The Shepherd’s Throne

The Rise and Ruin of David, King of Israel

Solomon Kpou

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Life Reclaimed Publishing

The Shepherd's Throne: The Rise and Ruin of David, King of Israel

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Some scenes in this book imaginatively reconstruct details that Scripture does not record. These are signalled in the text. Illustrations described as composite or hypothetical are not accounts of real people. Where real events and people are described, sources are given in the footnotes.

This book contains discussion of violence, abuse of power and sexual assault, particularly in Chapters 11 and 13. It does not describe these in graphic detail. A list of support services appears at the back of the book.

Dedication

To my six children, Georgina, Christina, Giftens, Bruce, David and Eliana. You are gifts from the Lord, and being your father is one of the greatest honours of my life. May you love God with your whole hearts and walk with Him all your days.

And to every young person who has ever felt overlooked, like the youngest son left out in Jesse's field while his brothers stood before the prophet: you are not forgotten. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart (see 1 Samuel 16:7), and He knows exactly where to find you.

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Preface

> For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.
>
> Romans 15:4

Few lives in Scripture are told as fully as the life of David. We meet him as a boy keeping sheep in the hills around Bethlehem, and we leave him as an old king on his deathbed in Jerusalem. In between, we see almost everything a human life can hold: courage and fear, friendship and betrayal, worship and rebellion, triumph and devastating loss. David's story is not only the story of a great king. It is the story of the human heart standing before a faithful God.

When God took David from the sheepfolds, He did not take the shepherd out of him. He made him king so that he would shepherd His people (see Psalm 78:70–71). A shepherd's throne exists for the flock. Its power is given to feed, guard and carry, not to take. Some days David sat on that throne as a true shepherd. Other days he forgot what it was for, and people he was meant to protect paid for it.

I have tried to follow the Bible's honesty. When we come to Bathsheba and Uriah, and later to the terrible wrong done to Tamar, I have named abuse of power and sexual violence for what they are: sin and injustice. There is no graphic detail, and I never place blame on those who were wronged.

I have written as a pastor, a husband and a father, not as someone who has mastered these lessons. David's story has searched me as I have written it, and I expect it will search you too. Read slowly, with your Bible open beside this book. And above all, look beyond David to the One he points to. In Him, every broken story can still find hope.

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Introduction: Two Kinds of Throne

> And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will."
>
> Acts 13:22

A Broken Stone at Tel Dan

In July 1993, at the foot of Mount Hermon in the far north of Israel, a member of an archaeological team was working near the ancient gate of Tel Dan. Her name was Gila Cook, and she was part of the excavation led by the veteran archaeologist Avraham Biran. Built into a later wall was a piece of dark basalt, broken on every side, with lines of writing cut into its face.[1]

The writing was Old Aramaic, the language of Israel's northern neighbour, Aram-Damascus. When the fragment and two smaller pieces found later were pieced together and read, they turned out to be part of a victory monument from the ninth century before Christ. Its author, most scholars believe, was Hazael, king of Aram, the same Hazael whose name appears in the books of Kings (see 2 Kings 8:7–15). Like most royal monuments of the ancient world, it was a boast. The king claimed to have defeated the king of Israel and a king of a dynasty written in the stone as *bytdwd*.

Most specialists read those letters as "House of David".[2] A few scholars have questioned the reading, but the majority view is clear. If they are right, this broken stone, now on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, holds the earliest known mention of David outside the Bible. A little more than a century after his death, an enemy king who had no interest in honouring him still knew the royal house of Judah by David's name.

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[1] Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan", *Israel Exploration Journal* 43, no. 2–3 (1993): 81–98; and "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment", *Israel Exploration Journal* 45, no. 1 (1995): 1–18. The circumstances of the find, including Gila Cook's role, are widely reported in summaries of the excavation.

[2] The reading "House of David" is held by most scholars. A minority have proposed alternative readings, noting, for example, the absence of a word divider between *byt* and *dwd*. The attribution to Hazael is the majority view; the surviving text does not preserve the author's name.

