title, David the Great. But David refused the traps of pride, self-honour, and instead chose humility. And that makes him like the ultimate king – the King of Kings who is the greatest because He is the humblest.

We have come to the end of our study of this amazing man, who took Israel from the chaos of living under judges or a tribal king like Saul, and created a powerful, united kingdom of Israel. When he was born, Israel was still mostly in chaos, harassed and ruled by Philistines, worshipping in ad hoc ways on the high places. When David comes to the end of his life, Israel is peaceful, powerful, centralising its worship, and ready for a golden age of prosperity to begin.

David in some ways had nothing and had it all. He had nothing as a forgotten shepherd-boy, the last-born of eight sons in an obscure village in Judah. But he also had it all: handsome, musical, athletic, a natural leader. He was a man just as likely to ruin his life with pride as to ruin his life with cowardice. But David became what he did because David wanted to be a channel, a vessel, for God to work through.

The great secret of David's life was humility. Others, like Saul, and later kings fell into the traps of pride: self-protection, vanity, stubbornness and incorrigibility. Kings after David refused to listen to counsel, rejected the word of the prophets, refused to back down when they needed to, boasted of their wealth and power to others, foolishly challenged nations more powerful than theirs. When David sinned, he sinned greatly, but David never compounded and complicated his sin with pride and stubbornness.

David wanted the glory of God. He wanted it when he defeated Goliath in his youth, and he wanted it when he prepared to build the Temple in his old age. He was jealous and zealous for God, not for position, not for reputation, not for power, not for riches. All of that came to him, but David is never making his life about his own name, and his own power.

Fittingly, David's life ended with the humility that wished to make his son's reign a success. David could have been jealous or insecure that his son would build the Temple, or perhaps be wealthier than he had ever been. Instead, David is still focused on the glory of God. He wants Solomon to succeed. He wants God's blessing on Solomon, and he wants Solomon to seek God. David's last weeks, days and hours are not about himself. Instead, David was concerned with his kingdom's succession, the kingdom's stability, and the kingdom's spirituality.

I. His Kingdom's Succession

And they made sacrifices to the LORD and offered burnt offerings to the LORD on the next day: a thousand bulls, a thousand rams, a thousand lambs, with their drink offerings, and sacrifices in abundance for all Israel. ²² So they ate and drank before the LORD with great gladness on that day. And they made Solomon the son of David king the second time, and anointed *him* before the LORD *to be* the leader, and Zadok *to be*

priest. ²³ Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him. ²⁴ All the leaders and the mighty men, and also all the sons of King David, submitted themselves to King Solomon. ²⁵ So the LORD exalted Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed on him *such* royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel. (1 Chron 29:21-25)

Here we read that Solomon was anointed king for a *second* time. The first time was when Nathan and Zadok anointed him by the Gihon river in a more private ceremony. But this is now a public ceremony that involved the entire people. David is making sure that Solomon's throne is recognised and ratified by all the leaders of Israel, all the other sons of David, and even those who had been in Adonijah's conspiracy previously.

We are not sure exactly when this happened. It seems it must have happened shortly after Adonijah's conspiracy and Solomon's hasty coronation, but before David is on his deathbed. There was enough strength for David to be on his feet, make the dedication speeches about the Temple, and then this next day coronate Solomon.

Here is David's farewell to his people. His last words will be on his sickbed, with Solomon at his side, but here, the frail and aged king makes his farewells to the men who helped make Israel great.

And think of how great he had made it in his forty years. Israel was now a unified country under one flag. The royal capital where the worship of God would be centred had been established in Jerusalem. Israel's military force was now formidable and respected by all the enemies around them. They were no longer attacked, harried, or harassed. Israel's boundaries had been extended from 6000 to 60 000 square miles. David had established extensive trade routes, protected by garrisons, and several nations now paid tribute to them. Preparations had been made for the worship of Yehovah and His temple to be among the most magnificent in the world. Justice and righteousness now reigned.

Some of the men in the crowd, like David, are gray-haired, and bent over, who had been springing from den to cave thirty years earlier.

I imagine many a choked back tear, many lumps in throats, as men who had been willing to risk life and limb to get David a drink of water from a well, who saw the glories of banners flying and shields clashing and ram's horns blown, now saw the sun setting on their declining leader. They saw the oil poured on Solomon's head, David handing over the sceptre and the crown.

