

## Searching for a Heart of Gold

Sixties' musical icon Neil Young wrote, "I've been to Redwood I've been to Hollywood, I've been a miner for a heart of gold. Its such a fine line that keeps me searching for a heart of gold... and I'm growing old." The song could be the title of David's story in the Bible, "*Searching for a heart of gold.*" As the song implies, such hearts are not so easy to find. The prophet Samuel certainly found that to be true. As Samuel was growing old the people started to cry out for a king. They appreciated Samuel's leadership but did not look forward to being led by Samuel's sons who were evil and corrupt. The Israelites feared the ever-present threat of the nations all around them. Israel wanted what every other nation had, a king! Samuel is hurt by their request. He feels it's a personal rejection of him. But God explains to Samuel, its not you, its me they're rejecting. You're not the one who has protected them these years, I am. They've mistakenly attributed their peace and prosperity to human leadership rather than divine providence.

God tells Samuel to warn the people of the danger in putting their trust in a king. Trusting people to provide what only God can provide eventually brings curses not blessings into your life. Israel's answer is revealing. *The people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead*

*us and to go out before us and fight our battles" (1Samuel 8:19-20).*

So God says to Samuel, "Give them a king." Samuel selects a man named Saul. It was a popular choice. Saul was exactly what the people wanted. He was an impressive young man without equal among Israel, a head taller than everyone else (9:2). Israel recruited kings like Auburn's legendary coach Shrug Jordan recruited football players. Jordan once had a conversation with his recruitment coach.

*I need you to recruit a player for me?*

*Sure coach, what kind of player are you looking for?*

*Well, you know that player that you knock down and he stays down?*

*We don't want him, do we coach?*

*No, that's right. You know the fellow you knock him down and he gets back up.*

*Yes sir. That's the player we want.*

*No, no I don't want that player. You know that fellow you knock him down, he gets up, knock him down, he gets up, knock him down, he gets up...*

*I get it coach. That's the guy we want isn't it coach?*

*No, we don't want him either. I want you to find that guy that's knocking everybody down!*

Israel wanted a king that could knock all the other kings down. Physically, Saul appeared to be the perfect choice. Saul was 32 years old when he is chosen and he will reign for 40 years. Everything on the outside looked good. Saul is impressive. He is victorious. But what about his heart? Gradually the scriptures reveal Saul had heart problems. It is most

evident when Saul fails to totally annihilate the Amelekites as God commanded him (1 Sam 15). He was supposed to kill all the *men, women, children, infants, cattle, sheep, camel and donkeys...* When Samuel comes around the conversation goes something like this.

*Saul: Bless you Samuel. I've carried out the Lord's instructions.*

*Samuel: What is that bleating I hear?*

*Saul: Oh that. Well the soldiers wanted to keep the best of the cattle. But we totally destroyed everything else.*

*Samuel: Why did you not obey?*

*Saul: I did obey! We destroyed everything but the King and the best of his animals to offer sacrifices to the Lord.*

*Samuel: Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifice? Obedience is better than sacrifice."*

In that moment of disobedience and lying to the Lord, Saul forfeited his anointing. He would remain king externally in the eyes of the people for many more years, but in the eyes of God he was rejected. And God sends Samuel to search for another man to anoint king. This time it would not be the "people's choice" using the people's standard, but God's choice and God's standard. Samuel went searching for *a heart of gold*.

Samuel goes to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse. Jesse is surprised but excited and quickly gathers his sons for Samuel to inspect. David is not only not the people's choice, he's not even his own family's choice. He is so unlikely a candidate that David is not even brought to the city out of the

fields. He is the youngest of 8 brothers and has been given the least important job in the family, taking care of the sheep.

First Jesse parades his firstborn, Eliab... Samuel says No. Then Abinidab. Again Samuel says No. Then Shamah.... Once again Samuel says No. And on they go marching through all of Jesse's impressive sons. No, No, No! When Jesse's parade is finally over a conversation something like this follows.

*Is that all?*

*Well, no. I do have another boy, but you don't want to look at him?*

*Why not?*

*Well he's not a good choice. He's young. He's inexperienced. He's immature. He's just a kid. He wouldn't be a very good representative of the family or the tribe.*

*Really?*

*Oh yes. You need a man the people can rally around. A man the people will go to war with and die with. You need a man with strength and courage and power and ability.*

*You mean someone impressive.*

*Yes, That's right.*

*Who might stand a head taller than everyone else.*

*Now you've got it. Someone who looks like a king!*

*Sorry, the Lord already tried that. He's not looking for muscle. He's not looking for accomplishments. He's not looking for eloquence or intelligence or someone popular. He's looking for a heart!*