There is something fitting about that. The world outside Israel remembered David the way the world remembers powerful men: as the founder of a dynasty, a name on a royal house, a rival worth defeating and boasting about. But that is not the first way Scripture remembers him. When the Bible looks back on David, it keeps returning to a field.

> He also chose David His servant,
> And took him from the sheepfolds;
> From following the ewes that had young He brought him,
> To shepherd Jacob His people,
> And Israel His inheritance.
>
> Psalm 78:70–71

An enemy carved "House of David". God said, "I took you from the sheepfold" (2 Samuel 7:8). The difference between those two memories is the subject of this book.

A Nation That Wanted a King

To understand David, we need to understand the moment into which he was born.

For generations after entering the promised land, Israel had no king. The people were led by judges, men and women God raised up in times of crisis. The book of Judges ends with a sobering refrain: in those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes (see Judges 21:25). Those final chapters are some of the darkest in the Bible, full of idolatry, civil war and violence against women. A reader finishing Judges might reasonably think that a king would solve everything.

The last of the great judges was Samuel, a prophet who had heard God's voice as a boy in the tabernacle at Shiloh. When Samuel grew old and his sons turned out to be corrupt, the elders of Israel came to him with a demand.

> Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."
>
> 1 Samuel 8:19–20

Notice the heart of their request: *that we also may be like all the nations*. Israel had been called to be different, a people whose true King was the LORD. Now they wanted security on the world's terms. God told Samuel that the people had not rejected him; they had rejected God from reigning over them (see 1 Samuel 8:7). And even so, God gave them what they asked for.

The man chosen was Saul, son of Kish, from the tribe of Benjamin. On the outside, he looked like everything a king should be. Scripture tells us he was a handsome young man, and taller from his shoulders upward than any of the people (see 1 Samuel 9:2). At the beginning he was even humble. On the day he was to be presented to the nation, he was found hiding among the equipment (see 1 Samuel 10:22).

But Saul's heart was not steady before God. In 1 Samuel 13, under pressure from the Philistines and with his army slipping away, he grew impatient waiting for Samuel and offered the burnt offering himself. Samuel's response was devastating:

> But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.
>
> 1 Samuel 13:14

Two chapters later, Saul was told to carry out God's judgement on the Amalekites. He kept back the best of the spoil and spared their king. When he was confronted, he made excuses and blamed the people. Samuel's words still ring out for every generation:

> Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
> And to heed than the fat of rams.
>
> 1 Samuel 15:22

So this is the world David steps into. A nation that wanted a king like everyone else's. A king who looked impressive but would not obey. A prophet grieving over what had been lost. And Philistine armies pressing in on the borders.

Two Kinds of Throne

There is a passage in 1 Samuel 8 that is easy to read quickly and hard to forget once you have noticed it. Before God gave Israel its king, He told

Samuel to warn the people what kind of king they were asking for. Samuel stood before them and described the rights of a king "like all the nations". Listen to the verb he keeps coming back to.

He will take your sons and make them run before his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields, your vineyards and your olive groves and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage. He will take your male and female servants, your finest young men and your donkeys and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants (see 1 Samuel 8:11–17).

He will take. Again and again, Samuel says it. That is what thrones usually do. A throne is the place where power gathers, and power, left to itself, takes. It takes land and labour, sons and daughters, a tenth of everything and then more. The king the nations knew was a king who lived off his people.

Now set beside that warning a very different picture of a ruler, also from the Old Testament. When the prophet Ezekiel looked back over centuries of failed kings, he heard God say this:

> Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?
>
> Ezekiel 34:2

A shepherd is the opposite of a taker. He leads the flock to grass and water. He goes out after the one that strays. He binds up the injured one and carries the weak. He puts his own body between the sheep and the lion. His authority over the flock is real, but it exists for the flock. When the tribes of Israel finally came to David to make him king, this is how they described his calling: "You shall shepherd My people Israel, and be ruler over Israel" (2 Samuel 5:2). Shepherding came first.

Here, then, are two kinds of throne. One is the throne of the king who takes. The other is the shepherd's throne, where power is held for the sake of the people under it. David was called to the second. The story of his life is, in large part, the story of whether he would sit on it as a shepherd or slide into the habits of the king who takes.

