



Sun 1 Aug

Introduction

1 Kings 1 - 4: a new beginning

These chapters tell a tale of kings and kingmaking. We meet plotting princes and crafty courtiers, politicians and priests, the fading embers of an old king and the rising star of a new one. We go backstage in the royal palace, amid the manoeuvring of hangers-on. Then, we come out into the light of a new reign, rich with potential and bright with promise.

The scene is Jerusalem, a thousand years before the time of Jesus. King David lies sick. His life has almost run its course - from shepherd boy to warrior, outlaw to king, Bethlehem to Jerusalem and anointing to old age. If we follow David through the two books of Samuel, we see him achieve much in public life. He ruled his land, but could not control his sons, however, so left a split and quarrelsome household, its members vying for power. God had once given him grand promises about his family and their future. As the story moves from the books of Samuel into Kings, God's grace has to work in a deeply divided home.

Solomon, we shall see, emerges as his father's choice. From birth he was called 'Beloved of the Lord' (2 Samuel 12:25 footnote). He would establish the kingdom, build a house for God and know God as Father (7:12 - 14). From the start he is humble and wise, prayerful and prosperous. Before long he did indeed build 'a house for the name of the Lord' (1 Kings 5:5). Worship was a priority for Solomon.

Yet, there is a hint that this man had too many interests of his own. He was good at organising his land, but also at gathering goods for himself. Marrying a foreign princess might have forged a political alliance, but it did little for his faith. As time went by, wealth and women cast a spell over Solomon. He increased - of that there is no doubt - but sadly God decreased in his life.

A new beginning is a precious opportunity, but you need to press on, grow into new responsibility and carry it humbly. In these chapters, Solomon makes a strong start, forging on, yet his full story leaves a hollow sound in the ear, the aftertaste of a rich flavour gone sour. It leaves us longing for the one to come, who would truly be called 'Son of God'.

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1 Kings 1:1 - 4 (RSV, abridged)

Cold comfort

Now King David was old and advanced in years; and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. Therefore his servants said to him, 'Let a young maiden be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait upon the king, and be his nurse; let her lie in your bosom, that my lord the king may be warm.' So they... found Abishag the Shunammite... and she became the king's nurse and ministered to him; but the king knew her not.

This pathetic little story is an odd start to a book. The king lay sick. His courtiers made a desperate attempt to revive him by finding a kind of human hot-water bottle. They might have done better to hire an experienced nurse, for Abishag seems to have been a woman used. Part of her youth was stolen, to fend off the king's old age in a curious and unnatural relationship.

'The king knew her not' means that they had no sexual relationship, but there is much more that David does not know. The plotting of the palace and the ambitions of his son Adonijah all seem to pass him by. His time for careful and considered planning is past. People come to his bedside to claim old promises rather than draw on any fresh wisdom.

King David's old age was not handled well. His strength was failing, his sons were starting to jostle for position and the people around him dreaded the vacuum that he would leave. They dared not face the inevitable, so they tried to rescue the situation, but they did so in a manner that seems foolish and humiliating.

Growing older is a gift, but also a responsibility. A sign of ageing, they say, is when you stoop to tie a shoelace and find yourself thinking, 'Now what else can I do while I'm down here?' but there are serious concerns, too. Life goes by, energy gives way to experience, and skills that we once deployed well start to slip away from us. Let us ask for grace to receive those times as coming from God and meet them honestly and humbly. With God's help, even a period of declining strength may be an occasion for wise decisions and faithful service.

Prayer

God of all our ages, help us to respect old age and meet it without fear.

John Proctor
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