*Eliab. Go fetch Davy.*

When Davey arrives Samuel's heart jumps inside him as God reveals to him, this is the man I'm looking for, or better, this is the heart I've been

searching for. What a remarkable moment in that little town of Bethlehem. It would be another thousand years before Bethlehem would be this surprised by God's choice for a King. There, standing in the middle of the crowd, head and shoulders *below* everyone, was David, the least likely, David the overlooked, David the lesser. David, God's anointed choice to be King. As it turns out, David was an impressive kid, strong enough to protect his sheep from wild animals, intelligent, creative, musical. But none of those abilities would be of any use to God without the crucial thing, his heart. There was no doubting that all of David's heart belonged to God. But David's heart was not yet all God wanted it to be.

The road from Bethlehem shepherd to Jerusalem king would be, to quote another sixties tune, a long and winding road. This devoted shepherd soon became a popular young hero in Israel, defeating Goliath and a successful military captain in Israel, slaying his tens of thousands, so sang the popular folk songs of Israel. But apparently for David's heart to be shaped into the kind of heart God needed to do the kind of work God wanted, David would have to become a hunted fugitive for 10 years. Fleeing King Saul's insanely jealous obsession to kill David, like Moses before him and Messiah after him, David would have to endure a time of testing, a time of disciplining, in the wilderness.

During this troubled time David develops a remarkable relationship

with God. Scripture says whenever David needed to make an important decision, he *inquired of the Lord*. The inquiry began with the statement, “Bring the Ephod” which was a strange set of stones that somehow displayed God’s will. Through this mysterious ritual David apparently received direct guidance from God. In the wilderness David develops a trust in God’s wisdom and might rather than in his own. He demonstrates that trust twice when he spares Saul’s life when he could just as easily have killed him. God is fashioning in David the heart he wants in a king.

But ten years of God’s discipline in the wilderness takes its toll, living constantly on the run, fleeing for his life almost daily, managing the responsibility of the growing number who come to the wilderness to follow him (400 men not counting their families). Some of the psalms he wrote during these days indicate a troubled soul, like Psalm 10, *Why O Lord, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?* Like Psalm 22, *My God my God, why have you forsaken me?* Perhaps most poignant of all is Psalm 13. *How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?*

True, each of these psalms end with words that proclaim trust in God’s eventual faithfulness, but we should not skip to the end too quickly. We will not appreciate the faith David ends his Psalms with if we don’t

appreciate the fears he begins them with. In fact, it appears David, for a time, lost his heart, his faith. He devises a plan, he makes a decision, without asking for someone to *bring him the Ephod*. Instead, 1 Samuel 27:1 says, *David thought to himself. One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me and I will slip out of his hand.*”

Many bible scholars believe this is a crisis in David’s faith. The burden has become too great and essentially he runs away. David seeks relief from the constant pressure. Tired of waiting, tired of the discipline, tired of the daily battle he seeks a refuge other than God. He asks Achish, the King of the Philistines, for permission to move all the people under his care into the Philistine city of Ziklag. There are some Israelites living there, but it is the Philistine king who rules there.

Other scholars believe David’s hiding among the Philistines is a shrewd military strategy. Maybe, but does God really desire to hear David call Achish, the Philistine king, Lord? This David seems more than a stone’s throw away from the boy who slew the Philistine giant. Is David being strategic or schizophrenic? Has David forgotten who he really is? There’s a story of a southern woman during the Civil War who stood defiantly with broom in hand confronting the Union General Sherman’s army. She said with pride, *I know I can’t win. I just want everyone to know*

*whose side I'm on!* David should be yearning to build Zion, the city of God. Instead he is settling to dwell in Ziklag, the city of the Philistines.

Whatever his motivations, the decision leads to one horror after another. To provide for his people David plunders various tribes in the region. To gain the confidence of King Achish, he murders every man, woman and child. Is this really what God wants David to be doing, massacring villages? Is this life really better than when he was fleeing from Saul? David's decision leads to an ironic dilemma. Achish asks him to go with him into battle against Saul. David, who refused to kill God's anointed king before, is now conscripted to go to war against him, and his closest friend Johnathan! By God's grace, he is prevented from having to do this because the Philistine soldiers did not yet trust David enough to fight beside him.

Then comes the greatest horror of all. One day as he returns from fighting he sees smoke and the ashes of what was once his Philistine home. Just as he had done to so many families, now it is his women, his children that are gone. Scripture says, *David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep.* David's men become mutinous, murmurings of stoning David move through the men. Is this all part of God and David's ingenious plan? I doubt it. Isn't it more likely the result of resisting God's plan, seeking escape, relief, refuge on his own. How sad. The anointed

future king has become the avenging fierce killer, standing in the burned ruins of a foreign home with his loyal men angry, ready to kill him!

