

E. The Davidic Covenant

God's covenant with David is the next of the major biblical covenants. It was set within the Mosaic Covenant and specifically concerned the kingdom of Israel and its royal dynasty. And, as Torah, it served to advance God's revelation of His ultimate designs for His covenant kingdom. The Davidic Covenant was grounded in the covenant at Sinai and therefore drew upon God's covenants with Abraham and Noah and ultimately His oath in Eden. This is clear, not only from the sequence and scheme of the various covenants, but also the person of David and his descent from Judah. Five centuries earlier Jacob prophesied of Judah's regal primacy (Genesis 49:8-10) and the scriptural history subsequently traced Judah's line until it arrived at David.

David emerged during the very early years of the Israelite monarchy and the Scriptures present him as the individual whose person and reign most epitomized the kingdom of Israel as Yahweh's kingdom – the “kingdom of God.” God's covenant with David pertained to his rule over the Israelite kingdom, but it also recognized and spoke to the kingdom's prophetic and preparatory role in God's purposes. The Davidic Covenant – as all of the biblical covenants – looked to the future as well as the past and present. Gentry and Wellum's overview is helpful:

“The Davidic covenant functions in the larger story in a number of significant ways. In the history of the people of Israel, it inaugurates a divinely designed model of kingship for the nation. Furthermore, it implements the kingship of Yahweh among his people at a deeper and higher level. In addition to addressing concerns and problems of the developing nation of Israel, the Davidic covenant carries forward in specific ways the intentions and purposes of God expressed in the Israelite covenant [Law of Moses] and, even further back, in the covenant with Abraham.” (Kingdom through Covenant)

1. The Davidic Covenant had its genesis in God's covenant with Abraham and its pledge of royal offspring (Genesis 17:1-6, 15-16). God was going to establish a triumphal kingdom through Abraham, one distinguished by its supremacy and the sovereign who rules it. Later, when Abraham's descendents stood on the verge of the oppression God had promised, Jacob conveyed the blessing of a regal heritage to his son Judah (ref. Genesis 15:12-13 and 47:27-49:10). The scepter – the symbol of royal authority and power – was his and would remain with him until *Shiloh* came (“the one to whom it belongs”).
 - a. God later accomplished His great redemptive deliverance through Moses, bringing Abraham's descendents to Sinai where He ratified His covenant relationship with them. Afterward, their unfaithfulness to the covenant led to forty years of wandering and the death of the unbelieving generation (Numbers 13-14) before God brought them into the promised land under Joshua's leadership (Joshua 1-5). The next three decades saw the Israelites progressively conquering and settling the land, culminating with Joshua reaffirming the covenant relationship between God and Israel and charging the people with their obligation to uphold it in virtually the same way Moses had. Once again God set blessing and cursing, life and death, before His covenant people and once again His appointed mediator warned them of impending failure and the terrible judgment that would attend it (cf. Joshua 24:1-28 with Deuteronomy 31:14-32:47).

- b. Israel's conquest of Canaan was followed by a long, dark season of increasing unfaithfulness and apostasy recounted in the book of Judges. Time and ease dulled the people's allegiance and zeal for their God and their distance from Him increasingly separated them from one another. Israel's unity as Abraham's offspring was grounded in their mutual consecration to Abraham's God, so that their apostasy inevitably led to alienation and strife among themselves. Eventually the only thing able to unite them was a shared determination among the eleven tribes to exact vengeance on the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 19-20).

The book records a series of seven repeated cycles consisting of *apostasy, judgment, repentance* and *restoration*. In each of those instances God responded to the people's pleas by raising up a deliverer – a judge – to rescue them from their oppressors. Each time deliverance brought a season of renewed faithfulness, but one which typically died with the death of the respective judge. The author's summary assessment of that era of Israel's history was that “*in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (ref. 17:6, 21:25; cf. also 18:1 and 19:1). This assessment underscored three crucial truths:

- 1) First, it highlighted the fact that Israel was a *theocracy*. The covenant at Sinai presupposed and inaugurated God's design to establish a kingdom in and through the Abrahamic people – a kingdom that He Himself would rule. There was no human king in Israel because Yahweh was king.
 - 2) But in actuality, Yahweh had been deposed. Even *He* wasn't king in Israel; rather, every man was his *own* king, doing what was right in his own eyes. So the fundamental issue in Israel's covenant unfaithfulness – its “lawlessness” – was its rejection of Yahweh's kingship. The book of Judges is the concentrated, tragic story of the kingless Israelite kingdom – a kingdom that was only a perverse facsimile of its true self; a kingdom that reflected the kingdoms of this world rather than manifesting God's kingdom and rule to the world.
 - 3) But behind Israel's kingless condition lay God's revelation that His covenant kingdom was to one day be ruled by a human king. He implied this in His covenant with Abraham and in Jacob's prophetic blessing to Judah, but stated it directly through Moses. Israel was to have a human king like the nations, but one distinctly different from all other kings: Israel's king was to administer *Yahweh's kingship* as His faithful son. He was to be a man of God's choosing; a servant-ruler fully devoted to Torah and its ministration among the King's people (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).
- c. The book of Judges provides the immediate context for the emergence of the monarchy in Israel. Samuel was the last of Israel's true judges (men appointed by God to govern His people under His kingship) and the man who presided over the transition to the monarchy, first in relation to Saul as Israel's first king, but more importantly in David's ascent to the throne (1 Samuel 8-16).

