

Human Initiative and God's Design in 2 Samuel 7

King David had a long struggle, against Saul, and against enemies of Israel. His plans to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem succeeded after the death of Uzzah had led him to abandon them for a time. Next, he wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem in which to house the Ark. Pagan kings thought that their gods were interested in them as people who built temples for them, maintained them, and supplied priests and sacrifices in them. David wanted proper recognition for the Lord as the real king over Israel. Now that he had a royal palace of cedar in Jerusalem, he thought it was inappropriate for the Lord's Ark to be housed in a tent.

David expressed what he had in mind to the prophet Nathan. He wanted the Lord's approval for his plans. However, the prophet took it on himself to give advice about something that the Lord had not revealed to him. He told David, "Go ahead and do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you." It is a temptation for people who serve the Lord as their vocation to think that they have the authority to speak for the Lord as if the Lord would automatically endorse whatever advice they give. Nathan rashly gave approval to David's plans as if it was the Lord's approval.

However, that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan. The Lord had different priorities. He had designated David's vocation as a soldier to fight the Lord's battles so that the people of Israel might have security in their Promised Land. The Lord's purpose in raising up rulers in Israel was not to build Him temples, but to shepherd His people. That was why the Lord had taken David from following the flock.

The Lord's plans were expressed in double meanings for the words "house", as "temple" and "family" and "seed" in the sense of "a series of descendants" or "one descendant." When David planned a house for the Lord, by "a house" he meant "a temple." In Hebrew, the word for "house" often also meant "household" or "family." We still use the expression "house of Windsor: for the royal family. The Lord reversed David's plans. Instead of David's building a house for Him, He would build David a "house" in the sense of "a royal family." The expression "the house of David" became a common one for the royal line, first for Solomon, and then for the kings in Judah.

There is a certain ambiguity in the word "seed", which meant "descendant" or "offspring." We know that Solomon built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. However, this prophecy is Messianic. From passages such as this, the expression "the son of David" became common for the promised Messiah. Although the word "covenant" does not occur in 2 Samuel 7, David understood that here the Lord was establishing a one-sided, unconditional, covenant of grace with him. Psalm 89 is David's response to this promise, and it uses the expression "covenant" for the Lord's promises on this occasion. We have part of that psalm in the Introit for today.

The statements that included the expression "for ever" caught David's attention. A descendant of his would be a genuine human being. However, he knew that the Lord's promises of something eternal could not refer to one ordinary human being." The Lord was not speaking about a long line of kings, but about one individual Descendant. The Lord promised, "He will build a house for My name, and I shall make the throne of His kingdom stand for ever" and "Your house and your kingdom will stand firm before you for ever; your throne will be established for ever." The prayer that David offered in the Lord's presence after this revelation showed that the greatness of this promise overwhelmed him: "Moreover, even this You consider a small thing, O Lord GOD. You have also spoken about the distant future of Your servant's family; and this is the teaching about the Man, O Lord GOD." We know that this pointed forward to David's Descendant, Jesus Christ, both God and man in the one person, who will indeed reign on the throne of David for ever.

Certainly, the Lord had a close relationship of grace to the kings that followed in David's line. However, the father and son relationship discloses the Trinitarian relationship of the Father to the Son: "[the Son] shall be His Father, and He will be My Son." Similarly, when Mark began the Gospel he wrote by giving it the heading, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The Father reaffirmed that promise when Jesus was baptized: "You are My Son, whom I love. With You I am well pleased." The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes a verse from Psalm 2 together with this passage: "For to which of the angels has God ever said: 'You are My Son; today I have begotten You'?" Or again: "I shall be His Father, and He will be My Son"?

The Lord's plans were different from David's. During the wandering in the desert, a permanent and costly sanctuary would not have been practical. During the period when the leadership of Israel passed from one prominent tribe to the other, the Lord had not asked for a permanent sanctuary in Israel. The ark rested at Gilgal and Shiloh. Many people understood from God's promises to David that his royal line, or the particular Descendant, the Messiah, would be a conquering, powerful earthly kingship like David's. God's design included

what we call “the theology of the cross.” It was Jesus’ conviction that His role as the Messiah included suffering. This passage does not refer to a line of kings who are descendants of David, but one particular Descendant, the Messiah. Therefore, we also see; already in this passage, a prophecy of the suffering of the Messiah: “If He sins, I shall punish Him with the rod of men and with blows inflicted by men.” This could not refer to Solomon, because he was an ordinary human being, and there would be nothing unusual if he were punished for human transgressions. Of course, the sin was not Jesus’ own, but the sin of the world, which the Father laid on Him to bear. The Messiah bore sin that was reckoned to Him. The prophecy also included His sinlessness. He would not be rejected for disobedience, as Saul had been.

Nevertheless, God’s Son, who was also David’s Descendant, would have regal dignity. His kingdom included resurrection from the dead, and the gift of eternal life for those who believed in Him as God’s strange way of salvation. His building of a house for the Lord would be the same thing as the Lord’s making a house both for Himself and for David.

For us, too, the Lord’s ways are not our ways. When the Lord leads us over rough paths, and when He seems to be a God whose dealings are like mysterious riddles, we should trust that He knows best and plans best. We should make all our plans for the future subject to His will, even when we want great and good things in His honour. We should be careful not to presume to have a hotline to God, and, like Nathan, boldly speak for the Lord when the Lord has not spoken.

Similarly, Abraham had to learn by experience that the Lord was a God who acted in strange ways, and yet could bring things into existence out of non-existence, and life from death. If the Lord seems to deal strangely with us, He dealt even more strangely with His Son. He “punished His Son with the rod of men and with blows inflicted by men.” In the words of Isaiah, “The LORD has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all” The Lord’s kindness to Him included that, for our sakes. We can be confident that, if the Lord’s plans for us seem strange, they are gracious and kind, and that all will indeed work out for the best, for Christ’s sake.