I will not spoil the story, but I will tell you to watch the verbs. In the darkest chapter of David's life, Scripture says, "Then David sent

messengers, and took her" (2 Samuel 11:4). And when God sent a prophet to confront him, the prophet told a story about a rich man who "took the poor man's lamb" (2 Samuel 12:4). The shepherd had become the taker. That is the hinge of the whole book.

Keep this lens in your hands as you read. In almost every chapter, you can ask one simple question of David, and of yourself: *in this moment, is he shepherding, or is he taking?* The question applies to a king in Jerusalem. It applies just as much to a parent at the dinner table, a pastor in a church office, a manager in a meeting, a youth worker with a young person in their care, or anyone who has been given even a small measure of power over someone else.

How to Read a Flawed Hero

How should we read the story of a man who was both so faithful and so deeply flawed?

First, we must let the Bible tell the story its own way. Scripture is remarkably restrained. It often tells us what people did without telling us everything they felt or intended. In the chapters ahead I will paint scenes with some colour, and where Scripture is silent, I will picture what it leaves out. When I do, I will use words like "picture" or "imagine", or tell you plainly that a passage is an imaginative reconstruction, so that you always know where the biblical text ends and my picture begins. I will try not to put words in anyone's mouth that the Bible does not give. Ages, distances and dates can often only be estimated, and I will say so.

Second, we must not excuse David's sin because we admire his faith. A great deal of harm in churches and families has come from people so impressed by a leader's gifts that they would not name his wrongs. When David sins, God sends Nathan the prophet to confront him face to face. If God refused to cover up David's sin, then we must never cover up sin in the name of protecting a reputation.

Third, we must not dismiss David's faith because we see his sin. His psalms of trust were real. His love for God's presence was real. His repentance was real. Psalm 51 is not the prayer of a man trying to manage his image. It is the cry of a man who has been undone before God:

> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
> A broken and a contrite heart—
> These, O God, You will not despise.
>
> Psalm 51:17

This is the key to understanding why David was called a man after God's own heart. It was not because he was sinless. It was because, at his best and even after his worst, his heart turned towards God. When Saul was confronted, he made excuses. When David was confronted, he said, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). That difference changed everything.

Fourth, we must remember that forgiveness and consequences are not the same thing. God forgave David, and yet the sword did not depart from his house. That is exactly why the last years of David's life are so hard to read. They show us that grace is real and sin is costly, and that both truths stand together.

Fifth, we must read David's story as a mirror. It is easy to sit in judgement on an ancient king. It is much harder to ask where pride, lust, anger, passivity or self-deception might be taking root in us.

Finally, a word about what kind of book this is. It is not a commentary, and I have not tried to answer every question that scholars ask about 1 and 2 Samuel. Where there are real debates, about the text, about history or about how to interpret a passage, I will tell you briefly and point you to the footnotes. My aim is to help you know the story well, see how it speaks to life today, and above all see the One it points to.

The Son of David

That brings us to the most important thing of all.

David's story does not end with David. God promised him that his house and his kingdom would be established forever, and that his throne would endure (see 2 Samuel 7:16). As David's descendants failed one after another, God's people began looking for a coming King from his line, a King who would reign in righteousness and never fall. Ezekiel heard God promise one shepherd over His people, "My servant David" (Ezekiel 34:23), long after David himself had died.

The New Testament opens with that hope fulfilled:

> The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.
>
> Matthew 1:1

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Blind men and a desperate mother cried out to Him as the Son of David. The angel Gabriel told Mary that the Lord God would give her Son the throne of His father David (see Luke 1:32). Jesus called Himself the good shepherd who gives His life for the sheep (see John 10:11). And at the very end of the Bible, John is shown a throne, and in the middle of it, not a conqueror but a Lamb who had been slain. Then he hears this promise about the people of God:

> for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
>
> Revelation 7:17

That is the shepherd's throne at last. Here is the wonder of it. David was a shepherd raised to a throne, and he failed his flock in ways that cost them dearly. Jesus is the King who became a Shepherd, and He laid down His life for His sheep. David used his power to take a life and cover his sin. Jesus gave His own life to cover ours. David took a lamb that was not his. Jesus is the Lamb who gave Himself.

