
Lesson 23: David and The Royal Court

Text: Samuel II, Chapters 13-14

Terrible thing happened in David's royal family. When David committed the grave sin of taking Bath-sheba and sending Uriah to his death, Nathan the prophet foretold: "Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house" (12, 11). The divine wrath was now casting a shadow over David's life, and the evil started indeed in his own house.

As the storm gathers over David's head, we get a picture of the customs and manners at the royal court. The princes formed a class of their own, they dressed royally (13, 18) and went about in royal style. Each had his own farm (13, 23), and there was one prince who was the heir-apparent. David was an easy-going father but at times he could become very strict and formal (14, 24).

David's affair with Bath-sheba was a turning point in his life. One of the exegetes points to the striking identity of phrasing used in the stories of Bath-sheba and Tamar:

Bath-sheba: And david sent... (11, 4)

Tamar: Then David sent... (13, 7)

In each case this phrase marks the beginning of the story.

Now, when David heard of Ammon's behavior "he was very wroth" (13, 21). But what did David do? What punishment did he inflict upon his sinful son? The tragic answer is that David did nothing because his moral standing was undermined. Ammon, after all, was not the first in the family who was carried away by desire. Furthermore, it appears that Absalom's servants who killed Ammon were not punished. Absalom had promised them "fear not for I have commanded you" (13, 28), and David did nothing. David probably had in mind the case of Joab who caused Uriah to die at his king's command.

These Bible chapters are essentially the story of a man called David. The whole book of Samuel is mainly a book of individuals, and appropriately its first phrase is "Now there was a man...". In the case of David we read of his grave sin, his repentance, and his dire punishment. So much is told of David's tribulations that we begin to wonder whether the scales are not tipped against him. Why is it necessary to emphasize so much failure and weakness of that great and successful king?

In fact, the Bible tells us very little of his success and of the times when the king and Israel were enjoying peace. Compare this with the Biblical account of the reign of Solomon, who is throughout presented as a wise, wealthy and famous monarch. Yet David is, according to the Biblical narrative, never out of trouble. Beginning with his clash with king Saul, continuing with the hard times as a hunted chieftain of a small troop of marauders, playing a double game of

friend and foe of the Philistines at Gath. And when at long last David is finally enthroned as king of the whole of Israel, he is described as a man continually at loggerheads with his own family.

What about his tremendous military victories? And the empire stretching from the Gulf of Aqaba to the north of Syria which he founded? And the new royal capital which he established in Jerusalem? The Bible relates his achievements in a hurried manner, hardly pausing to give the bare facts, whilst it lingers and elaborates upon every failure and difficulty. Why?

Of course, the Bible is not opposed to David. Rather we are faced here with the prophetic interpretation of the life of the man David. For the book of Samuel is mainly concerned with individuals. And from this point of view David is a man of fighting and tribulation. All his life he struggles with others and with himself. He is a warrior - and he does not succeed in each battle.

When he was a runaway troop chieftain his life was anything but enviable, but it was not without its moral beauty. At that time he was faced with fateful decisions and he always displayed inner strength of character and loyalty to his people and even to the king who relentlessly pursued him like a hunted animal.

The life at the royal court in Jerusalem as described in the Bible, compared rather badly with the difficult but heroic days of the younger David. And yet, even when David seemed to relax in the luxury of an oriental court there was something great and wonderful in the character of this man, showing the moral stamina of a powerful king who humbled himself before the divine prophet. Let us compare David's reaction to Nathan's rebuke with Saul's response in a similar circumstance in chapter 15 of the first book of Samuel (verses 19-20):

Samuel to Saul: Wherefore then didst thou not hearken to the voice of the Lord?

Saul's reply: Yea, I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord

Nathan to David: Wherefore hast thou despised the word of the Lord to do that which is evil in My sight?

David's reply: I have sinned against the Lord