

12. THE COVENANT AND THE KINGSHIP

In this section we pay attention to the covenant which the LORD makes with David, of whom it is said: “I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail” (Ps 89:28). This covenant, too, is not different from the one made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But it does bring us closer to the coming of Christ, who will be given the throne of his father David and will reign over the house of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32, 33).

Towards the end of the ministry of Samuel, the people of Israel approach him with the request for a king to rule them. A central monarchy is to bring an end to the division and chaos experienced in the time of the Judges. Another reason why the people ask for a king is that Samuel’s sons, Joel and Abijah, whom he had appointed in his place, are corrupt (1 Sam 8:1-3). Still, the request for a king displeased Samuel and he prayed to the LORD about it.

The question has been asked whether it was proper for Israel to ask for a king. Was not the LORD Israel’s only king? Was this request in itself a breaking of the covenant? We read in the Bible that the LORD is King over all the earth, and that he especially lives and rules in Zion, in Israel (Ps 93). One can understand Samuel’s concern in this matter. Will the focus not be too much on the earthly king and not on the King in heaven?

But times were changing. After Joshua’s death, the time of the Judges was marked by disobedience and constant chaos. The last verse of the book of Judges states, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judg 21:25). This does not mean that Israel was actually promised a king, but we do sense that a different era was coming, the time of the kingship.

It is important to note that in the law given through Moses (Deut 17) we already find stipulations concerning the kingship. There the rules and regulations are set which will be in effect when Israel does receive a king. The point of these laws is that the king must be theocratic, which means that he must rule in God’s

name and according to divine law. He must be different from the kings of the nations around Israel. He may not have a huge army, a large harem, or great riches, but must trust the LORD, obey his commandments (especially concerning the holiness of marriage), and not be greedy.

In other words, any king who would rule Israel had to keep the covenant of the LORD, or he would be rejected. Kingship in Israel functions only within the covenant of God's love.

The LORD rejected in the request for a king?

When Israel gathers before Samuel and demands a king "such as all the nations have," Samuel places the request before the LORD. God tells him: "it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (1 Sam 8:7). Samuel is then told to warn the people by stating the demands a king will make upon them, the excesses that will be perpetrated, and the taxes that will be imposed, but the people refuse to listen. They say, "No, we want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations..." (verse 19). The LORD tells Samuel to give in to their wishes; they shall have their king.

During the farewell of Samuel, after Saul has been confirmed as Israel's king, the people confess their sin in demanding a king. But Samuel encourages them to continue in the ways of the LORD. He will defend them also in the future, "because the LORD was pleased to make you his own" (1 Sam 12:22). The time of the theocratic kingship has started. It is a time which must find ultimate fulfillment in the great, eternal priest-king, our LORD Jesus Christ.

Saul rejected; David chosen

King Saul at first showed zeal for the cause of the LORD. He wanted to govern theocratically, according to the LORD's commandments. Saul was not an irreligious person. But it soon became clear that he had autocratic tendencies. He would not wait long for the LORD. He made foolish decisions by which he jeopardized his people's safety. More and more Saul patterned his kingship after the style of the heathen kings around him.

Saul was warned that his way of operating was unacceptable to the LORD (1 Sam 13). But there was no real change in his attitude. It led to his final rejection when he spared the life of the Amalekite king Agag, whom he was supposed to destroy. Despite Saul's pleas and confession of guilt, the LORD's decision stood: he tore the kingdom from Saul to give it to one better than he (1 Sam 15:28). The king of Israel governs either in God's way, or he does not govern at all.

Samuel is sent to Bethlehem, where he anoints David, the son of Jesse, to be king over Israel in Saul's place. In 1 Samuel 16 we read how God selects what would seem to be an unlikely candidate. David was the youngest son, a mere lad, not someone whom Samuel would have chosen, but God chooses whomever he wants: he looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7). It is the way of his covenant.

The theocratic king tested

There is a parallel between David and Abraham with respect to the time involved before God promise is fulfilled. How long did not Abraham have to wait before Isaac was born? And how long did it not take until David was undisputed king over Israel?

David must first serve the man he is called one day to replace. In humility and sincerity of heart he does so, in every way honouring the king as the anointed of the LORD. Even as Saul's disposition grows increasingly troubled and he more and more rejects the LORD, David remains patient. Perhaps the most difficult time comes when because of God's blessings over David, Saul sees in David his successor and begins to suspect and hate him.

Finally David has to flee for his life. For several years Saul persecutes him. David even has to seek refuge in the land of the Philistines, Israel's arch-enemies. God sorely tries his covenant child. There are times when David has an opportunity to assassinate Saul, but he refuses to touch the LORD's anointed. He learns to resist the devil's temptations. He will bide the LORD's time, knowing that God will be true to his word. In all this David is being formed by the LORD for his office as a covenantal, theocratic king.

After Saul's death, David is not immediately accepted as king over all Israel. A civil war breaks out. Many of the Psalms written by David give us an insight into his trials and pain, but they also witness to his faith and trust in the LORD. David learned that he was king only by the grace of God.