David's days as king are over. Seven years as king over Judah in the city of Hebron, thirty-three years as king over all Israel, forty years in total. But as very few kings do or have ever done, he hands over the kingdom peacefully, happy to see his son reign in his place.

It is perhaps the last test of a man's life: whether he can relinquish power and ensure stability for someone else, or whether he will jealously cling to power, try to shore up his own legacy. We see around us the nations given over to communism or fascism have leaders who have elected themselves "President for life". We see aging dictators hanging onto power long into their dotage and senility. It happens in business, where a titan of industry has long since lost touch with the market, but still hangs on, his dutiful lieutenants carrying out his bidding. Sadly, it happens in churches too, where a pastor whose preaching brought in crowds when he was in his youth continues to hang on, even when cloudy judgement, forgetfulness is withering the ministry. It is a special blessing of humility, when leadership is more concerned about succession than about his own reputation or legacy.

With succession established, David is even more concerned that Solomon not be bumped off that throne by poor decisions and bad judgement. Our last moments with David though take us to his bedside, where the last things he must say are said to Solomon.

II. His Kingdom's Stability

Now the days of David drew near that he should die, and he charged Solomon his son, saying: ²"I go the way of all the earth; be strong, therefore, and prove yourself a man. ³And keep the charge of the LORD your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn; ⁴that the LORD may fulfill His word which He spoke concerning me, saying, 'If your sons take heed to their way, to walk before Me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul,' He said, 'you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.'

As David knows his life is slipping away, the last things he says to his inexperienced son all have to do with the stability of the kingdom. If Solomon wants a kingdom that will last, he needs to deal with threats from within and without.

Within himself, Solomon will find a heart that leans away from the sort of heart that God will bless. He will want to be weak and lazy, he will be tempted to be cowardly and avoid difficulty. So David says, be strong, therefore, and prove yourself a man. Solomon's heart will drift away from the Word of God, and David exhorts him: walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses. If Solomon was spiritually focused, devout, submissive, then God would uphold Solomon as he did David, God would prosper him and preserve the Davidic dynasty.

David knows that Solomon's leadership will be only as good as it is spiritually devoted.

But there will also be threats from outside.

⁵"Moreover you know also what Joab the son of Zeruiah did to me, *and* what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, to Abner the son of Ner and Amasa the son of Jether, whom he killed. And he shed the blood of war in peacetime, and put the blood of war on his belt that *was* around his waist, and on his sandals that *were* on his feet. ⁶Therefore do according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to the grave in peace. ⁷

"But show kindness to the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and let them be among those who eat at your table, for so they came to me when I fled from Absalom your brother.

⁸"And see, *you have* with you Shimei the son of Gera, a Benjamite from Bahurim, who cursed me with a malicious curse in the day when I went to Mahanaim. But he came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by the LORD, saying, 'I will not put you to death with the sword.' ⁹Now therefore, do not hold him guiltless, for you *are* a wise man and know what you ought to do to him; but bring his gray hair down to the grave with blood."

Now, it is very easy to misunderstand this passage. On first glance, it looks like an old man plotting revenge. But Alfred Edersheim puts it eloquently; "It was not, as some would have us believe, that on his death-bed David gave utterance to those feelings of revenge which he was unable to gratify in his lifetime, but that...he looked at the dangers to a young and inexperienced monarch from such powerful and unscrupulous [people]. In these circumstances it was only natural that, before dying, he should have given to his son and successor such advice for his future guidance [from] his long experience; [by] review[ing] the chief dangers and difficulties which had beset his own path, and referr[ing] to the great public crimes which, during his reign, had necessarily been left unpunished."

David knew that Joab was a great danger to Solomon. Though Joab had stood with David many

times, he was also a dangerous man, and a murderer. He murdered Abner, Saul's general, when he was seeking peace. He killed Absalom, when Absalom was hanging from a tree. He murdered Amasa, whom David had made general instead of Joab. And most recently, he had supported Adonijah's conspiracy to get the throne. Joab was a man who deserved the death-penalty multiple times over, but who controlled so much military strength that David probably had no one who was willing to execute him. David's own sin with Uriah had no doubt affected his conscience in terms of condemning Joab for murder. But there was no doubt that Joab was a murderer, whose wily ways had not changed. David tells Solomon that he needs to remove the innocent blood stain on the kingdom by executing Joab.

Similarly, David knew there was still a pro-Saul element in the northern tribes, represented by Shimei. Shimei had pleaded for mercy, and received it, but David tells Solomon, you will need to keep a close eye on him. David has enough experience with these men to tell Solomon that if he does not deal with them quickly and early, his kingdom will not be established.

