

Faith Pulpit

The Heart and Hands of Leadership

Leadership is always a subject of prime importance for the local church. The spiritual success of a church is in direct proportion to the quality of its leaders. In this article Dr. John Hartog III, professor at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, explores Psalm 78 to discover several qualities of leadership from David's life.

Israel's History from Zoan to Zion

Psalm 78 is the first and longest of the Historical psalms (the others are 105, 106, and 135).^{[1](#)} Only Psalm 119 is longer than Psalm 78. According to its superscription, Psalm 78 is a "Maschil" psalm, which means it is one of the contemplative poems written to direct the meditations of faithful hearts. The superscription also indicates that Asaph wrote this psalm. According to 1 Chronicles, Asaph was a singer, cymbalist, and chorister who functioned as a minister of sacred music during the reign of King David (6:39; 9:15; 15:17, 19; and 16:5, 7, 37).

Asaph wrote this psalm so each succeeding generation would remember to set its hope in God and not forget His works (78:6, 7). The psalm provides a panoramic view of God's dealings with Israel from her deliverance out of the Egyptian fields of Zoan (78:12, 43) to God's choice of Zion as the place for His sanctuary on the earth (78:68, 69).^{[2](#)}

God Awoke and Made Three Choices

After its opening verses (78:1–8), the psalm develops with a series of cycles of Israel's unfaithfulness, unbelief, sin, and rebellion (78:17, 32, 40, 56). Because of the nation's repeated transgressions, the Lord had given His people over to the sword (78:62–64); but then "the Lord awoke as one out of sleep." Asaph employed this anthropomorphism of awakening from slumber in order to provide a "poetic description for the end of God's inactivity on Israel's behalf."^{[3](#)} In His "reawakening" God

chose a tribe (Judah; 78:67, 68a), a city (Zion; 78:68b, 69), and a leader (David; 78:65–72). God blessed His people with a leader, even though they did not deserve this gift.

The Davidic Leadership Model

The mention of Davidic leadership is the climax of the psalm.^{[4](#)} In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God had shown Himself to be faithful, and His crowning grace gift to His people was its leader under whose reign the people would realize the hopes that God had for them—hopes of righteous living and rest from enemies. David was the one who would execute the wishes of Israel's Rock and Redeemer (78:35).

After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Judah no longer had a Davidic king, but the songs of Zion and the royal psalms pointed the hearts of the faithful to the future messianic age when a descendent of David would reign in perfect righteousness (Isa. 11:1–9). In this way, David's leadership took on an impression of prophetic nostalgia or eschatological reminiscence. As such, David's reign is a prototype of future messianic leadership, and by application the summary of his leadership found in the closing verses of Psalm 78 provides a paradigm for all would-be leaders.

Leadership Development

God chose David His servant and “took him from the sheepfolds” (78:70) and brought him from following after the nursing ewes so that he might shepherd His people Israel (78:71). Charles H. Spurgeon observed that “it is wonderful how often divine wisdom so arranges the early and obscure portion of a choice life, so as to make it a preparatory school for a more active and noble future.”^{[5](#)}

David's leadership training took place within the sheep paddocks where he learned patience, compassion, courage, and responsibility. To be sure, young David spent time around the court and on the battlefield as a part-time armor bearer and as a court musician to King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14–23), but from the psalmist's perspective God's primary preparation of David for his reign took place in the sheep pastures outside Bethlehem. This place of training was surprising, even to father Jesse and to Samuel the Prophet (1 Sam. 16:1–13, especially v. 11).

Patience put David in good stead during the many years that passed between his anointing in 1 Samuel 16 and his coronation in 2 Samuel 5. Patience also prevented David from building the Temple when it was his heart's desire (2 Sam. 7:1–3).^{[6](#)}

David also learned compassion while working with his ewes. In Israel the shepherd leads his flocks, “but the ewes that suckle their young need his special attention, and those he follows with his eye and if needful with his steps, to watch over them and protect them from harm.”^{[7](#)} Little wonder, then, that men who were distressed, in debt, and discontented found a leader in David (1 Sam. 22:2). David also showed compassion to those who guarded the baggage (1 Sam. 30:23–25) and to the house of Saul (2

Sam. 9). In these ways, David's leadership pointed ahead to the perfectly compassionate Leader, our Lord Jesus, who as the Good Shepherd gave His life for His sheep (John 10:11, 14).

When David volunteered to fight Goliath, King Saul doubted David's ability to prevail since David was a young man and the giant had been learning the art of warfare from his youth (1 Sam. 17:33). Rather than remind King Saul that he had been a part-time armor bearer to the King, David responded by rehearsing a time when a lion and a bear attacked his father's flock. David explained that he had courageously rescued the lambs from these carnivores and had killed them with his own hands. There in the Valley of Elah, David bravely proclaimed, "your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God" (1 Sam. 17:36). While serving in the fields, David learned the deliverance of the Lord, and it emboldened him for the challenges of kingship.

Leadership Lessons

From David's life and leadership, we find three significant lessons for pastors and Christian leaders.

