

# The Heart of God

*In the seventh part of our series which examines the relevance for today of the message and ministry of the non-writing prophets, Dr Jon Garvey considers the prophetic psalms of David*

**K**ing David does not often appear on the list of Israel's writing prophets. But Peter certainly calls him a prophet in Acts 2:30, as we shall see. And in fact, there are more quotations in the New Testament from the Psalms attributed to David than from any of the other prophets except Isaiah. He is actually the earliest of the writing prophets by three centuries, if we do not count Moses.

Not only was David a prophet - he was the head of a school of prophets. 1 Chr. 25 tells us that David set aside "some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals." All the men of this hereditary guild of prophets were under the supervision of their fathers, and the fathers under the supervision of the king himself. "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets" (1 Cor. 1:33), which indicates that it was not only as their king, but as their senior prophet, that David was overseer of their ministry.

We can read the work of some of these men in the Book of Psalms, and this is also the place where we find David's prophecy. The style and content of his words are very different from the other

prophets. This is because the psalms were written as songs for temple worship, and not mainly for teaching or exhortation. What we know of David's gifting agrees with this - he was a poet, not a preacher.

## *A Prophet and a King*

**B**ut how did David become a prophet? We are used to prophets who confront kings, not kings who preside over prophets. We are not told directly of his call, but it seems likely that the start of his ministry coincided with his anointing by Samuel as king, when "the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power" (1 Sam. 16:13). The cosy idea we sometimes have of the shepherd-boy David writing psalms whilst tending his sheep is unlikely. There are a few psalm-headings which may suggest they were written before David began to reign (eg Ps. 34), but he had already been anointed as king. He may have been a poet and musician from his youth, but it took the anointing of the Spirit to make him a mouthpiece for God.

And yet anointed kingship alone did not make him a prophet, either. Of the kings who were descended from him only his son Solomon was a prophet, and though he wrote many proverbs, Solomon only wrote one psalm. What was so special

about David? To answer that, we must look at the content of his prophecy.

You could argue that every psalm is prophetic, because all were inspired by the Spirit and included in the canon of Scripture. But it will be more useful here to distinguish "prayer" from "prophecy" and look at those parts of David's psalms which specifically declare God's will and foretell his future acts. If we do this, we find that David's prophecy has two particular emphases.

## *Prophetic Themes*

**H**is first theme is *the righteous and the wicked*, viewed as a king would view them; as the righteous who need to be encouraged, and the wicked who need to be disclosed and weeded out of the kingdom if the king is to rule well. Examples of this are Ps. 5:9-10, quoted in Romans, where David calls on God to banish the wicked; and Ps. 12:5, God's own oracle to a discouraged king declaring that he himself will protect the weak and needy from those who malign them.

His second theme is *the king himself*, and in particular the descendant whom God promised would inherit his throne forever. God had made this promise to David by the prophet Nathan: "I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your

own body, ... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever” (2 Sam. 7). This is the promise, or covenant, on which depends the whole concept of Jesus as the Messiah, or Anointed One.

Peter in Acts 2:30 says that David “knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.” This refers to Ps. 16:8-11, which Peter had already quoted to the Pentecost crowd. The apostle gives us a picture of David, trusting fully in God’s promise, being enabled by the Spirit to see something of how it would be fulfilled in Jesus. How far he understood what he was seeing, and how far it was unconscious, we perhaps cannot know.

### *King of Kings*

**S**ome psalms, like Ps. 110, seem to have been written for use on royal ceremonial occasions, such as a coronation, that is they concern David himself and later kings as well. And yet they include things which could never apply personally to any human king, as Jesus pointed out (Matt. 22:41-46), for David calls the king “my Lord” (v1) and “a priest for ever” (v4). Other psalms, like Ps. 22, were personal prayers which, in the light of the events of Jesus’s life, astound us with their accurate prediction of his sufferings. It

is almost as if David himself, half consciously and half unconsciously, were living out the life of the coming King.

This is perhaps the best way to look at David’s prophetic gift. Unlike the other prophets, he was not just a chosen watchman, but himself a central figure in God’s salvation plan. He was the first of the royal line that would lead to Jesus. He was what the Bible calls a “type” of Christ, just as the Passover was a type of his Passion, and the temple a type of his Church. Like King Jesus, King David rescued his people from their enemies, ruled them with justice and compassion, and led them in their worship of God. His victories foreshadowed Christ’s victory. His sufferings exemplified those of the One who was to come. Israel looked back at the golden age of David as a model of the eternal reign of “David’s greater Son”.

### *Understanding the Heart of Christ*

**N**o man before or since David has ever understood better the mind and heart of Jesus. The very nature of his role as Israel’s archetypal king, a “man after God’s own heart”, led to so many comparisons with the life of his promised successor. Then again God’s providence created more parallels, such as his persecution by evil men and his betrayal by close friends. We see these reflected in David’s prayers, prayers from

the depths of a godly heart. If we add to that a spirit guided by prophetic insight to see what his descendant’s reign would bring, then we can see that David’s prophecy gives us a unique view of our Lord.

We might almost say that if you want to know what Jesus has done, you must read the gospels; but if you want to understand his heart, you must read the Psalms. This, above all, is David’s prophetic word to the people of God today.

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