

## **“Put it in Writing: David”**

*Reading: Psalm 89:20-37; 2 Samuel 7:1-16*

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Maybe this scenario is familiar to you: I sit down at my desk to begin a task, something I've been planning and preparing for, something that needs to be done and at last I've got the chance to tackle it. I've checked my email, I've got a mug of tea, everything is quiet, there are no more distractions. And just as I begin whatever the task is, the phone rings. It always does, doesn't it? And to make things worse, the caller ID says that it's an 'unknown caller.' I know that sometimes for whatever reason the phone company or whoever just didn't get your caller ID information attached to your number, and so it's completely possible that an unknown caller might actually be someone I would want to talk to. But I've also learned that there are a surprising number of people out there who want to waste my time with scams and sales pitches and political campaigns. I had no idea there were so many conferences for pastors to go to, or renovation companies for churches, or consultants who have just the right magic bullet to make my church grow.

I sometimes — only sometimes, I'll admit — feel bad for the person on the other end of the line when I do pick up the phone for an unknown caller. Because many times, they have to convince me to listen to them for more than two seconds, and while I do honestly try to be polite and civil, I'm sure that there are many times when I just sound annoyed. Maybe I'm just cynical, but when someone approaches me out of the blue, someone with whom I have no relationship, or when someone makes me an offer for something I haven't heard of, I have to be convinced. I assume that their motivation is to sell me something, or to get something out of me, or to get me to do something for them. And sometimes that's fine, of course, but let's face it, these days we're all used to being sold things. What's the catch? What are you really selling me? What do you really want from me? How much is this conversation going to cost me in time or money? The more you try to convince me that this is the best deal ever, the more suspicious I'm likely to be.

I don't think we're just a product of our time when we respond with suspicion to someone else's initiative. I don't think that's necessarily cynical or inappropriate, though of course it can become that. I think we realize that there ain't no such thing as a free lunch, and that even if something really is a good deal, it's still going to cost you something. But in our Scripture reading today, we see a covenant in which God takes the initiative, and in so doing, He shows us a different way. He points us to a new creation that operates by different rules. He gives us a glimpse of the eternal direction of His work.

It's a story from the life of the great king David. David had a colorful life, to say the least. He lived the sort of life that Hollywood would not need to embellish if they made a movie about him, because there's plenty of drama and action and emotion in there without adding anything else. He started out as a shepherd, a thankless and lowly regarded job, as the youngest son in a family of eight brothers. I had a remarkably tolerant and kind older brother, but let's face it, if you've got seven older brothers, at least a few of them are bound to push the youngest around from time to time. He is unexpectedly anointed king at this young age by the prophet Samuel, which presents a conundrum since there's already a different king. He has his fateful confrontation with the giant Goliath, and King Saul recognizes his talents and brings him into the royal household, only to get jealous and turn on

him. David becomes a guerilla fighter of great renown, living in the wilderness on the run, until Saul eventually dies in battle and David can claim his throne.

We get many chapters after that out of David's story. He consolidates his power, he builds his administration, he deals with scandals and family problems and rebellions, he has great victories and crushing defeats, he makes wise decisions and makes terrible mistakes. But there is this point in the story that we read today, shortly after David has finally established his rule and has settled into Jerusalem as his capital, and everything seems to be going pretty well. He gets it into his head that he should build a proper temple for the Lord, since up to this point the worship of God has been centered on a tent. What better way to thank the God who has blessed you while also showing your nation that you are established as a good and powerful and pious king? But God responds in a very surprising way. The equivalent of the unexpected phone call in those days was the word of a prophet, and at first the prophet Nathan even thinks this temple is a good idea. But before long, God speaks up. David will not be the one to build God's temple; God didn't ask him to and doesn't seem to be in any hurry. But God keeps going. He takes the initiative in something that David did not expect; God changes the terms of the entire relationship and the history of the nation.

During this season of Lent we've been reading each week of one of the times when God revealed something significant about His plans and His priorities by making a covenant. At critical points in time during His work to redeem humanity He has signed on the dotted line, He has committed Himself to special agreements with individuals, with families, and with entire nations, and we've been stopping to ask what God considers important enough for Him to make such a deep commitment. What do these covenants reveal about who God is, how God is working, and how we should respond to His work? Each one has been a massive step forward in what God is doing, and each one shows us something more about the character of God. Noah's covenant showed us that God is good, Abraham's covenant showed us that God has a plan for our future, Moses' covenant showed us that God cares about how we live our lives and build our societies. And today, God makes a new covenant with David, a different sort of covenant, a very unexpected one.

