

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: January 7th: Contract and Promise: 2 Samuel 22 and 2 Samuel 23: 1-7 (You also need to read Psalm 18 – for reasons which will become obvious when you do!)

This is a much longer chunk than we have been used to recently. If it looks a slightly intimidating read, it might cheer you up to know that a quick reading followed by going back to any passages that intrigue, attract or puzzle, should be fine. The general trust is more important than the detail.

Chapter 22 and Psalm 18 are very much the same text. There is some argument about which came first; but the general view seems to be that the writer/editor of Samuel 22 “borrowed” Psalm 18 because it sort of fitted his text... and is a rather splendid psalm. As regards the historical Context: The story of David taken as a whole is (a) not a very precise fit for the psalm or for either of the chapters; and (b) is not the story of an outstandingly virtuous individual who reaped the fruits of his virtue. You might sympathise a little with the cynical school boy who described David as a bit of a bastard, and Solomon as a bit of an idiot. Less cynically, you can imagine the Parole Board (if David had been sent to prison for adultery and murder) struggling a bit to convince the “Daily Mail” that he should be let out because he had learnt his lesson and mended his ways. Though, to be fair to David, it is very hard to recall any other historical top man who would have taken Nathan the Prophet’s savage rebuke as being well deserved (rather than having Nathan killed on the spot), and have accepted the death of his son by Bathsheba as just though agonising.

The key theme here Contract and Promise: things going well depends on things being done well. Virtue is rewarded. Vice is punished. *The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. (Twice)* Loyalty, blamelessness, purity, attract God’s favour. Crookedness is punished. *The Lord is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.* David the Just’s house will stand for ever; the house of the wicked will fall.

Now none of this is odd. I guess there never has been a religion, a moral philosophy, a political creed, a conscientious parent, a concerned teacher, who hasn’t tried to get across the message that if you do good, good things happen; and if you do bad, bad things happen. We have seen the same theme in the God messages to Abraham and Moses: Covenant is writ large in the Bible. Society would be in an even bigger mess if the word was that the best way forward was doing evil, and lying about it! However, for Christians there is no escape from our foundation reality that Jesus did everything right, and died on a cross at about age 33. Christians have a soft spot for the story of Daniel’s Three Companions who, threatened with being burnt alive, said: God can rescue us, **but even if he doesn’t we will stick with Him and die for Him.** Most of the Old Testament prophets, and, from what we hear or know, the New Testament apostles, had one hell of a time in human happiness terms.

So what are we to make of Promise and Covenant, in history and in our own lives? Is it just wishful thinking? Can we swallow the Prosperity Gospel: serve the Lord and pile up the bucks? Can we side with Job: *Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him?* Is virtue its own reward? Simply at the level of economic success, isn't it true that the good employer actually does better, in the longer term, than the exploit/lie/swindle and move on employer? Simply in terms of career progress, doesn't the good person actually longer term do better than the bad person? Simply in terms of human relationships, isn't the good person fundamentally more happy than the bad person? (Or is it only true that *The rain it raineth every day, Upon the just and unjust feller; But chiefly on the just, Because the unjust's got the just's umbrella?*)