

THE SHEPHERD KING: DIE LIKE A KING

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1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12

I lost a cousin this week. On Monday, my cousin Bryan died after a four-year battle with cancer. His mother and my father were siblings, and Bryan was one of my favorite first cousins. We were close in age. He was just a year older than me. He was also the youngest of three boys. Sadly, our families never lived close to one another. Bryan's father's job at International Paper moved them around. But our families kept in touch and visited at least once a year. I always loved those visits because I didn't have a brother and I got to spend time with three boy cousins.

I remember one winter that my family flew to my cousins' home in Ticonderoga, New York. Ticonderoga is a small town on the shore of Lake George. It's just a bit north of... Canada. We went there just after Christmas in 1969 and got snowed in when a record-breaking blizzard hit the region. I thought it was wonderful. I had never seen so much snow in my life. Actually, I had never seen snow.

My cousins lived at the top of a steep hill which offered excellent opportunities for sledding. They had wooden sleds with steel runners and we would race the sleds down the icy streets of their subdivision. My uncle would meet us at the bottom and drive us back up the hill in his Volkswagen bug for another run. I had never sledded before so Bryan and I rode side-by-side on the same sled with him steering and me screaming.

Bryan was quiet and not the sort of person to raise his voice. He always chose his words carefully. He possessed an extraordinarily dry sense of humor. If you listened to him, you would be rewarded with laughter. Bryan was smart and kind. Everyone liked him. He was a clear, organized thinker and could do whatever he set his mind to. In high school, he decided that he wanted to learn to play the guitar, so he taught himself. I remember watching as he worked at it for hours at a time. As it turned out, he was a talented musician.

Bryan graduated from the University of the South at Sewanee with a major in French. After college he worked at different jobs for a number of years. Eventually, he decided that since he liked to play golf (and was good at it) that he wanted to be a professional golfer. He went to school and became a Golf Pro and then managed several courses around Myrtle Beach.

Sadly, on top of all this, Bryan was an alcoholic. His drinking started in college and continued on. Being a golf pro didn't help as the golf lifestyle is conducive to drinking. After twelve years as a pro, his drinking caught up with him and he lost his job, his money, and his home.

He moved to Atlanta and moved in with his parents. In Atlanta, he entered a recovery program which helped him get back on his feet. He got a job and his own apartment, but the drinking resumed, and Bryan spiraled slowly downward. At one point he pawned his guitar and his golf clubs. Shortly after that, he suffered alcohol poisoning and he had to be taken to the hospital where he nearly died. From there, he entered into a residential rehabilitation program in Atlanta and remained there for three years working toward sobriety. It worked. And when it was determined that he had completed the treatment program, the rehab facility offered him a job as a residential counselor.

Bryan worked as counselor for three more years. He enjoyed the work and he was helping people. He was also rebuilding the damaged relationships with his family. The old Bryan that we knew and loved—my prodigal cousin—had returned.

However, during this time of his sobriety, Bryan was diagnosed with cancer. When it was discovered, it was already Stage IV colon cancer and had spread to his liver. Bryan endured endless rounds of chemo and radiation and surgery. He continued working at the center as long as he could, but earlier this year he had to give it up and move into his brother's house. He remained there until last month when he entered hospice. I drove down two weeks ago to say goodbye.

I've been thinking about Bryan this week as I've been studying our text from 1 Kings. Here we read the story of the death of King David. For eight weeks now, we've been looking at stories from David's life. By no means have we looked at all of them. For example, we skipped the part where David was on the run hiding from a mentally unbalanced and murderous King Saul. We also did not look at the conflict among David's children.

We began this series with the account of David being anointed by the prophet Samuel. At the time, Israel had a king—its first king, King Saul—but Saul displeased the Lord and God commanded Samuel to go and find David and anoint him to become the next king. At the time, David was only a boy. It would be about twenty years before David became king.

In our second sermon, we looked at the wonderful story of David defeating the Philistine champion Goliath using only the tools of a shepherd—a sling and a rock. David was able to face the warrior because of his faith that God was with him.

In the third week, we determined the sort of king that David would be by examining an act of extraordinary compassion. In that story, David restored all the lands of King Saul to Saul's destitute grandson. Here we are reminded why David is known as the shepherd king.

