

# David—the man after God’s own heart

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*The story of David is dramatic and compelling from the moment he is introduced to us. Here we begin a new series of exhortation articles on his life. We will explore how circumstances, good and bad, helped to mould the character of one who is uniquely described—in both Old and New Testaments—as “the man after God’s own heart.”*

## 1. The anointing

**T**HE GREAT PROPHET, grieving and exasperated by the total failure of Saul to fulfil what was expected of him as king over Israel, received fresh instructions from Yahweh for the choosing of a new king as yet unnamed. The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem, I have chosen one of his sons to be king.” But Samuel said, “How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me.” The Lord said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for Me the one I indicate.”<sup>1</sup>

Samuel set off from Ramah, where he held a school for the prophets, and made his way south past Jebus (as Jerusalem was then generally called) until he came to the little town of Bethlehem. He had been in the habit of making an annual circuit of the towns and villages he regarded as his charge as their judge and prophet, but for him to arrive unexpectedly filled Bethlehem’s elders with fear. Trembling, they asked him, “Do you come in peace?” Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

### Son of Jesse

Now Jesse had a large family of sons, eight in all—happy, in the words of the psalmist, to have his quiver full. They were, however, of mixed parentage, for Jesse had married twice, and on the second occasion to a woman who already had sons.\* So, when the last child came along, when Jesse was old, the new infant had ranged over him both half-brothers and step-brothers much older than he, and for that reason alone he was rather set apart.

Naturally, when the sons were presented before Samuel, the oldest among the sons of the first marriage came first. His name was Eliab, and his striking appearance led Samuel to say to himself, “Surely the LORD’S anointed stands here before the LORD.” But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height [shades of Saul!], for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”<sup>3</sup>

Introduced in turn by Jesse, Eliab’s brothers Abinadab and Shammah also passed in front of the prophet without either of them being indicated as the Lord’s choice. And the same happened with the rest of Jesse’s grown-up sons. So, mystified, Samuel turned to Jesse and asked him, “Are these all the sons you have?” “There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered (remembering the one he had not thought worthy of inclusion), “but he is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.”<sup>4</sup> Jesse sent for David and had him brought in, fresh from the

1. 1 Sam. 16:1-3; all quotations from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

2. vv. 4,5.

\* As suggested by Brother Roy Standeven in *The Warrior Tamed*, pp. 9-11.

3. vv. 6,7.

4. v. 11.

fields, a youth on the brink of manhood, with a fine appearance and handsome features, clear-eyed, and differing from the rest of the family with his fair complexion and auburn hair. "Rise and anoint him," came the Lord's signal to Samuel; whereupon the prophet took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and from that day on the spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.

### Questions

Thus, briefly, David is introduced to us in Samuel's account, leaving the mind open to some intriguing questions. How, for instance, was Samuel's anointing of David carried out without creating a stir that might have caused the whole town to erupt and Jesse's family itself to be affected? Had the story leaked out, it would have brought King Saul and his men hotfoot, to despatch not only the apprehensive prophet but also David, the newly anointed—an outcome that Saul later tried to accomplish many times when he hunted David like a partridge upon the mountains.

So, how was the cover-up (assuming there was one) accomplished? The brevity of the account masks the fact that the arrangements for the sacrifice to which all the elders of the town had been invited may have occupied several days, during which time Samuel had chosen to stay at Jesse's house. The elders had been told to sanctify themselves in preparation for the sacrifice, after which there was to be a celebratory meal. But, since the prophet had elected to stay with Jesse,

and had further singled out him and his sons by personally sanctifying them, their meal was held at home. And in that case the individual interviews Samuel held with Jesse's sons, one at a time, were held in private.

Nothing is written as to the possible explanation given to each candidate—until the last, who was David, and he may have been warned not to divulge it to the others, especially in view of their attitudes towards him. Some have thought that the family did know the truth of the matter and that they closed ranks to keep it a secret. If so, the attitude of the eldest, Eliab, toward David that he was conceited and wicked of heart (17:28) hardly supports such a recognition.

On the other hand, if, as William Deane suggests,<sup>5</sup> the brothers were indeed kept in the dark by Samuel as to the true import of it all, they might easily have been led to believe that the prophet was looking for a candidate for his school at Ramah, in which case they would have accepted that David, with his scholarly leanings and musical abilities, was a likely candidate. But much depends, in this scenario, on whether the view is taken that David's prowess in both literature and playing the harp was enhanced by the Holy Spirit without recourse to the school at Ramah, or whether nature was further nurtured under the kindly supervision of the great judge and prophet himself.

