

1 Chronicles 29:15

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Date: 25 August 2013

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[0 : 00] I'd like to consider with you this evening David's prayer that you find in the chapter we read in 1 Chronicles 29, and especially the words that are there in verse 15.

We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow without hope.

We're here at the end of David's life. He's been king for 40 years, and here we reach the climax of his reign. His life wasn't one of those lives that peaks in middle age and then declines away.

David's spiritual vitality, we're told in Kings his physical vitality had been drained, but his spiritual vitality moved on and peaked here at the very end of his life.

Old though he is, he is still very much alert, and he is still very much concerned for the well-being of his kingdom, the well-being of the cause of God in the land. So he's finalizing the arrangements for turning over his kingdom to his son Solomon, who would succeed him. And in this prayer here, from verse 10 to verse 19, we have the last thanksgiving of a royal life.

[1 : 54] It's a very carefully crafted prayer. It's a very impressive expression, but it particularly gives us insight into the motivation of the king who achieved so much.

The king of whom it was said that he was a man after God's own heart. Here is a glimpse into his thinking, into his inner life at its climax, at its best, at the peak of his spiritual experience.

And he shows us a joyful faith that is based on an unpretentious humility. So that as we study what David reveals of himself, we are challenged as to how we should live, as to how we should perceive ourselves if we too are to seek for the accolade that was given to David, one after God's own heart. So we have here is prayer. And the prayer is in three sections. You can see verses 10 to 13 set out his praise of the Lord. Verses 14 to 16, he describes the dependence and submission of mankind. And then in verses 17 and 19 to 19, he presents his petitions for the future. But running throughout the whole prayer, there is an underlying theme, which is David's grasp of the reality of the kingdom of God.

Here is this outstanding example of a king, one whose rule had brought many a benefit to his nation, one who'd unified it, procured for it success both militarily and economically.

[4 : 00] And he's more than ready to acknowledge. It is the basis of his perception of who he is and what has been going on in his land, that the ultimate authority is not his, but is that of the God whom he serves.

The key to his success was living with an awareness of the rule of God as determining the way in which the affairs of his land and his personal affairs should be attended to. Oh, David was human. David was fallible.

He didn't always live up to this, but he knew what the target was. He strained towards the goal, and here we have this marvelous expression of how he achieved it. Notice, just in passing in verse 23 later on, we're told Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king in place of his father David.

It's not the throne of the king of Israel. It's the throne of the Lord. And not only Solomon sat there acknowledging who the ultimate king was, David had done the same. And that was the secret that led to the success that was enjoyed during their reigns. The Lord was given his true place.

So it's with this awareness of the greater and the higher power of God that David comes and expresses himself.

[5 : 47] And as we look at the prayer, I want to look first of all at the first section, then the last section, and then come back to consider the middle verses. The first section, the sovereign majesty of the Lord.

If you're here this morning, I said enough then about this word praise. It's David, blessed the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly. Blessed are you, O Lord.

It's an expression of adoration that is based on what God has already extended to David. It's an echo of thanksgiving. It's not looking at God in the abstract. It's not just considering praise, adoration as something that is God's due. It is something that is motivated by the realization of all that God has given him.

And if the gifts are so magnificent, what must the giver be like himself? One commentator puts it this way, David ransacks the theological dictionary to find words to describe the majesty and supremacy of his God. Greatness, power, glory, majesty, splendor, exaltation.

Here is a man who is living with an awareness that there is none higher than the Lord God. And David brings together all these words, but he doesn't just use them as a sort of mantra. He doesn't just use them as a whole list of suitable religious sounding words. He justifies their use. He grounds their use. He gives reasons for what he's saying. He's not just using words for the sound effect.

[7 : 51] He's using words because he's grasped the reality. And you see that in verse 11, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. I can use, says David, all these words regarding the Lord God, and I can use them appropriately and fittingly because he is the sovereign possessor of everything.

God's kingly rule derives from his right as creator. And so David is uninhibited in his expressions of praise, of adoration, of thanksgiving. There's one feature that runs throughout his prayer, and that's that he uses the word all ten times. He's speaking exuberantly. He doesn't always come across in English. He's speaking exuberantly because he realizes there's no limits to God's power because he is head over all. Everything, again says the word all, all in heaven and earth is yours.

He can speak in this marvelous way because he has grasped the reality. And that's the challenge to us still. It's all very well using words, God is sovereign. It's all very well saying God is supreme and majestic.