By contrast, David calls for kindness to be shown to Barzillai the Gileadite, who gave David provisions when fleeing from Absalom.

David's warnings proved correct. Adonijah attempted a second conspiracy, and Solomon had him executed, and at the same time, Joab, who had also fled to grab the horns of the altar, showing he knew he was guilty and in danger. Solomon ordered Benaiah to execute him and take his place. Abiathar the traitor High Priest was exiled and replaced with Zadok.

Solomon placed Shimei under house arrest until such time as Shimei violated the terms of the covenant and tried to leave. Then he, too, was executed. Only then is it said: "Thus the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon." (1 Kings 2:46)

This was not vengeance, but stability: the proper establishment of the kingdom. David has dealt with succession, and stability. It is one thing to hand over power; it is another to want your successor to succeed. Many a man hands over power in a way destined to make his successor look incompetent and make him look glorious. He wants his successor's time to be disastrous to make him look saintly by contrast, and will secretly revel every time he hears, "those were huge shoes to fill". But David wants Solomon to succeed. His humility is making sure that Solomon's kingdom will succeed. If anything brings it down, it will be Solomon himself, not some threat which David failed to warn him about.

But his last words summarise the deep heart of the kingdom: spirituality.

III. His Kingdom's Spirituality

In 2 Samuel 23, we have what are said to be the actual last words of David. The recorded last words of people reveal so much of their heart, hopes, and character. Perhaps David actually spoke these words before breathing his last, or perhaps he composed them like a last will and testament. But the Bible tells us that they are his last words. Being his last words, they summarise him and his success. They tell us how he saw his whole life from the perspective of a man at the end of his life.

Now these *are* the last words of David.

Thus says David the son of Jesse; *Thus* says the man raised up on high,
The anointed of the God of Jacob, And the sweet psalmist of Israel: (2 Samuel 23:1)

Here is David in four phrases.

1. He was the son of Jesse, the eighth and last born of a family in Bethlehem.
2. He was the man raised up on high. He was the shepherd-boy, the forgotten one, the one not even called to Samuel's anointing, but raised up to become Israel's greatest king, and a man known by all nations.
3. He was the anointed of the God of Jacob. God's choice to be king over His people, God's chosen man to defeat Israel's enemies, bring peace, order and true worship.
4. He was the sweet psalmist of Israel, the Composer-Monarch, Singer-Regent, who filled Israel's hymnbook with seventy-five psalms, and prepared the way for the most beautiful worship on Earth, the Temple worship that Solomon would complete.

David tells us that God spoke to him by His Spirit, giving him some kind of direct revelation. Melchizedek was a king-priest. David was a prophet-king.

²"The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, And His word was on my tongue.

³The God of Israel said, The Rock of Israel spoke to me:

What God told David is at the heart of his life:

'He who rules over men *must be* just, Ruling in the fear of God.

He is the secret of David's kingdom, and the secret of its success. True spiritual leadership lives in loving fear of God, depending, trusting, revering, adoring.

True spiritual leadership serves by firstly submitting. To rule over men, a man must be under God. To rule others, he himself must be ruled, living in the humility that is the fear of the Lord. Unless a man lives with a reverent, joyful sense of God's greatness and goodness, he will be a tyrant, or a coward. He will be a bully or passive. The only stabilising force for godly leadership is to be under God's leadership.

Though the LORD *is* on high, Yet He regards the lowly; But the proud He knows from afar. (Psalm 138:6)

The man ready to influence others is most deeply influenced by God. The man ready to exercise control is under the Spirit's control. The man ready to show strength has been conquered by God. ¹¹

But the meek shall inherit the earth, And shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. (Psalm 37:11)

At the heart of David's life was a humility that always depended on God, trusted in Him, and looked to Him. David was not touchy over his reputation, jealous to control his throne, suspicious of rivals, contemptuous of his critics. No, David lived in the fear of God, meaning God was first and biggest in his life. David knew both the power of God and the love of God, both the justice of God, and the mercy of God, both the wrath of God and the gentleness of God. Because he lived in the humble fear of God, he could be a just ruler. He could be fair, wise, humane, balanced, veering neither into cruelty nor sentimentality.

This kind of ruler brings hope, joy, and refreshment. Look at the images.

