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The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that this passage of 2 Samuel 7 "is one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament for evangelical faith."¹ It occupies the dramatic and theological center of the entirety of First and Second Samuel. So let's look together at the first 16 verses as I read:

2 Samuel 7:1-16

"The Present From the God Who Has Everything"

¹ Now when the king lived in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, ² the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." ³ And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you."

⁴ But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, ⁵ "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in?' ⁶ I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. ⁷ In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'"

⁸ Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. ⁹ And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.' " (ESV)

- Why God says "no."
- "No" doesn't mean "I don't love you."
- The Present From the God Who Has Everything
- When God says "no."

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. (1990). *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (253). Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press.

So, are you by any chance the kind of person who gets very excited about your good ideas? You think them up, and plan all the details, and then you may commit the whole thing to God in prayer? You become very excited about a new project which you believe will transform your life, or maybe the life of the church or your friends; and then, after you have presented the idea to some of these friends or the church, the Lord says, "No, that's not going to happen."

It's deflating! When you placed so much hope in your plans and truly believe that it would meet the needs of people or answer lots of their questions, but the whole thing comes to nothing. It is hard not to feel bitter. This is the kind of situation in which David found himself.²

Let me remind you of where we are. David has had a very busy life. After his youth, he had expended a great deal of energy while fighting the Philistines and evading both capture and murder at the hands of King Saul. In fact David himself had become King. For seven years he had reigned from Hebron over the southern tribe. And then he became king over the entire nation – all twelve tribes.

And now he has moved into the new capital city – which he and his men have captured – and he's brought the Ark back to Jerusalem, a city that now goes by his own name – people now refer to it as "the city of David." And unlike any leader of Israel before him, a stability had been created. Israel's long period of nomadic life, wandering from place to place, always on the run from enemies, was over. They were settled now, and certainly David as King was settled, ready to enjoy a good period of rest. And, for the first time, in one city, you have the priesthood – the ark is there – and the royal office – the king is also there. In one city, you have the tabernacle and the Davidic king.

All good. But he's embarrassed. David is embarrassed because he lives in a proper house – a pretty fancy one at that – with a nice solid roof, and it's pillared and paneled with the finest wood available – cedar from Lebanon that was a gift from the King of Tyre.

On the other hand, the ark that was God's presence on Earth had always been portable. Movable. And it took up residence in a tent. And the tent must have become pretty ratty and smelly by this time – after all, 7 centuries had come and gone since the Exodus. Some parts of it must have been replaced, patched, or fallen away over the years, but still, this is God's habitat we're talking about. And it wasn't even very big. We've had larger tents out back for picnics here at Hope Presbyterian Church.

And yet this is where Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement takes place...?

So David says, "Shouldn't *God* have a proper place to live in?" Nathan doesn't even question David's idea – God seems to bless whatever David does, and there is nothing really wrong with the idea... They're in the land now, for Pete's sake. But Nathan takes God's name in vain: He presumes upon God's blessing of this plan – "the Lord is with you" – without even taking it to God in prayer.

² Bentley, M. (2007). *Face2Face with David Vol. 2: Encountering the Man after God's Heart* (36). Leominster: Day One Publications.

And that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan and said, "Oh really?! If this is a house for me to live in, don't you think maybe I should be consulted?" And from v. 5 onward, God gives his reasons. In fact this chapter contains the longest speech we hear from God since the Commandments were given at Mt. Sinai. So what reasons does God give?

The first is this: at all of the great turning points in history, God, and God alone, takes the initiative. (repeat) Think about that! "If this is going to happen," God says, "I will give the command. I will make it so."

The gift – David's desire to build this house – looks fine on the face of it, but as DA Carson says, "It almost looks like David is doing God a favor." There is an edge to it. As if what David is suggesting is, "I will give God a little of my glory."

But friends, you never, *ever*, grow in spiritual progress, when you think you're doing God a favor. **You are *always* a debtor to grace.** Always.

But there is a second, deeper reason, why God tells David "no." Look at v. 8:

⁸ Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, **I** took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. ⁹ **And I** have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. **And I** will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth."

What God is saying is "I know you think, David, that by building a mega-temple (David, you see, was the first guy to want to build a mega-church)... that in building this mega temple, you believe that you are doing your duty to make my name great. But that's not the way it works. *I'm* the one who makes *your* name great."

I think we would do well to remember that Jesus never talks about our:

- establishing God's kingdom,
- furthering God's kingdom,
- building God's kingdom, or even
- extending God's kingdom.

In the Gospels, the only things we do to God's kingdom are:

- wait for it
- see it
- enter it,
- seek it
- receive it, and
- declare that His kingdom has come.

Now this is unpopular with Americans.

We like to believe that we can all make a difference. We want to achieve – create progress. But it's really never been that popular that the gospel is about what God has done for us, and not about what we can do for God. The Pharisees didn't like it, and we don't either. (And, yes, we do have a responsibility to obey and follow the king – we end just about every service by saying "let us go forth to serve our neighbors and the world as those who love our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.") But we won't correctly understand our role, understand what that means to serve him – and avoid disillusion – unless we understand what Jesus says about the kingdom. God does not need us.

This story is part of many stories in scripture, you see, that makes up a doctrine we call "aseity."

It's really an old English word, with Latin roots, that simply means "from himself." It's a doctrine of God's self-existence.³ It means that God isn't dependent on anyone. I'm not from myself. You're not from yourself. Not biologically. Your stuff came from your parents. And in a broader sense, who you are, what you think, how you see the world, is from outside of you: friends, influences, the culture, hopefully your faith in Christ, etc. You're not "from you."