But we've got to translate that into where it impinges on our lives here and now. Am I living as one who has a true and ongoing grasp of that reality? Does it shed light on the way I behave? Does it shed light on the way I live? If we're to have a secure framework for ordering our lives? If we're to have a secure framework for finding our way through the darkness of this world, it can only be achieved as we have an awareness of the character and the supremacy of the God to whom we owe our existence. The God who speaks and orders affairs. And David goes further because he doesn't just say God owns everything as creator, he also presents God as not being heartless or cold. It's possible to say God's sovereign and supreme and end up with a notion of God as being a divine tyrant who comes and imposes standards, who comes and imposes unwelcome burdens on our living, who distorts what is necessary. But David is very much careful, very careful to show that he, God, is the one who's in whose hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. David blesses, praises, returns thanks to his God because his God is the one who does not impose but doesn't so exercise his proprietary rights over what he's created as to impose burdens on his creation.

[11 : 18] He bestows lavishly upon his subjects so that the tribute they bring to him is an expression of thanksgiving for all the gifts he's bestowed on them. And that comes out repeatedly. We've given you only what you've, what has come from your hand. All this abundance is from your hand and all of it belongs to you.

David is speaking as one who is aware that the sovereign God is the one who is unstinted in what he gives.

And that's the challenge too still. So often we are influenced by the world around us. So often we look at possessions in this world and think somehow they're ours. But ultimately they're not.

Basically they're not. David speaks with insight when he acknowledges all comes from the Lord.

The abundance is divinely bestowed. And we have a far healthier spiritual outlook when we realize not simply the sovereignty of God but the fact that the gifts he bestows are his in the first place.

And we are those who merely enjoy their use. Spiritual health for the individual, spiritual health for the people of God collectively, comes from a right view of material possessions as coming from the hand of God as being his and to be returned to him.

[13 : 10] And then we can look at the last section of this prayer where David has two pleas for the future. On the one hand, he looks to the future of the people. He's just seen their extravagant generosity.

And he wants it kept up. But he doesn't speak directly to the people saying, you've given well, keep it up. He speaks to God. Keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever.

The phrase is there, keep this desire, in verse 18. And it's oddly enough, it's exactly the same phrase that you find back in Genesis 6.

In Genesis 6, in the authorized version, it's something like, the imagination of the thoughts of man's heart. When God was looking at the world before the flood, he used this phrase to describe the motivation, to describe the inner inclination of the hearts of mankind, and saw that it was always evil.

Even after the flood in Genesis 8, God uses much the same phrase again, recognizing that there is an inner propensity within each one of us to wander and stray, to go off the path, that there is motivation towards evil.

[15:00] But here is David taking this phrase and using it in a positive way, but positive not as a description of what's been achieved, but in a prayer that God would use his power, his Spirit's influence, so that hearts and lives would not display the inherent tendency towards evil that is the blemish of mankind.

He is looking for inner motivation maintained by divine power. And that's why David is presenting this prayer to God.

Keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you.

It is only as God keeps us that we know spiritual health and strength. And the chronicler was recording this, the author of the book of Chronicles, was recording this version of Israel's history with the specific needs of his own generation in mind.

Chronicles is written when the people of Jerusalem and Judah were under the power of the Persian Empire. After Jerusalem had fallen, after the exile, they're back in the land.

[16:35] It's the Persians who are in control. And the people feel written off. The people feel down and out. They're just a small speck in a vast earthly empire.

And the chronicler is recording this prayer because it's at that very point of pressure. It's at that very time when the world is around and coming in and closer and saying, our ways are successful, why don't you adopt them?

It's at that very point that God's people need to be kept by his power. David had seen it back in his own day, and the chronicler represents David's prayer because it was just what was needed for the people, his original audience.

And it's just what is needed to be at the heart of our prayers still. The Church of God is a small entity in our land now.

It no longer commands respect. It no longer commands hearing. You can... Political correctness demands a hearing for every point of view bar evangelical Christianity.

[17:54] We are a minority. And we are a minority under siege. A minority pressurized to conform to the ways of this world.

And the only way we can avoid it is if our hearts are kept by God. If the desire, the motivation is kept and our loyalty maintained, and we cannot do it in our own strength.

So David's prayer from long ago is a prayer we can still echo. And more than that, David is not just concerned about the spiritual vitality of the people.