In the fourth week, we read that as king of Israel, David established Jerusalem as capital and brought the Ark of the Covenant from its place in the country to a

new home in Jerusalem. You will recall David's *Dancing With the Stars* moment as he led God's throne into the city. Because of his overwhelming passion for God, he danced like a king before his Lord.

In the fifth week, David proposed constructing temple to house the Ark. He did not think it right that while he slept in a fine palace the ark (and God) languished in a tent. Despite his good intentions, God forbids David from building a house for God and instead announces that it will be God who builds a house for David. This house will not be an edifice, but a dynasty of David's family. All God desires is that God's name be prominent on this "house."

Despite God's anointing and the promise of his kingship, David falters. As you will recall, he takes Bathsheba and murders her husband. The prophet Nathan confronts the king about his transgressions and David repents confessing, *I have sinned against the Lord*. But the damage has been done and David will never recover his actions. He will never again be the great shepherd king of promise.

Today, we conclude this sermon series by looking at the account of David's death. Here, we read that David is now old and close to the end. He calls his son Solomon to come before him—the son who was tapped to take the throne after David. Solomon is the second son of David and Bathsheba. Their first child died in infancy. Solomon is certainly not next in line for the throne. There are other sons ahead of him. But through some royal machinations, Bathsheba convinces David to select her son to be his successor.

As we read today, David brings Solomon before him and charges him. He offers instruction on how Solomon is to live. David tells his son to be strong, to be courageous, and moreover to keep the charge of God.

To charge someone is to give them a particular task. A judge charges a jury with their duties for the trial. Next Sunday, I will participate in the installation of a minister as pastor of a church. Part of the ceremony is to charge the person in his duties as pastor. David charges Solomon to observe and keep the charge that God gave him as king. David then explains how to do this: *Walk in God's way, keep God's statutes, God's commandments, God's ordinances, God's testimonies, all as is found in scripture*. If Solomon does this, he will prosper in all that he does.

David then reveals that if Solomon lives with God always before him, then God's promise to David will be fulfilled—the promise that if David's descendants are faithful to God, then God will continue to allow them to sit on the throne of Israel and David's house will be assured.

My question to you today is this: After we have read all these stories about David, do we still believe that he possesses the legitimacy to give this charge to his son? Does David have the moral compass to direct anyone on how to follow God?

Isn't David giving instruction on God like a bank robber lecturing on obeying the law? It doesn't seem right.

David started off with such great promise. He was singled out by God to rule God's people. As king, David united the twelve tribes and defeated their enemies. He forged a new kingdom and established its capital. His potential had no limits. But he failed to do what he is now charging his own son to do—to walk in God's path. David's fall didn't occur because he took Bathsheba. That was just a by-product of a greater sin. Long before that, David had already placed God in his rearview mirror and driven away leaving God behind. The result was death, betrayal, and violence. Can we really trust David's words?

I have been struggling with this very question as I reach the end of this series on David. But my cousin Bryan's death has offered me a fresh perspective. Bryan started out his life with great potential. He had a strong education and a supportive family. He had numerous talents and the ability to develop those talents. But all that was subsumed under the terrible disease of alcoholism. In treatment, he achieved sobriety and was hired as a counselor to help those seeking their own recovery. Because of his experience, Bryan's words carry weight.

And that is how I choose to look at David's charge to his son. When David says to walk in God's way, he knows what it is like take the wrong path. David can speak with authority on keeping God's commands and on breaking them. His words carry the weight of experience.

It is important for us to remember just how broken David was—how far he fell from grace. And yet, in his final days, his words resonate as he encourages his son to do what he was unable to do, to follow God.

What is most notable for us is that it is out of this very brokenness that God came to us as a savior—Jesus of Nazareth of the house of David. Why David? Couldn't God pick someone perfect, or at least less flawed? But God doesn't demand that we be perfect. God recognizes our sins and meets us there. In Christ, God renews that covenant that God will always be with us even in the depths of our brokenness and will bring us to his house of salvation. This is our Lord who guides us on the right path, who comes after us when we are lost, who heals us when we are broken. This is our God, the true shepherd king. Amen.