

1 Samuel 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 16 The Lord said to Samuel, How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go, I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.

And Samuel said, How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me. And the Lord said, Take a heifer with you and say, I have come to sacrifice to the Lord, and invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do.

And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you. Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, Do you come peaceably?

And he said, Peaceably, I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice. And he consecrated Jesse and his sons, and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, Surely the Lord's anointed is before him. But the Lord said to Samuel, Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him.

[1:07] For the Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, Neither has the Lord chosen this one.

Then Jesse made Shammah pass by, and he said, Neither has the Lord chosen this one. And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, The Lord has not chosen these.

Then Samuel said to Jesse, Are all your sons here? And he said, There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep. And Samuel said to Jesse, Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.

And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the Lord said, Arise, anoint him, for this is he. Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers.

And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah. Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him.

[2:13] And Saul's servants said to him, Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our Lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre.

And when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well. So Saul said to his servants, Provide for me a man who can play well, and bring him to me. One of the young men answered, Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him.

Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, Send me David your son, who is with the sheep. And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread, and a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent them by David his son to Saul.

And David came to Saul, and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armour bearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, Let David remain in my service, for he has found favour in my sight.

And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre, and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

[3 : 25] 1 Samuel chapter 16 begins with the situation after the rejection of Saul. After Saul fails to judge the Amalekites, the kingdom is taken from him, and will be given to one who is better than him.

Samuel, however, is mourning Saul. Saul had been like Samuel's adoptive son, the replacement for his unfaithful sons, just as he was the replacement for Hophni and Phinehas. The Lord sends him to anoint a replacement, to Jesse the Bethlehemite.

This is the first time that we hear of Bethlehem in the book of 1 Samuel. We last heard of it in the book of Ruth. Samuel is worried, though. If Saul catches wind of the fact that he is going to Bethlehem, and wonders what he is about, and discovers that he is anointing a successor, he will be in serious trouble.

Unsurprisingly, Saul would seek his life if he anointed a replacement, who Saul would perceive as a rival. And the Lord gives Samuel a cover story. He is going to make a peace offering.

In Leviticus chapter 3 verse 1, the peace offering can involve a male or a female. Saul was marked out as the king in part through a sacrifice in chapter 9, and now his successor will be marked out in a similar manner.

[4 : 35] Samuel follows the Lord's instructions and goes to Bethlehem. In preparation for the feast, he consecrates Jesse and his sons, and invites them to the sacrifice. As he is consecrating the sons, he sees the oldest son of Jesse first, Eliab, and judging by his appearance, presumes that he must be the chosen one.

Yet the Lord says that he has rejected him. Nor has the Lord chosen Abinadab, or Shammah, or any of the other seven sons that have passed before Samuel. Previously we saw that Saul was set apart from others by his appearance.

He was handsome. He was head and shoulders above everyone else. Here the Lord makes clear that one cannot judge simply by the outward appearance. The Lord sees the heart. While the outward appearance is by no means unimportant for the king, it is not the be-all and end-all.

And perhaps Israel should have learnt some lessons from their experience with Saul. In a way that is perhaps reminiscent of the setting apart of Saul as king, the candidate cannot be found. Samuel has to enquire of Jesse whether he has another son who has not been presented.

And indeed there is one more, the youngest, and he is keeping the sheep. This is perhaps the first of several allusions to the stories of Joseph and Jacob. Joseph was introduced to us in Genesis chapter 37 verse 2 as the one who kept the sheep with his brothers.

[5 : 52] Now there is another shepherd on the scene. Like Joseph, David is another very handsome young man. Unlike Joseph, he naturally rises to authority as the spirit of God comes upon him. David is described as ruddy with beautiful eyes.

Only one other character in scripture is described as ruddy, and that is Esau. David is a character who brings together traits associated with Esau and Jacob. He is primarily associated with Jacob, but he takes on some of the more manly traits of Esau.

Although we will see that he resembles Esau in some not-so-good ways as well. Appropriately, David will also bring the land of Edom into union with Israel for a period of time.

He brings together the twins. Like Saul, David is described as one who is a suitable bridegroom of Israel. He is physically attractive. David's name means beloved, and as the story proceeds, we will see that he gains dominance and influence and power, in large part through the fact that everyone falls in love with him.

The first being Saul himself. As the spirit of the Lord comes upon David, however, the spirit of the Lord leaves Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord torments him. Much as when Pharaoh was troubled with dreams, the cupbearer, his servant, told him of a gifted young man who would be able to help him, so here one of Saul's servants tells him that there is a young man who will be able to help him with his problem.

[7 : 13] David, the son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, is already developing a reputation for himself. He is skillful in playing. He is a man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him.

Saul sends messengers to Jesse to summon David. David is sent by Jesse with a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat. We have seen these things before. These are items associated with the signs of the kingdom given to Saul in chapter 10.

There he was told, first of all, that the donkeys of his father had been found, and then in the second encounter he met men carrying goats, bread, and wine, and they gave him some of the bread. Finally he met prophets and musicians coming down from the high place, and the spirit of God came upon him and he became a new man. Now these same signs are being sent to him by the hand of David.

David is now the one who has the spirit of God upon him. He will play the musical instrument. He is the one by whom Saul will be relieved of his harmful spirit. Already David and Saul's identities and destinies are tied up together, and Saul loves David greatly, and David becomes his armour bearer. [8 : 21] He requests that David remain with him, that he become one of his household, as one of his full-time servants. A question to consider. Paying attention to the characterisation of David within this chapter, what are some ways in which he can already be contrasted with the character of Saul?