He is concerned about the loyalty and devotion of his son. And makes that a matter of prayer too. Give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements, and decrees.

A land, a nation, a political entity needs rulers.

[19:08] And the quality of the ruler has a lot of influence on the conduct of the people. David was not one of those who took the attitude, it doesn't matter what happens after me.

After me the deluge. Not at all. He showed his genuine concern for the cause of God by presenting this prayer for his son Solomon, so that after David's own death, the enterprise, the grand enterprise of building the temple, would be brought through to completion, and the land would continue to enjoy divine blessing.

David makes it a matter of prayer to ask the Lord for wholehearted devotion to be given to Solomon.

Because a grand temple means nothing at all unless the hearts of those who are worshiping there are devoted to the Lord.

David had his priorities right. Even though he'd gathered together such a vast collection of resources to enable the temple to be a grand and imposing structure, he realized still that it wasn't

the outward sight of the temple that mattered.

[20 : 37] It was the state of the hearts of those who gathered there to worship. So we've got the beginning of the prayer, adoration of God.

We've got the end of the prayer, concern for the future, committing it solemnly into God's hands, pleading both for the heart devotion of the people and of the one who would rule them.

And then we've got thirdly that central section, where we're presented with the impermanence of human life and endeavor.

David looks at himself and he asks in self-deprecating fashion, who am I? Who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this?

And then in verse 15, we have these words. We are aliens and strangers in your sight. Our days are like a shadow without hope.

[21 : 51] Somehow at first glance, those words seem rather out of place. They can first of all seem somewhat depressing and gloomy.

We are aliens and strangers. Is that the best David can come up with as a description of himself and Israel? Strangers in your sight without hope?

Is this just an old man speaking in bitterness? It can't be, because we've just seen David acknowledging the greatness of God and David committing to the God who is great, the future of his kingdom and the reign of his son.

Here is David coming with a heartfelt expression of our weakness.

We must pay attention precisely what David's saying, otherwise we would misunderstand it. He's not saying that they're strangers to grace and to God.

[22 : 59] In no way is he trying to say that Israel is different, is no different from the other nations. He calls God, he calls the Lord God of our father Israel.

He calls the Lord in verse 18, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel. He is speaking as one who is within the company of the people of God, and he's looking at their condition.

He's not saying we're strangers to grace and to God. But he is saying that there is something that even those who are God's people have to realize in the world, and he's looking at their lives.

He says that there is something that we are going to do with the world. He says that there is something that we are going to do with the world. Two ways of looking at it. First of all, can I remind you of how John Calvin began his Institutes, that grand work of theology from the Reformation. He began by saying that our wisdom consists of two parts. Our knowledge of God and our knowledge of ourselves. And it's very difficult to tell which of them comes first in our experience, because they're so interlinked.

[24 : 09] We never retain true self-knowledge until we've contemplated the face of God and come down after such contemplation to look at ourselves.

And that, in essence, is what David's done here. The beginning of this prayer, he's got this grand, expansive, exuberant view of God in his majesty, in his total rule over all things.

And then he comes down and says, who am I? What are we? He looks at human frailty, frailty even of the people of God.

He comes and assesses our condition so that he sees the reality that we are. We hide it from ourselves.

We go through life so often with an inflated idea of who we are and where we are going. But if we've seen the reality of who God is, even in a glimpse, even in the smallest of measures, our own feebleness, our own finitude, our own dependence strikes us all the more.

[25 : 23] However, if we have sensed something of the reality of the unchangeable and infinite God, it inevitably gives us a sense of our own unworthiness.

Oh, we see ourselves as unfit. Who are we that we should be able to do all this? Who are we that we should be able to do anything at all? So, David at one level is looking here at humanity, having seen the luster and the glory and the illumination of the light of God.

And as he looks at himself and his nation, he can only see the darkness, the weakness.

But he also uses two words. Aliens and strangers in this translation.

And these two words are actually a quotation of what God himself had said back in Leviticus.

[26 : 36] In Leviticus 25, in amongst all the regulations about the sabbatical year and how land was to be kept in Israel, God had said, the land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you are but, and translations vary, but it's the same two words as is found here, aliens

and strangers with me.

The NIV translates it in Leviticus 25 verse 3, aliens and my tenants. But to get the link, it's aliens and strangers.