1. Acknowledge that your people belong to God. The psalmist declared that David shepherded "His [God's] people, and Israel His inheritance" (78:71). The people belonged to the Lord, not to David, a lesson he learned among the flocks of his father Jesse.

In the church today, leaders should remember that the people under their charges belong to God—they are His people and His inheritance (1 Pet. 5:2, 3). When leaders remember this truth, they view their leadership in terms of a sacred trust. This attitude of humble responsibility contrasts with the leadership style prevalent in the final days of the kingdom of Judah when the prophet Ezekiel pronounced a message of doom to those leaders who fed themselves rather than God's flock of people (Ezek. 34:2, 5–10).[8](#)

2. Demonstrate integrity. Asaph concluded Psalm 78 by summarizing King David's reign in terms of "the integrity of his heart" and the "skillfulness of his hands." The noun "integrity" speaks of "completeness" or "wholeness." It is honesty, candor, maturity, reliability, and a heart and life that are oriented toward God. The adjective appears in Job 1:1 where it describes that patriarch as being "perfect." A leader with integrity acts the same at home as he does "on the job," and he behaves the same in Las Vegas at a business convention as he would in his home church. People trust a leader with integrity because he says what he means and does not say different things to different people. A leader with integrity upholds doctrinal and professional standards, and his word is his bond.

King David was far from perfect, but in keeping with his integrity he was willing to admit his sins. This is an important leadership characteristic whereby "the individual learns to understand and appreciate God's grace." To put it another way, "It was not David's sin but his response to his sin that

marked David as a man after God's own heart." It comes as no surprise that David wrote Psalms 32, 51, and 139 (especially 139:23, 24).^{[9](#)}

The heart of integrity is a whole heart. It is a "faithful heart"^{[10](#)} that rests within the leader who is transparent before God and candid with people. David had this heart, and those who read the Psalms also sense David's heartbeat for God. David loved the Lord, and he was passionate about worship. His passion for worship made him both the sweet singer of Israel and the master architect for the Temple later built by his son Solomon. "A spiritual leader's heart is so deeply in love with God that he wants everyone to know his God as he does."^{[11](#)} A leader is someone who is the same on the outside as he or she is on the inside. The Davidic paradigm of leadership, therefore, emphasizes the quality of integrity.

3. Practice discernment. Psalm 78:72 concludes with a reference to David's "skillfulness" of hands.^{[12](#)} This "skill" is that of "understanding" differences. It is ethical insight that differentiates between right and wrong, and it is discretionary wisdom that knows the difference between what is appropriate and inappropriate. This "skill" is an inner moral compass that directs one's actions ("hands"); it is a "mind that is in tune with God's desires and seeks to accomplish his purpose."^{[13](#)} To put it simply, it is "discernment."^{[14](#)}

David exercised skillfulness of hands, and all Israel loved him because he could lead them into battle, and, more importantly, he could get them back home (1 Sam. 18:16). He was a decision-maker who made the right decisions, and with skill he "served his own generation by the will of God" (Acts 13:36).

Leadership-God's Way

God's gracious gift to His people Israel came in the form of a leader-a man named David. Before he became the king, David had learned patience, compassion, courage, and responsibility. As a result, David ruled with integrity of heart and with discernment of hands. May God bless His people during this Church Age with similar leaders (Eph. 4:11, 12), and may He soon send His Son, King David's Descendant, who will inaugurate the future kingdom with perfect leadership.

Works Cited

1. Arthur G. Clarke, *Analytical Studies in the Psalms* (Kansas City, KS: Walterick Publishers, 1949), 198.
2. Clearly, the psalm is a teaching psalm. By making frequent references to the past, the psalm teaches that throughout Israel's entire history, God has been faithful even though His people Israel have at times been unfaithful. In a way, Psalm 78 comes across like a persuasive and inspiring history lecture that reminds the reader that "we ignore the voice and testimony of history at our peril" because "God has always involved Himself in human history," and "the past is the great interpreter of the present and the great safeguard of the future" (John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms: An Expository Commentary*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988], 644).
3. Stephen J. Lennox, *Psalms: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999), 240.

4. Marvin Tate, Psalms 51-100 in Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 295.
5. C. H. Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 346, 347
6. Patience also stayed the sword that might otherwise have slain King Saul (1 Sam. 24, 26).
7. Charles Augustus Briggs, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907), 191.
8. The leaders of Judah also stand in contrast with the future leadership of the messianic age (Ezek. 34:23).
9. Quotations in this paragraph are taken from Peter V. Deison, "The Heart and Vision of Spiritual Leadership," in Integrity of Heart and Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell, ed. by Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 259. I recommend this book for those interested in reading articles on leadership. I also recommend Aubrey Malphurs and Will Mancini, Building Leaders: Blueprints for Developing Leadership at Every Level of Your Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) and the widely read Oswald J. Sanders, Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer (Chicago: Moody, 1994).
10. Artur Weiser, The Psalms: A Commentary. Translated by Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 537.
11. Deison, "Heart and Vision," 260.
12. And what strong hands they were (1 Sam. 17:35)!
13. Deison, "Heart and Vision," 262. Italics original.
14. A. Cohen, The Psalms: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary in Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino Press, 1945), 259.

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