Echoing God's words to Moses, the time came that the people of Israel decided they needed a human king (cf. Deuteronomy 17:14; 1 Samuel 8:1-5). They were disgusted and disillusioned with Samuel's sons (who were self-appointed judges) and determined it was time to move beyond judges as Israel's rulers and crown an actual king. This displeased Samuel because he sensed what the Lord openly acknowledged: Israel's insistence on a human king amounted to their overt rejection of Him as king. But in reality this was no new development; Abraham's offspring had been unfaithful since their days in Egypt (8:6-8; cf. Ezekiel 20:1-9). So also now their wayward, self-serving hearts informed their vision of a king; exactly as Yahweh had warned, they sought a king after their own heart.

Nevertheless, the Lord told Samuel to grant the people what they wanted, but to first make sure they understood what they were getting and how this decision would play out for them: No matter whom they chose to be their king, that man would rule them "*according to the procedure of the king*" – that is, in his own name and for his own sake, not as administering Yahweh's rule with His mind and heart. Samuel explained all this but the people were unmoved; in a telling rebuff, they admitted that they *wanted* to be like the nations, having a king who'd rule them in the same way (8:9-22). They clearly weren't seeking a king to exploit and oppress them, but their words would come back to haunt them.

Thus God gave Israel a king who met their expectations – a tall, handsome and accomplished warrior named *Saul* who stood out among his peers (9:1-2). They should have known that Saul had no legitimate claim to the throne; he was a Benjamite and the scepter belonged to Judah. But whether they didn't know or didn't care, Israel embraced him enthusiastically (11:14-15). But soon Yahweh's warning came to pass as Saul showed himself to be a ruler like the kings of the nations – a man who ruled "according to the procedure of the king" (12:1-15:35).

2. Saul's failure was the springboard for David's ascent to the throne. Saul was Israel's choice, while David was God's. Even Samuel, Yahweh's judge and prophet, considered Jesse's sons according to appearance, examining each in turn until none was left except David. When the Lord identified David as His chosen king, Samuel anointed him and the Spirit, taken from Saul, came upon David and remained with him from that day forward (16:1-13). (The issue here was God equipping David to rule in His name and power as His royal "son," not David's personal salvation as so many assume. If that were the meaning, then Saul "lost his salvation" when the Spirit was taken from him (16:14).)
 - a. Samuel's anointing transferred the kingship to David, but this led to a long season of persecution and suffering. Saul continued to rule Israel and many years passed before David's anointing was fulfilled and he was crowned king (ref. 1 Samuel 17-31). Even then, David's kingship came about in stages. It began with the tribe of Judah, only later encompassing all Israel after a long war between his house and Saul's. But as it was with Judah, David's own tribe, so it was with Israel: David established his rule over the whole house of Israel, not by military victory, but by the conquest of love; he won the hearts of the people (2 Samuel 1:1-5:3).