Most of the time, a covenant has promises for both parties involved. Usually everyone has something to do to maintain the covenant: I will protect you as long as you pay a tribute to me, for example. But this one is different; it's basically one-sided. David wasn't looking for this sort of thing, but God speaks to him out of the blue and promises that David's dynasty will not end. David wanted to build a house for God, but instead God will build a house for David by ensuring that his line will not fail. When those descendants stray, God will correct them, but there is no indication that David or his descendants have to do anything to maintain this promise. God is simply and unexpectedly pouring out His blessing on this king.

We now have the benefit of three thousand years of history to look back on and see how God fulfilled this promise that He made. We can see that not long after God made this covenant, David committed adultery with a woman and had her husband killed in an attempt to hide the sin. We can see that David's family was a disaster even while he was still alive, and that his grandson was such a terrible king that he ended up splitting his kingdom in two. We can see that many other of David's descendants were faithless to God, to the point that they eventually lost the entire kingdom. And now, of course, we can see that there is no Davidic king ruling over the nation of Israel, and there hasn't been for a very long time.

However, we can also see that this promise was fulfilled completely and unexpectedly in Jesus. As a human in the line of David, and as God in the flesh, and as the faithful Messiah, He became the powerful eternal king that David only foreshadowed. God's promise was fulfilled not with a dynasty that lasted forever, but with a Davidic king who would be so great as to rule forever.

So what we are seeing in this covenant is one of the greatest works of God done purely out of God's grace and love. We've seen in previous covenants that God is good and that He's involved and that He cares about how we live our lives; here He's taking it to the next level. God is at work for the eternal redemption of His creation, and He's taking the initiative in that work — David can only see as far as building a temple, but God's got a much bigger view — and God's motives are *good*. His promise is independent of our worthiness or our faithfulness, since David and his descendants failed God several times, and some of their failures were pretty spectacular. There may be hitches, deviations, or distractions, but God's overall plan of redemption depends on God's goodness, not our own. And what's more, God's promise is independent of our circumstances, since there were many times along the way when it seemed sure that God had abandoned His people, that the plan had failed, that God had gotten so angry that the game was over. There is no power powerful enough to stop God. We can reject God's plan, we can opt out of it, we can walk away from God's promises to us, we can even fight against the progress of the kingdom of God if we want, but we cannot stop God's work of redemptive love for His creation.

Some people are tempted to take a promise like this and use it as an excuse to run wild. "What shall we say, then?" asks the Apostle Paul in Romans, once he has explained the work of God in Christ. "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" In other words, if God's promises are so sure that my own conduct and my circumstances can't stop God, why shouldn't I just keep doing the bad things that I want to do to underline God's goodness in keeping His promises? Doesn't my faithlessness make God's faithfulness that much more spectacular?

But no, the real question is this: once we have seen the promise of redemption, once we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, once our eyes have been opened to the path of life and light and we come out of darkness and death, why on earth would we want to go back? Why would you go from disease to health and then *want* to go back to the disease?

What God is looking for is a heart that is humble enough to receive the good things promised by God. David is remembered as being a "man after God's own heart;" but what does that mean? He was far from a perfect person. He made some huge mistakes, and his life was far from easy. But he had the humility to hear the word of God and respond with gratitude. That is both so much simpler and so much more difficult than it sounds. God came to him, God initiated a plan of redemption that went so far beyond what David had imagined, and it takes humility to trust that what God has for us comes to us out of God's love. There are hard times, painful times, uncertain times, times when God seems distant or hard, but His ultimate plan for us is one of redemption and love. We don't have to question God's motives, and that takes humility.

We don't become people after God's own heart by being perfect, but by consistently humbling ourselves before the work of God in our lives, by consistently listening to His word as it comes to us through Scripture or preaching or conversation or prayer, by consistently trusting that the promises

He gives us are sure, by consistently believing that God’s initiative in our lives is good. And lo and behold, as we humble ourselves, God uses our humility to perfect us. It was, after all, the humble faithfulness of Jesus Christ that opened wide the door to God’s greatest act of faithfulness in history. He humbled Himself for our sakes, so that we could be made perfect as He is perfect.

So our covenant for today is a testament to God’s enduring goodness and faithfulness, a reminder that He is faithful for eternity. He has signed His name on the dotted line to promise that. The call for us is to examine ourselves to see whether we really trust in God’s goodness. It’s easy to fear God or to listen to God halfheartedly out of a sense of duty or obligation, but it’s not always easy to trust that what He has for you is good. It’s one thing to do what God tells us to do because we think we ought to or because we have no real choice, but it’s another to follow God’s call because you trust that He has good things for you. He has come near us out of love, and His plan for us is far greater than we know. Today, how is God calling you to respond to His goodness?



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