

## **The Trouble with Kings**

A prompting offered by Ruth Hopkins, Seminary Intern  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10**

*Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward. And David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.*

### **2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

*I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows-- was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

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Today we start our month long look at David. Not a lot is going on in this week's reading – David becomes king. David, the shepherd, that good-looking fellow that killed Goliath and was an ancestor to Jesus. The guy who danced practically naked in front of the Ark of the Covenant, who seduced Bathsheba, and then tried to kill her husband. What can we say about such a man?

One of the reasons I love the Hebrew Scriptures so much is that they are full of shady characters. Moses killed a man. Abraham passed off his wife as his sister. Jacob stole his brother's birthright. Jael drove a tent peg into her lover's temple. Such richness! The Hebrew Scriptures are a far better read, as stories go, than the New Testament. Except for some of Leviticus and Numbers, of course, unless you are really into the dietary laws.

So let's jump in. First a few academic, profound exegetical ponderings to consider. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures you can trace two tracks – one is pro-king, the other is anti-king. Generally speaking, if you come across a story that is about God in a pillar of fire, God on the move, or God residing in a tent, you have the anti-king track. When you come across a story where God is enthroned, or you read instructions about building a temple (so many cubits by this many cubits), you can generally assume we have a pro-king story. This is a fascinating subject on its own, and deserves its own class. But anyway – The entire book of Judges tells of a time when "there was no king in Israel" and local judges ruled. But when the Philistines entered the picture, it seemed like a good idea to have a king, with an army. Saul was that first king.

In our other reading, we have Paul. Poor Paul, writing to the church in Corinth. This church was being led astray by so called "super apostles." These super apostles were undermining Paul's

authority, and Paul has spent considerable previous verses laying out his credentials as a Hebrew, an Israelite, and a descendant of Abraham. When we join him in today's verses, he is playing his trump card – he, indeed, is the one “caught up into heaven” and given instruction, let those super apostles top that!

So we have two leaders in authority, David, just crowned, and Paul, trying to hang on. So it goes throughout history. I am sure that Old King George did not expect, as he was being crowned, that years later he would be watching 13 upstart colonies declare their independence. And David, shepherd boy, probably had no idea when he was being crowned that his power would ultimately lead to much heartache and sorrow. Both kings had tremendous power, and, as we shall see in the coming weeks, King David was in the grip of his own power, which led to all kinds of troubles. Paul talks of a different power. A power that is not of kings, but of God. Power in weakness. Power that is grounded in God, not in king or queen-ship.

We see Paul, struggling with some “thorn” that he has repeatedly asked God to remove for him. But God does not. “My grace is sufficient” God says. Have no confidence that the removal of that thorn will make everything ok, just have confidence in me, says God. God did not cause Paul's pain, but God will be with Paul in his pain, and transforming weakness into strength.

We do not know what thorn Paul is speaking of, and it is probably better that way. For there are all kinds of thorns, from illness, to abuse, to natural disasters to corrupt governments. Some need to be removed as a matter of justice, some we can only suffer through. And I am not suggesting that we “grin and bear it”, as in “we must suffer because Christ suffered.” While the thorns of life can bring gifts, the thorns themselves are not blessings from God. We put those meanings on them, whether we call them blessing or curse. Paul understands that God did not cause his affliction. But God is present even in the difficult things God does not cause, and the grace of God can be seen even through those things that bring us grief and sorrow.

I looked for many reasons as to why I developed thyroid cancer. Was it because I smoked for several years in college, or maybe it was the years on birth control that messed up my hormones, or was it what I was eating? I was practicing alternative medicine, and felt certain that there was some flaw in me that was manifesting the cancer. I was tortured by the thought that I somehow brought this on myself. I thought that my herbs and energy healing would guarantee me a cancer-free life. I still do not know why I got it, my doctor will not speculate, and now, several years later, cancer free proud to be, I realize it doesn't really make any difference. It is and was, what it was and is. I am not consumed by uncertainty. Grace trumped the uncertainty. Grace freed me of the blame game. The grace was not that I got cancer, or that now the cancer is gone. The grace is that God is with me.

It was a grace filled time. It was that very experience that made me realize I needed to get into the game of life for real. God was indeed with me, whether I was happy or sad, active or stuck in a mental funk. So why not live and love life, and try to love others too? God will be with me. And that is the guarantee, not that life will be a bed of roses, but that God walks in the garden with me, thorns and all. The words “weak” and “strong” no longer have any meaning, because God's grace is beyond those dualities. I am weak in strength and strong in weakness.

And God's grace is with us all. If the story of David tells us anything, it tells us this. Over the coming weeks, we will watch King David unravel, and as he puts more confidence in his own power rather than God, he makes horrendous mistakes, and really pays dearly for them. But God is still with him. Just as God was with Moses, who killed a man, and God was with Abraham, who passed his wife off as his sister, and all the rest of those shady characters. God's story moved along, through deeply flawed people, and thank God for that! We are all pretty shady characters sometimes.

The trouble with kings is that they often believe, like David, that their kingship guarantees them that bed of roses, or like those super apostles, that their credentials gives them immunity from the slings and arrows of life. And that is often the trouble with us. But in reality, all bets are off – like life itself – no guarantees, except for the one that counts the most, and give us all the best of credentials – God is with us. We are God's. Amen.