So as we follow David from the sheepfold to the throne, from the cave to the palace, and from the rooftop to the place of repentance, keep watching for the greater Son of David. Every victory points forward to His. Every failure shows us how much we need Him. And every moment of grace in David's life is a glimpse of the grace that is now offered to you and me in Christ.

How to Use This Book

This book is arranged in five parts that follow the shape of David's life.

Part One: The Sheepfold follows David's anointing, his first service in Saul's court and his victory over Goliath. These chapters are about formation: what God does in hidden places before He shows anyone to the world.

Part Two: The Wilderness follows the long years when Saul hunted him. These chapters are about testing: envy, friendship, failure, refuge,

and the constant temptation to take by force what God has promised to give.

Part Three: The Throne follows David's rise to power over all Israel, the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem and God's covenant with David. These chapters show the shepherd's throne at its best.

Part Four: The Rooftop tells the story of Bathsheba and Uriah, and of Nathan's confrontation and David's repentance. It is the turning point of his life.

Part Five: The Broken House follows the consequences in David's family and kingdom, through Tamar and Absalom to David's last years and his death.

The **Conclusion** looks at what David's life means, and at the King who sits on the shepherd's throne forever.

Each chapter includes the biblical narrative, short *Behind the Text* sections with background information, teaching and practical application, a section that traces the line to Christ, questions for reflection and a closing prayer. Some chapters include a section called *Through a Justice Lens*, and four include *A Story for Today*, a short present-day story. These stories are composites. They draw on the kinds of situations people in ministry often meet, but the names and details are invented, none of them describes a real person, and each one is marked so that you know. If you are reading with a group, Appendix E offers a fifteen-week guide.

Read with your Bible open. Read slowly. And let us begin where God began: in a field outside Bethlehem, with a boy nobody counted.

Part One: The Sheepfold

Chapter 1: The Boy Nobody Counted

> For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.
>
> 1 Samuel 16:7

An Old Prophet in Mourning

The story of David does not begin with David. It begins with an old man in mourning.

Samuel had given his life to Israel. He had been dedicated to the LORD as a small child. He had grown up in the shadow of the tabernacle at Shiloh, and he had heard the voice of God in the night when the word of the LORD was rare. He had judged the nation and prayed for the nation. And when the people demanded a king like the other nations, he had anointed the tall son of Kish. Saul had looked the part. And Saul had failed. God had rejected him from being king.

Now Samuel grieved. The last verse of 1 Samuel 15 tells us that he went no more to see Saul until the day of his death, and yet he mourned for him (see 1 Samuel 15:35). Picture an old prophet sitting in his house at Ramah, his shoulders heavy, going over old conversations and wondering what might have been. It is a strange and tender detail for the Bible to give us. The man of God was mourning a man God had already set aside.

Into that grief the LORD spoke.

> Now the LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons.”
>
> 1 Samuel 16:1

Notice the phrase *I have provided Myself a king*. The first king had been the people’s request. This one would be God’s provision. Samuel was not being sent to hold auditions. He was being sent to find someone God had already chosen.

There is grace in the way God speaks here. He does not rebuke Samuel for grieving. He simply tells him that grief cannot be the place where he lives. There is a time to mourn what has been lost, and there is a time to fill your horn with oil and go, because God is not finished. Many of us need to hear that. We can grieve a failed leader, a broken church or a family that did not turn out the way we hoped, and that grief is real. But God is already providing what comes next, and at some point He calls us to get up and walk towards it.

Samuel was afraid, and he said so plainly: “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me” (1 Samuel 16:2). The road from Ramah south to Bethlehem was not long, perhaps a day or two of walking. But it ran through the land of a king who would not tolerate a rival. God did not scold His servant for his fear. He gave him instructions. Take a heifer. Go to offer a sacrifice. Invite Jesse. I will show you what to do.