Certainly, after what had taken place in Bethlehem, David's life was never going to be the same again.

## 2. The shepherd's life

**A**LTHOUGH only a few verses in Scripture are devoted to David's life as a shepherd, his experiences and the opportunities they gave him to develop both physically and spiritually prepared him in the fullest possible way for kingship and for his incomparable role as the sweet psalmist of Israel. Who, for example, knows better how to care for his people than he who has learned to look after his sheep? From lambing to maturity the flock need tending and leading from pasture to pasture. Moreover, in the hills around Bethlehem threats from now long-forgotten predators such as lions, bears and wolves were a constant hazard with which the youthful David had to contend.

This young shepherd, since he was not a hireling but responsible for his father's sheep, sum-

moned up both strength and courage to combat it. Twice he did so and restored the lamb to its ewe. But more than that; he thereby confirmed that the God he already trusted had been with him to deliver *him* as well as the lamb. It was this faith and confidence that emboldened him, within a year or two, to engage in mortal combat with a fearsome enemy champion whom not even the bravest warriors in the army of Israel were prepared to face.

For it is in this way, through faith and trust in early experience, that God prepares and fits His children for greater challenges to come. So

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5. *David: His Life and Times*, W. J. Deane, James Nisbet and Co., 1889.



**Shepherd in Israel in traditional garb.**

Picture: iStockphoto.com/Noel Powell

it was with David. His equipment as a shepherd consisted of not only the staff, with which he killed the lion and the bear, but also a sling and a supply of stones. Much as a youth today takes pleasure in targeting with a ball, David would enjoy slinging stones with the additional occasional pleasure of scaring away unwanted predators. His enthusiasm for this must also have been enlivened by the knowledge that he lived only a few miles from the territory of Benjamin, whose warriors were famed for being able to sling stones at a hair's breadth and not miss. In this way also David developed, albeit unwittingly, a skill ready for his great day.

### **Meditation on God's ways**

But David's shepherding was not all caring and combat. There were days—and nights too—in which he meditated and learned to appreciate the wonders of God's creation and the marvels of His condescension to man. It led him especially, among the psalmists, to praise and glorify the great Creator for His wonderful works to the children of men. "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him? For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:3-6, AV).

To David, all nature was a declaration more powerful than any speech or language could express. "Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge," he said (Ps. 19:2, AV). From such a Creator there had also come a law that was perfect, enlightening the eyes and

making wise the simple. Would that countries that mask the stars with their own inferior light could see the heavens as David saw and understood them!

In David's thinking, everything about a shepherd's work could be sublimated to the Divine. Was he a shepherd? So also was the God Whom he worshipped. And more than that, God was David's own shepherd, and he one of the sheep whom God pastured and led beside the waters of life. So great indeed became this metaphor that when 'David's greater Son' dwelt among men, he too assumed the mantle of the Good Shepherd who cared for his sheep, even to the extent of giving his life for them.

### **God our Shepherd**

David's best-known and best-loved psalm, though written only after many years of God's protection and guidance, developed the shepherding theme he had learned in his youth on the hills of Bethlehem:

"The LORD is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake" (Ps. 23:1-3, NKJV).

Then, in words that have comforted many generations of believers as they faced the inevitable, David continued:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of  
the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

For You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort  
me" (v. 4, NKJV).

In adversity among many antagonists, God had unfailingly provided for him:

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil [as Samuel had done];  
My cup runs over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (vv. 5,6, NKJV).

Could the blessings and hopes of God’s flock have been more beautifully and movingly expressed?

But what else did David learn as he looked after his father’s sheep? The Scriptures show that around this time he became a musician so

highly skilled as to be chosen to serve officially at the court of King Saul, in order to assuage the malign humours that assailed the king after his rejection by Samuel in favour of ‘a man after God’s own heart.’

How ironic that David, already chosen and anointed as that very man, should serve in this way! His musical proficiency whilst so young, normally the result of much practice and training, supports the idea that, besides learning melody with the aid of his shepherd’s pipe, David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, practised harmony and composition at Samuel’s school for prophets at Ramah. Thus was he taught to “Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm” (Ps. 98:5, AV).

[\(To be continued\)](#)