It is here in the story we see the genius of the grace of God. God has not stopped working on David. He is still fashioning David's heart. When we are at our lowest, God is at his greatest. Only when we reach the end of our rope are we able to fall into the hands of God. That is what faith is. It is coming to the place where we understand our only hope is God. Faith is not an accomplishment, it is an acknowledgement of failure and the need to surrender to another. David is ready now, perhaps more than ever before, to surrender to God, to give God his heart.

David's story is our story, every believer's story. We all get tired of the daily battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. We all want to escape, go to some peaceful place, safe from harm. We try to escape the pressure by numbing our lives with pleasure, by surrounding ourselves with people who give permission to lower our standards. We just want to live somewhere where there isn't a constant war going on. But there is no such place. Our adversary doesn't get tired. Peter says he is *a roaring lion constantly looking around for someone to devour*. (1 Pet 5:8) Paul tell us, *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world, spiritual forces of evil* (Ephesians 6).

Running away feels good for awhile, but one day we look up. We see

our lives have changed, we've become uglier, meaner, more selfish. Our holiness compromised, we're no longer offended by our sin. We may even find ourselves marching with the enemy, opposing God's people. Then, as we run away from the battle, we look around and see we're losing our family, one by one they're captured by the enemy while we weren't watching. One day we stop, look at ourselves, standing in the ruins of our life, weeping, surrounded by people equally disappointed and disillusioned. Why? Because the daily discipline of the Lord, the daily battle with the enemy seemed too much. It seemed easier to run away.

But there is no place we can run where there is no battle. The answer is not to run away, but to run, like you have never run, back home to God. And that's what David does. *David was greatly distressed, but David found strength in the Lord...* David cries out, *"Bring me the ephod!* And once again *"David inquires of the Lord"* (1 Samuel 30: 6,7). *Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?* And once again he hears God clearly. *Go get them David.* And does he ever. Exhausted, starving, every muscle aching from the grind of their journey and the grief of their loss, they haul off to capture the Amalekites who have captured their families. David and his mighty men defeat them not losing a single soldier recovering everything the Amalekites had taken, his flocks, his friends, his family, his faith.

Some call David the Old Testament version of the Prodigal Son.

David came to himself. At his lowest he found God again. That may be the place we best find God. Only when we lose confidence in our own strength, our wisdom, our goodness can we fully trust in the strength, wisdom and goodness of God. David learned in that moment of failure what Paul would write 1000 years later. *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

God took David away from the pasture, away from the palace, into the wilderness. He took away his marriage, his mentor, his closest friend. He took away every refuge to rely on instead of God. In response David runs away. God wants to exalt David, David wants to escape God. God wants to prepare David to do battle with the enemy. David's wants to persuade the enemy to let him hide among them. God's plan is to train David; David's plan is just a train wreck.

But there, lying in the wreckage, broken and humble, David is ready to turn back to God, to come home. Now, broken-hearted, David finally has the heart to be a King. There is an old Jewish saying. *God places wisdom upon the heart, but wisdom cannot enter the heart until the heart is broken.* In the same way God would make us fit to be children of the King. Our training, our discipline is daily. The battle never ends. There are times we're so tired we want to run away. There are times we are tempted to lose our zeal for Zion and settle for Ziklag. But we must not forget. *We were not*

*made for Ziklag. We were made for Zion.*

Over the next 50 years, like Saul, David makes mistakes, commits terrible sins. Like Saul, He struggles to do the right thing; often makes the wrong choice. But there is one big difference between David and Saul, the heart. Saul's heart is hardened by his choices. He chooses to sacrifice rather than obey; he chooses to blame rather than be shamed; he chooses to defend himself rather than ask for mercy and when he could no longer deny his sin, he chooses to save face rather than look into the face of God. How different from the heart of David,

David goes on to become a great man: a great soldier, a great king, a great statesmen and diplomat, a great poet and musician; he designed the temple and raised money for its construction, brought renewal to the worship of Israel with his temple musicians and his beautiful worship hymns. But in the eyes of God he was not great because he did all these things, rather God did all these great things through David because despite his flaws, despite his failures, despite his sins, he never lost his heart for God.

God does not demand we be great husbands or wives; great parents or children; great students or athletes or or scholars or businessmen; he is not impressed by our good deeds, our church attendance, our bible reading, our generosity. These are not unimportant. It is good and right that we strive to improve in such areas, but these are all external things. The Lord is

searching for hearts, or as Samuel put it, *The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, the Lord looks at the heart.* How is yours this morning?