So the old prophet set out. Picture him on the road: the heifer plodding beside him, the horn of oil wrapped up and carried carefully, the hills of Judah folding one into another, terraced with olive trees and vines and dotted with flocks. Bethlehem was a small town, not a royal city. Nobody expected anything from Bethlehem.

When Samuel arrived, the elders of the town trembled at his coming. A visit from the prophet was not always good news. “Do you come peaceably?” they asked, and he answered, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD” (1 Samuel 16:4–5). He told them to consecrate themselves, and he himself consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

Seven Sons and an Empty Seat

Then came the moment that would turn a quiet family gathering into one of the most famous scenes in the Bible.

Jesse’s sons came before Samuel one by one. The first was Eliab, the eldest. We know from later in the story that Eliab was a soldier in Saul’s army, and it seems he carried himself like one. Something leapt inside the old prophet as he looked at him. Surely, Samuel thought, the LORD’s anointed was standing in front of him (see 1 Samuel 16:6).

Stop for a moment and see how human that is. Samuel had walked with God for decades. He had heard the voice of the LORD more clearly than almost anyone alive. And still, when a tall, impressive young man stood

in front of him, his first instinct was to measure him the way the world measures. Perhaps there was even a flicker of Saul in Eliab: the height, the bearing, the look of a leader. Samuel had been impressed by that look once before.

God corrected him immediately.

> But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."
>
> 1 Samuel 16:7

So Eliab stepped aside. Then Jesse called Abinadab, the second son, and Samuel said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one" (1 Samuel 16:8). Then Shammah came, and again the answer was no. One after another the sons of Jesse passed in front of the prophet. Seven sons in all. The awkwardness in the room grew. Picture the father glancing at his boys, the brothers glancing at one another, the elders of Bethlehem wondering what on earth the prophet was looking for. Each one was turned away.

"The LORD has not chosen these," Samuel said at last (1 Samuel 16:10).

Then he asked a question that should never have needed asking.

> And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all the young men here?" Then he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him. For we will not sit down till he comes here."
>
> 1 Samuel 16:11

There remains yet the youngest.

Jesse had been invited to a sacrifice with the prophet of God, and he had brought every son except one. Scripture does not tell us why. Perhaps someone simply had to stay with the flock, and the job fell, as it often did, to the youngest. Perhaps Jesse never imagined that the boy with the sheep could be relevant to anything important. Whatever the reason, the youngest son was not in the room. He had not even been counted.

Samuel refused to sit down. The feast would wait. Everything would wait until the forgotten boy arrived.

Behind the Text: The Youngest and the Smallest

The Hebrew word Jesse uses for "youngest" in 1 Samuel 16:11 is *qatan*. It can mean youngest, but it is also the ordinary word for small, little or least. The same word appears when Saul, at the beginning of his story, protests that his family is the least of all the families of Benjamin (see 1 Samuel 9:21). Jesse's answer could be heard either way, and both fit. David was the last one, the little one, the one out the back with the animals.

Shepherding in the hill country of Judah was real work, and it was often given to younger sons, hired hands or daughters (Rachel kept her father's sheep in Genesis 29:9). Flocks grazed on the hillsides by day and were brought at night into sheepfolds, low enclosures of stacked stones, sometimes built against a cave or a rock face. The shepherd often slept across the entrance. Lions, bears, wolves and thieves were real threats (see 1 Samuel 17:34–35; John 10:10–12). A shepherd boy spent long hours alone, in heat and cold, responsible for animals that could not look after themselves. It was humble work. It was also, as we will see, a school.

Oil in the Midst of His Brothers

A servant or a brother runs out across the fields, calling his name, and David comes in from the hills with the smell of sheep on his clothes and the dust of the pasture on his feet. He was probably a teenager, perhaps younger rather than older. The Bible does not tell us his age. What it does tell us is how he looked, because it goes out of its way to describe him: he was ruddy, with bright eyes, and good-looking (see 1 Samuel 16:12).

There is a gentle irony here. God has just told Samuel not to judge by appearance, and then the text tells us David was good-looking. The point is not that David was plain. The point is that his looks were not the reason. God had already looked past the faces of seven sons into their hearts, and He had looked past David's face too. "Arise, anoint him; for this is the one!" (1 Samuel 16:12).