⁴And *he shall be* like the light of the morning *when* the sun rises,
A morning without clouds, *Like* the tender grass *springing* out of the earth, By clear shining after rain.'

What do we feel on a beautiful morning when the sun rises into a brilliant blue sky? What do we feel when we see green shoots glistening with raindrops as the sun shines upon them? Refreshment,

hope, a sense that things have been made new. Just and fair, God-fearing leaders bring this kind of hope, refreshment, nourishing experience. Whether it be a husband, a parent, a pastor, a manager, a civil ruler, ask yourself, do people feel refreshed, joyful, hopeful under them?

But lest we think this was something David achieved on his own, look at the next lines.

⁵“Although my house *is* not so with God,
Yet He has made with me an everlasting covenant, Ordered in all *things* and secure.
For *this is* all my salvation and all *my* desire; Will He not make *it* increase?

The Hebrew grammar here is difficult, and the NKJV renders this as a negative statement. But most translations render it as a question: “Is not my house so with God?”. David humbly hopes that he is a dynasty that has ruled in the fear of God.

But here is the great basis of it all: He has made with me an everlasting covenant, Ordered in all *things* and secure. For *this is* all my salvation and all *my* desire; Why is David a faithful man, ruling in the fear of God? Because God has been gracious and made a covenant with David. God drew near first. God saved David, and then God made a secure, orderly covenant with him: that one of his descendants would rule all the world in an eternal kingdom. At the root of the fear of the Lord is not raw willpower, but grace. David is not depending on his own works, David is looking to God's promise. He does not depend on self, he depends on God.

He really captures this in Psalm 37:

²³ The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way. ²⁴ Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds *him* with His hand. ²⁵ I have been young, and *now* am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread. ²⁶ *He is* ever merciful, and lends; And his descendants *are* blessed. (Psalm 37:23–26)

⁶ But *the sons* of rebellion *shall* all *be* as thorns thrust away, Because they cannot be taken with hands. ⁷ But the man *who* touches them Must be armed with iron and the shaft of a spear, And they shall be utterly burned with fire in *their* place.”

By contrast, the unrighteous are like thorns. You don't want to handle them, because thorns tear and prick your hands. You don't want to really draw close to or associate with the wicked. If you have to deal with them, you need armour, protection, force. The language of power and force is the only language they speak.

I think the tender heart of David felt this contrast acutely. As a humble man, he wanted to lead people with the gentleness of the fear of the Lord, and he could do that. But often enough, when dealing with very wicked people, they only spoke one language: the language of force, power, and violence.

What do David's last words say? They say, I David, the last-born shepherd son of Jesse, was lifted up on high by the grace of God. He anointed me. I didn't deserve it, God did it. He made a covenant with me. But once I was under Him, and in Him, I could rule in the fear of the Lord, and I brought refreshment and healing to others.

We are told that David was thirty when he began to reign, and reigned for forty years. So at the relatively young age of seventy, David now passes on.

¹⁰ So David rested with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David. (1 Kings 2:10–11)

The New Testament sums up David this way, in one of Paul's sermons.

³⁶ “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption (Acts 13:36)

And there we gain full perspective on even the greatest of lives. David served his own generation, and did so by God's enablement. When he had done so, he died, was buried, and like all of us returned to dust, came into the world empty-handed, and left it the same way. The best of men are men at best.

Our frailty and death and burial reminds us not to think of ourselves too highly. Pride is self-deception: we are not little gods.

Our eternal souls remind us not to think of ourselves too lightly. We are made in God's image and destined for eternal life or eternal corruption.

David shows us both. He was a great man, a man who left his mark on history. But he was great exactly because he did not seek his own greatness, or dwell on his great achievements. He was great because he made his boast in his great God.

That's what makes him the king most like Jesus. And it is the reason why the human surname of Jesus is not Christ. Christ is His title: Jesus the Messiah. But the surname of our Lord is David. Jesus, Son of David, Yeshua ben David. In our modern phonebook, Jesus would have been a Davidson. And it is the reason why Jesus is even referred to as David in Ezekiel 34 and 37, when predicting His reign over Israel in the future. In Jesus the good we saw in David comes to perfection: perfect humility, and so perfect greatness. David's descendant was not buried and saw corruption: He rose again, and was exalted. Yeshua the humble is Yeshua the Great. Messiah son of Joseph is also Messiah Son of David.

We must admire David, but only as a brother, and as a fellow-traveller. We worship and adore and submit to David's son and David's Lord: Jesus, Son of David.