The promise to David

It was David's desire to build a house for the LORD, a temple where the LORD would dwell in the midst of his people. This was not meant to bring honour to David but to give glory to God. When David first made this plan known to Nathan, the prophet gave his assent: "Whatever you have in mind, go and do it, for the LORD is with you" (2 Sam 7:3). But then the LORD, via Nathan, gave quite a different message to David.

The LORD promised David that he would build a house (a dynasty) for him! The throne of David would be established forever. Oh yes, when David's sons did wrong, they would be properly punished. But the kingship would not be taken away from David's line, as it was taken away from Saul's. God's covenant with Israel was established in the kingship of David. The LORD promised David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16).

This meant that the great Mediator of the covenant, the seed of the woman, who will crush the head of the serpent, would come directly from the line of David. In Him God would establish his kingdom over all the earth, and in him, also, his covenant of love would be secure forever.

The answer of David to this promise is noteworthy for its simple piety. He does not only look at himself and his house, but as a true theocratic king sees how his people also are blessed by God's promise: "How great you are, O Sovereign LORD! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. And who is like your people Israel – the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You have established your people Israel as your very own, forever, and you, O LORD, have become their God" (2 Sam 7:22-24).

David here sums up in a few words the entire covenant history from the time of the Exodus to the time of the theocratic kingship. The line goes from Israel to David. Earlier we saw how the line went from Adam via Noah to Abraham (Isaac, and Jacob). The great Messiah will be both son of Abraham and son of David (Matt 1:2 and 6). It need not surprise us that the angel Gabriel announces the birth of Christ in this manner to Mary: "...the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1:32, 33).

The covenant of God's love as confirmed with David leads us directly to the great Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, our eternal King.

David and Christ

David has played a prominent role in the history of God's covenant of love. He stands beside other faithful servants such as Abraham and Moses. David is introduced to us in the Bible as a man after God's own heart. In faith David awaits the time for his kingship to take effect, and in obedience he is a truly theocratic king, one who serves under God and in accordance with his will. It is noteworthy that the kings of Israel who came later are compared to David, and of only a few is it said that they walked in the way of their father David (e.g., Hezekiah and Josiah).

Yet the Word of God also shows that David's life was marred by sin. David's actions with respect to Bathsheba and Uriah rank among the greatest scandals recorded in Scripture. Not only did David commit the sins of adultery and murder, he also implicated others in covering up these sins. The effects of his sins were serious. As the prophet Nathan said, "the sword will never depart from your house..." (2 Sam 12:10).

The question may arise if David's sins were not more gruesome than those of Saul, his predecessor. Why was Saul rejected and David pardoned? The answer is that David truly *repented* of his sins. David saw the depth of his evil: "Against you, you only, have I sinned" (Ps 51:4). David also wished to continue his task in accordance with God's will: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." David's sin was a result of weakness. It remains a grave error, but it was not a way of life and a rejecting of his theocratic calling.

David humbled himself before God and his people. There is a vast difference between humbling oneself and hardening oneself. The first leads to restoration; the second to excommunication.

In David's life we see the "godly sorrow" about which the apostle Paul writes in 2 Cor 7:10: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Worldly sorrow is concerned only about the effects of sin; godly sorrow grieves over the character of sin. The demand of God in old and new covenant is also in this respect the same: he forgives and restores only those who show godly sorrow.

When we read the many Psalms which David wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we see how closely he lived with the LORD. Under all circumstances, in good times and bad, David turned to God and walked with him. He poured out his heart before this great God who dwelt in the highest heavens and yet was always near. It is in the Psalms of David that we find how the relationship with God in the covenant of love truly functions. For in this relationship we more and more become one with God: "The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them" (Ps 25:14).

In some Psalms David also prophesied of the Messiah and expressed his longing for the time of salvation from sin, sorrow, and death. He knew that his throne would be established forever in the great priest-king who would serve God perfectly and obtain the eternal victory (Ps 110). David longed for the day of Christ. This longing is at the heart of the covenant experience.

Covenant and kingdom

Some people say that in the New Testament the covenant receives little or no attention and that the focus is, instead, on the kingdom of heaven. Christ's parables, for example, deal mostly with the kingdom and do not refer to the covenant.

It is unfortunate that in this way the concepts of the covenant and the kingdom are placed over against each other, for God's kingdom has always existed. He is king of all the earth: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps 24:1). The kingdom of God had its earthly centre in Zion: "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in" (Ps 24:7-10).

It pleased God who is King over all to make his covenant of love with Israel, and to bring forth the Saviour of the world from that people. The line of the covenant is also the line of the kingdom. It is remarkable how the Lord Jesus, when he commends the faith of the Roman centurion, states, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:10-12). Entry into the kingdom of heaven means admission to the covenant of God, sitting together with the patriarchs.

Covenant and kingdom are not two separate entities. The people of God's covenant are those who will sit at the feast of Christ in the kingdom of heaven. Those who have entered the kingdom are heirs of the promises of the covenant. Psalm 145:13: "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made."

Covenant and kingdom find their unity in Christ. It is important for us to see that unity, for the Lord Jesus, who is our only Saviour, the promised Mediator of the covenant, is at the same time our eternal King and Lord.