Picture the scene. The whole family standing around. The elders watching. Eliab, the impressive eldest, now standing to one side. And in the middle, the youngest, perhaps a little breathless, perhaps bewildered. Samuel lifts the horn and pours. The oil runs down through his hair, over

his forehead, into his eyes, onto his shoulders. The fragrance fills the room.

> Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel arose and went to Ramah.
>
> 1 Samuel 16:13

In the midst of his brothers. The boy nobody counted was anointed in front of everyone who had overlooked him.

And then, astonishingly, nothing happened. No crown. No throne. No announcement to the nation. Samuel went home to Ramah. Saul was still king. And David, as far as we can tell, went back to the sheep.

That is worth sitting with. The anointing was real, and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. But years of waiting, running and hiding still lay ahead of him. Between the oil and the crown there would be a harp in a troubled king's house, a giant in a valley, a spear thrown across a room, caves, deserts, betrayals and long nights of fear. If you had asked David on any one of those nights whether he felt like a king, he might well have laughed.

Many people assume that when God calls you, the path will open up immediately. Sometimes it does. More often, the calling comes first and the waiting comes after. God marks a person out and then sends them back to the sheep. That is not because the calling was a mistake. It is because the character has not yet caught up with the calling, and God is more interested in the person than in the position. The oil on David's head was a promise. The years that followed would be the preparation.

The Least in the House

What God did in Jesse's house was not unusual for Him. David is part of a pattern that runs right through Scripture.

Again and again, God passes over the expected one and chooses the one nobody would have picked. In a world where the eldest son inherited the family's name and the largest share of its wealth, God chose Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau, telling Rebekah before her twins were born that "the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). He chose Joseph, the eleventh son, the dreamer his brothers sold. He chose Moses, a fugitive who protested that he was slow of speech and slow of tongue

(Exodus 4:10). When God called Gideon to rescue Israel from the Midianites, Gideon's reply sounds almost like Jesse's: "my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (Judges 6:15). God did not argue with him. He simply said, "Surely I will be with you" (Judges 6:16).

The pattern continues in the New Testament. God chose a teenage girl from Nazareth, a town people mocked, to carry His Son. Jesus chose fishermen and a tax collector to be His apostles. When Paul looked at the church in Corinth, he saw the same thing:

> But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.
>
> 1 Corinthians 1:27

Why does God work this way? Not because He enjoys being unusual, and not because there is anything wrong with being the eldest, the strongest or the most gifted. Paul tells us the reason in the next verses: so that no flesh should glory in His presence (see 1 Corinthians 1:29). When the strong succeed, people praise the strong. When the overlooked are lifted up, everyone knows it was the LORD.

This should change the way we look at people. If God's habit is to choose the least in the house, then the people we are most tempted to overlook may be exactly the ones He is preparing.

Church history is full of examples. One of them is a young Englishwoman named Gladys Aylward, born in London in 1902. She left school early and worked as a housemaid. She felt called to take the gospel to China, and she was accepted for a preparatory course with the China Inland Mission. But her progress in learning Chinese was slow, and the mission did not offer her further training. By the usual standards, she had been weighed and found unsuitable. Instead of giving up, she saved her wages, and in October 1930 she set out alone by train across Europe and Siberia to join an elderly missionary in Yangcheng, in Shanxi Province. Together they ran an inn for travelling mule drivers, where guests were fed, housed and told stories from the Bible. She learnt the local language by living among the people, cared for orphans and, during the Japanese invasion, led a large group of children across the mountains to safety. Her story was later told by Alan Burgess in *The*

Small Woman.[3] The very title says it. The world saw a small woman. God saw someone He could use.

Gladys Aylward was not perfect, and she would have been the first to say so. But her life is a reminder that the judgement of the room is not the judgement of God. The committee may say no. The family may forget to call you in from the field. God still knows where you are.

What the Field Was Teaching

So what was God doing with David in those hidden years?