And this influenced the thinking of people in Old Testament times. David himself uses it in Psalm 39. I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were.

You find it time and again in the New Testament, in Ephesians, no longer foreigners and aliens. Or in Hebrews chapter 11, they admitted they were aliens and strangers on earth.

Older translations tended to use the word sojourners. But sojourner is not a word that's in the active vocabulary of many people nowadays. But do these words convey to us what the sense they conveyed to David?

[28 : 08] In his day, the alien, the stranger, these two words, described a specific group of people in the land. Not just in Israel, but in all the surrounding nations.

These were technical terms that were used for people who had come from outwith the community. Foreigners from another land and who had settled in a different nation.

The alien, perhaps even a better translation of fuller understanding would be the phrase resident alien. The stranger was a temporary settler. They'd begun life somewhere else.

And whether because of warfare or famine or whatever pressure was on them, they'd come into the land and they didn't have the right to possess property.

They were in the land but not integrated into the community. That was how Abraham found himself at Hebron in Genesis 23.

[29 : 14] That was how Moses found himself in Midian. That was how Elimelech and his family, when they went to Moab at the beginning of the book of Ruth, they were there as aliens and strangers. They had a certain status.

But they did not have full rights of citizenship, of possession, of staying. Often the sojourner, the resident alien, attached himself to an Israelite family and received some measure of protection from them.

But they did not have security in the land. They were vulnerable. And if you read through the Old Testament, you'll find time and again God says to His people, you must take care of the widow of the orphan and the stranger in your midst.

Because these are groups in society who are vulnerable. These are groups who are often exploited and maltreated. These are groups who don't have security in the land.

And when God used the expression to describe the Israelites, He was saying to them, you're my people. I've brought you out of Egypt. I'm giving you the land of promise.

[30 : 32] But don't dare think that you've security in this world. Don't dare think that I am making over this land to you as a permanent possession.

The land is mine and you can think of yourself in no better way than as being my tenants. So the alien, almost the refugee, refugee perhaps is closer to the second term, the term settler, stranger in this verse.

You can think of them as bedraggled, struggling with poverty, with hardship, with oppression, vulnerable to exploitation, not possessing security.

But God transformed those two terms. He didn't just say to Israel, you are going to be aliens and strangers in the land.

He said, you are going to be aliens and strangers with me. And that transformed the situation entirely.

[31 : 40] With me. In this text here, it's in your sight. In Psalm 39, it's with him. What's being said there?

Well, if you ever rented property, I'm sure you know that your enjoyment of the property you've rented depends a lot on the character of the landlord.

Whether repairs are made or whether the place was fit for habitation in the first place. It depends on the character of the landlord. And so, God in speaking to Israel saying, yes, you're passing through. Don't think you've permanent resident rights here. But I am the one who's in control. I am your landlord.

And adding before me or with me adds a totally new dimension to the situation. Yes, our life is like a shadow.

[32 : 44] And it's added without hope. And I don't think you have to understand that as absolutely without hope. It's an expression for our days on earth are like a shadow without hope.

If you just look at our earthly life, you know what's coming at the end. We're all headed to the grave. There is a lack of hope looking at earthly life simply on its own.

But if you're even an alien and a stranger, a sojourner with God, the situation is transformed.

The resident alien is treated properly. He's not exploited. The resident alien has not earthly security, but heavenly security.

Because he knows God is the one who is providing for him here and who is committed to providing for him hereafter. A security that's utterly reliable because it doesn't depend on self.

[33 : 48] It derives from God. So when David in these words is looking at his people and himself and seeing their frailty, yes, it is an acknowledgement of reality as it is, but it is an acknowledgement in faith that looks to the difference it makes in being able to say in your sight, before God, with you.

This sin-ravaged earth, our existence in it, isn't the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is the God who is in heaven, whom have I in the heavens high, but thee, O God alone, and on the earth, whom I desire besides thee, there is none.

So here we have in this central section a realistic appraisal, not a totally negative one, a realistic appraisal of the life of faith under the picture of the tenant of God who enjoys not permanency now, but permanency hereafter, and knowing that is able to devote the resources God makes over to us now in a way that honors and serves him.

So here we have the challenge. How do you see your life? Who is your landlord on earth? Who is providing for you here and now?

And do you see him as providing for you hereafter also? Let us never lose sight of the heavenly dimension of what awaits the people of God.

[35 : 47] Let us pray.