- b. From that point forward David continued to enlarge the Israelite kingdom, fighting wars against enemies both within Canaan and outside of it. Yahweh had promised Abraham dominion over all the land “from the Euphrates River to the Great Sea to the river of Egypt” and David was His chosen instrument for accomplishing that task (cf. Genesis 15:18; Exodus 23:31 with 1 Kings 4:21). And, as a pinnacle feat, David finally took the city of Jerusalem, the Jebusite stronghold that had resisted Israelite conquest since the days of Joshua. Afterward, David moved the ark of the Lord’s presence to Jerusalem and installed it in a tent there (2 Samuel 6:1-15). This was an act of monumental historical and prophetic significance: Yahweh’s regal son – acting in the role of priest-king – presided over His enthronement on Mount Zion as Israel’s true King.
3. David recognized that he sat on *Yahweh’s throne* in Jerusalem and he determined to establish that throne in accordance with Moses’ instruction regarding a fixed dwelling place for Yahweh’s “name” (Deuteronomy 12:1-14). David was committed to building a permanent sanctuary for Yahweh on Mount Zion, but not without the approval of the Lord’s prophet. Thus he inquired of Nathan, and that inquiry provided the occasion for the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17) whose key features are as follows:
- a. Rather than David building Him a house, Yahweh declared that He was going to build *David* a house after granting peace and rest to his kingdom (7:9-11). But whereas David sought to build a physical dwelling, Yahweh was promising him a royal dynastic “house”; David was to be the first of a line of kings administering Yahweh’s rule over the kingdom of Israel as His regal “sons.”
 - b. One of those sons would fulfill David’s desire and build Yahweh a permanent dwelling, *but as a man of peace in the context of an established kingdom at rest*. David was disqualified as a man of war – not because of sin or uncleanness (he’d fought the Lord’s battles), *but in view of the prophetic significance of the temple-building act as part of God’s covenant oath* (cf. 7:1, 11-13; 1 Chronicles 28:1-6).
 - c. Moreover, Yahweh promised to establish a unique and enduring father-son relationship with that particular son. That relationship, grounded in the son’s connection to David, the chosen son-king, would sharply contrast the Lord’s relationship with Saul (7:14-15; cf. 1 Chronicles 17:13-14).
 - d. So this enduring relationship would see Yahweh establishing this son’s throne and kingdom forever. In that way, David’s own house, throne and kingdom would endure forever (7:16).

David’s response to the Lord’s covenant promises shows that he understood them to stretch into the distant future (cf. 7:18-19 with 1 Chronicles 17:16-17), yet he also came to see his son Solomon as their immediate referent (cf. 1 Chronicles 28; 2 Chronicles 6:1-11). Solomon, the man of peace, would build Yahweh’s house as His uniquely-beloved son-king sitting on His throne (1 Chronicles 29:23) and ruling over the kingdom covenanted to Abraham (1 Kings 4:20-21).

4. Like all of God's covenants, the covenant with David was *Torah* and so embodied the features of Torah – revelation, instruction, prescription and prophecy.
 - a. The Davidic Covenant further developed God's revelation concerning His purposes for His creation, specifically as those purposes implicate the concepts of kingdom and kingship. God disclosed this regal dimension in the structure of the creation episode (*ordering* and *filling* as forming realms of dominion populated by creaturely rulers) having its apex in man, the image-bearing lord of the creaturely lords. The covenant with Noah reaffirmed this creational order, while the Abrahamic Covenant situated man's intended regal status within a particular covenant line and connected it with a priestly (mediatorial) function. That covenant line expanded in the twelve tribes of Israel whom God constituted a royal priesthood at Sinai and it eventually found an epitomizing example in the person of David, Yahweh's chosen priest-king (cf. Psalm 110; 2 Samuel 6).
 - b. David's distinction as the Lord's chosen ruler – the man after His own heart – points to the prophetic nature of God's covenant with him. David himself recognized that the covenant looked to the future, but his own person and reign were prophetic as well. This is especially apparent in David's priestly ministration as Israel's king. David wasn't a priest under the Law of Moses (the priests were *Levites* and David was of Judah), but he alone among Israel's kings performed a priestly function pleasing to Yahweh (cf. 2 Samuel 6:12-19 with 1 Samuel 13:5-14 and 2 Chronicles 26). Most importantly, David's priestly activity occurred in connection with Yahweh's enthronement on Mount Zion. David's distinction in this regard derived from his typological role: *He prefigured the promised covenant Son in whom the Lord would merge the kingship and priesthood – the messianic priest-king according to the order of Melchizedek; the priest-king through whose ministration Yahweh's house, throne and kingdom were to be established everlastingly* (cf. Psalm 110 with Hebrews 5-7 and Matthew 6:9-15; cf. also Zechariah 6:9-15 with Romans 8:31-34 and Hebrews 10:1-13).
 - c. The messianic orientation of the Davidic Covenant is crucial to understanding its instructive and prescriptive dimensions. Some have argued that this covenant, too, was unconditional, but it clearly imposed obligations on David and the line of kings it promised. This is evident simply from the father-son relationship the covenant established; it required of David and his royal seed that they fulfill their sonship (cf. 1 Kings 2:1-4, 9:1-9). But, as with God's covenant with Abraham, the human obligation imposed by the Davidic Covenant looked ahead to a particular son of David – a son who would fulfill the terms of the covenant as Yahweh's chosen, uniquely-beloved son-king. David and his sons all failed the covenant, but the Lord remained faithful to uphold it in view of the day when He would bring the promised Son of David and Son of Abraham into the world (Matthew 1:1). As enthroned High Priest, that faithful Son and King would build Yahweh's everlasting sanctuary and establish His throne, kingdom and blessing in all the earth. And in that way Yahweh would build David an enduring dynasty and dominion (cf. Psalm 72, 89 with Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12 and Jeremiah 33:14-26).