Later in the story, when David volunteers to fight Goliath and Saul tells him he is only a youth, David tells the king about the field. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, he went after it, struck it and rescued the lamb from its mouth. When it turned on him, he caught it and killed it (see 1 Samuel 17:34–35). That is the first lesson of the field: courage. David learnt in private, with no one watching, to put himself between danger and the ones in his care.

The second lesson was responsibility for the weak. Psalm 78 says God brought David "from following the ewes that had young" (Psalm 78:71). That is a small and tender detail. A flock moves at the pace of its slowest members. A good shepherd does not drive the pregnant ewes and newborn lambs at the speed of the strong. He adjusts his pace to theirs. Isaiah would later describe God Himself this way: He will gather the lambs with His arm, carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young (see Isaiah 40:11). David spent years learning that kind of patience before he was ever given a nation.

The third lesson was faithfulness in small things. The field was not a stage. There were no crowds. David's brothers called his flock "those few sheep in the wilderness" (1 Samuel 17:28), and they did not mean it as a compliment. But the psalmist sums up David's reign in words that come straight from the sheepfold:

> So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,
> And guided them by the skillfulness of his hands.
>
> Psalm 78:72

[3] Alan Burgess, *The Small Woman* (London: Evans Brothers, 1957). Biographical details are also summarised in standard reference works on Gladys Aylward (1902–1970). The 1958 film *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* was based on Burgess's book; Aylward was unhappy with how the film changed her story.

Integrity of heart and skill of hands. Both were learnt in the field.

The fourth lesson, and the deepest, was about God Himself. The most famous psalm in the Bible is a shepherd's psalm, and its heading attributes it to David. It does not tell us when he wrote it. But whoever spends long nights under the stars with a flock that depends entirely on him begins to understand something about being a sheep. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). The boy who led his father's sheep to still waters learnt that he, too, was being led. The one who walked his flock through dark ravines, rod and staff in hand, learnt that he was never walking through the valley alone.

That is why obscurity is not wasted time. The field was not the place where God forgot David. It was the place where God was forming him. Every night under the stars, every lamb carried home, every predator faced alone: none of it was wasted. The hidden years were the training ground for the public ones.

For the Ones Left Out of the Room

I have spent nine years working with children and young people with complex needs, and I have seen too many of them treated the way David was treated that day. Not cruelly, necessarily. Just overlooked. Not invited. Not counted. Treated as if they had nothing to do with anything important.

Think of a boy who is always the last one picked, the one teachers sigh about, the one whose file is thicker than anyone else's. Think of a girl who has been told so often that she is "too much" or "not enough" that she has stopped trying to be seen at all. Think of the young person whose family left them at home with the sheep, so to speak, while everyone else went to the feast. In a hundred small ways, the world tells these young people that they are not the one. (These are not portraits of particular young people. They are the kinds of stories anyone who works with young people will recognise.)

The God of the Bible tells them something different.

A Story for Today: The Boy at the Back

This is a composite story. It draws on the kinds of situations people in ministry and community work often meet, but the people and details are invented.

Jayden was fourteen and had already been through four schools. His file followed him everywhere, and it always arrived before he did. Teachers read it, sighed and seated him near the door. At home he was the one left minding the younger kids while everyone else went out. He had learnt to expect nothing and to say even less.

Graham was a retired bus driver who helped with the youth group at a local church. He noticed that Jayden always stood at the back of the hall, close to the exit. So Graham started saving him a seat, and asking what he thought, and waiting for the answer. One Friday the group ran a barbecue for families in the street, and Graham asked Jayden to look after the grill. He did it all night without being asked twice. At the end, in front of everyone, Graham said, "We couldn't have done tonight without Jayden."

Jayden said nothing. But he came back the next week, and the week after that. Years later he was the one standing at the back of a hall, looking for the kid nobody had counted.

Nothing about Jayden changed that night except that someone counted him. That is often where it starts. Samuel would not sit down until David came in from the field.

If you are a parent, this story asks you a searching question: are any of your children out in the field? It is so easy to give our attention to the child who performs, the child who is easy, the child who looks like us or makes us proud. Jesse was not a villain. He simply did not think of his youngest. Yet the son he did not think of was the son God had chosen. Ask the LORD to help you see each of your children the way He sees them.

If you lead in the church, this story is both a warning and an invitation. It is a warning because we are just as likely as Samuel to be dazzled by Eliab. We look for leaders who are tall, articulate, gifted, attractive and confident, and we overlook the faithful, quiet, unglamorous servant who has been keeping the sheep for years. It is an invitation because some of the greatest leaders God will raise up in your church are not in the room yet. They are out the back. They are stacking chairs, minding the children, praying in secret. Go and find them. Refuse to sit down until they come.

If you lead in a school, a workplace, a sporting club or a community service, the same is true. Every organisation has its own version of Jesse's feast, the meeting where decisions are made and the people who are invited to it. Ask yourself who is never in that room. Ask whether the way you notice people is really the way God notices them.

And if you are the one who feels overlooked, if you have spent your life waiting for someone to call your name, hear me. God knows exactly where you are. He did not need Jesse to remember David. He sent a prophet across the hills of Judah to find a boy in a field. You are not invisible to Him. You are not forgotten. You may be in a season of obscurity, and that season may last longer than you would like. But it is not a season of abandonment.

A Greater Son of Bethlehem

There is one more thing we must see, because the story of David is never only about David.

About a thousand years later, another child would be born in Bethlehem. The prophet Micah had said that out of this little town, "little among the thousands of Judah", would come the One to be ruler in Israel (Micah 5:2). Isaiah had said a Shoot would come from the stem of Jesse (see Isaiah 11:1). Jesus came from Jesse's line, and He too was overlooked. Isaiah said He would have no form or comeliness, nothing in His appearance that would make us desire Him (see Isaiah 53:2). He grew up in Nazareth, a town people mocked. His own brothers did not believe in Him. The religious leaders looked at the outward appearance and saw a carpenter's son from Galilee. They did not see the King.

At the Jordan River He too was anointed. Not with oil from a horn, but with the Holy Spirit descending on Him like a dove, while the Father declared His love for His Son (see Matthew 3:16–17). And like David, He did not go straight to a throne. He went to the wilderness. He went to the cross. The world looked at a beaten man on a Roman cross and saw failure. God looked and saw the Good Shepherd laying down His life for the sheep.

This is the gospel, and it is wonderful news for everyone who has ever been left out of the room. Jesus was rejected so that we could be received. He was not counted so that we could be counted among God's children. Through faith in Him, God pours out His Spirit on the people

the world overlooks: shepherds and fishermen, tax collectors and outcasts, the young, the struggling and the forgotten.

The question is not whether you look like a king. The question is whether your heart belongs to the King.

David would make terrible mistakes in the years ahead. But on this day, in a small house in Bethlehem, with oil running down his face and his brothers looking on, he stood as a living sign of a truth that has never changed. God sees the field. God remembers the youngest. God chooses whom He will, and He will not sit down until they come.

Not far away, in the king's house at Gibeah, a darkness was already settling over Saul.

For Reflection

1. When have you, like Samuel, been impressed by an "Eliab", someone who looked the part? What did you learn?
2. Who in your family, church, school or workplace is still "out in the field", not invited into the room where things happen? What would it look like to go and find them?
3. What might God be forming in you during a hidden or unnoticed season of your life?
4. David learnt to move at the pace of "the ewes that had young". Who are the slower or more vulnerable people in your care, and how can you adjust your pace to theirs?
5. Read Psalm 23 slowly. Which line speaks most to where you are today?

A Prayer

Father, thank You that You do not see as man sees, and that You look past every outward appearance into the heart. Forgive me for the times I have judged others by their height, their talent or their polish, and for the times I have overlooked the ones You were preparing in the field. Search my heart, LORD, and make it a heart that belongs wholly to You. Help me to see my children, my church and the young people around me as You see them. For anyone who feels forgotten today, let them know that You know their name and their place, and that no season of obscurity is wasted in Your hands. Thank You for Jesus, the greater Son of Bethlehem, who was rejected so that we could be received, and anointed

so that we could share in His Spirit. Form me in the hidden places, and keep me faithful with the sheep You have given me. In Jesus' name, Amen.