But God is different. He doesn't need us. This is one of the points Paul was making in Athens on Mars Hill. 'Look at these gods you have. They have needs. One needs a good harvest, and another needs the sun to shine, while still another has a passion for the oceans. And whether you are a farmer or a fisherman, or a woman who desires a child, you pray to one of these needy gods, and you offer to scratch his back, and then he'll scratch yours. Friends, that is what the bible calls, "religion."

How many of us have been practicing religion over Christianity? God doesn't need his back scratched. God doesn't need you and he doesn't need me. And he doesn't need our worship, either. He was and is eternally happy in himself. God doesn't say on Wednesday, "Oh, I just cannot wait until Sunday!!" He doesn't say, "I hope George plays louder," or "I sure hope the piano was just tuned, because I'm feeling a bit low, and that would really help me if they sounded louder and in better tune!" No, he doesn't need our worship. He is perfectly great and perfectly happy, so how are you going to go to God and offer him *anything* that *makes* him great.

Now let's be clear. We're *not* saying that God doesn't care. Or that God doesn't get angry with us. Or that God doesn't feel love. No, God IS interactive. He IS personal. He pours out his love upon us. In fact in this very passage, you see a God who cares about David, may be a little angry with David, but also loves David. God is all of those things, but he is never any of those things because he has some deep need for us. He simply IS. He *is* those things because of his own choice and out of the perfection of the sum of all of his attributes. He is entirely and perfectly content.

Friends, this is the difference between Christianity and Religion.

³ Muller, R. A. (1985). *Dictionary of Latin and Greek theological terms*: (47). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

Have you ever noticed that everywhere in the New Testament you see almost what you might call hostility – at least an antipathy – by Jesus towards the religious? When he gets near religious leaders, he's curt, sharp, almost stern. And it's religious people who were the most angry at what Jesus said and did. It's the religious that plot to kill him. But when Jesus gets near people from the world – we call them "worldly people," he's very patient and kind. The woman at the well is a great example. Over and over again the crowds, the common people of the world, were fascinated with Jesus, though maybe they didn't always believe what he said.

One of the main points of the New Testament – but you see it in shadow, right here in the Old Testament – is that you're never going to understand Christianity unless you see that it is something utterly different from religion.

Religion is when you do something for God to get something back. Christianity is about a gift of free grace.

Don't mistake Christianity for religion. Don't mistake Christianity for going to worship, praying, and giving to the poor. Don't mistake Christianity for that. You can do all that and be on your way to destruction.

Maybe you're saying, "You're kidding! I thought Christianity was about leaving the immoral lifestyle, and trying to live according to the Bible, according to the example of Christ, and according to the law of God. Isn't that it?" The answer is "No."

If those things are about adding to God's glory or giving God some of your glory – that is religion. A Christian is a debtor. We've got nothing! **We are *always* a debtor to grace.** The difference between religion and Christianity is that religion obeys the law of God, trying to get value. A religious person says, "If I do all these good things, God will have to listen to me and people will honor me, and I won't get cancer."

And that's why religious people alienate other people. They have this weird, uptight combination of fear and pride. But Christianity means obeying God's law *out* of value, not seeking value.

And this leads us to our second point:

- God's "No" doesn't mean "I don't love you."

There is a pun at the end of v. 11. "[T]he Lord declares to you that the Lord will make *you* a house." In other words, you thought you were going to build a house for me, but actually, I'm going to build a house for you." Here is the pun: David wants to build God a "house;" God promises that he will build David a "house"— that is, a household" – a son who will be God's own son, whose Davidic throne will be established forever. David means by the word house, "a temple," and God uses the same word to mean, "a dynasty," like saying the House of Rothschilds." V. 12:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Now this is big news. Very big news. Because you have to put yourself in David's shoes. Who preceded David? King Saul. And Saul was never able to "go dynasty." Jonathan should have sat on the throne next. But Jonathan dies with his father – they die at the same time. Why? Why no dynasty for them? They started well – both tall, dark and handsome, we're told. And humble. Saul didn't even want the job. But in the end, he disobeyed God, took things into his own hands, disregarded the prophets, and eventually plotted murder.

Now, David is the king. But what will happen to him? And let's say you didn't know about Bathsheba and Uriah... what about his *son*? And his son's son? How about his great, great grandson. David couldn't control his own passions and desires... how would he be able to control those of his sons?

But God says what?

¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.' ”

Now this is amazing. Over thousands and thousands of years, whenever subjects or servants or slaves approached a king, they would come in a very servile way and say, "O King, may you live forever. Long live the King!" That is the way any subject would try to appeal to a king. But this is *God* talking to a *human being*! God promises that, unlike what happened with Saul when Saul had done a whole heap of wrong, and God cut off the dynasty right there and said, "Enough of that!" that "With your son David, when your son Solomon messes up, I will discipline and punish him with temporal discipline. It will be with the rod of human beings that he receives correction. There will be no absolute judgment." Why? Because "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son."

Now. What does this sonship mean? Does this mean the Spirit comes upon Solomon or his descendents and makes Solomon God's one and only son? Is this a sonship of the flesh, of DNA, of biology? Is this an incarnation?

No, but it IS a sonship of function and of authority. It is a covenant promise that Solomon will rule in his place. That he will exercise God's reigning rule, and he will reflect God's kingship, with God's kingly interest in righteousness and equity and integrity and covenant care.

Any time, you see, a descendent of David will come upon the throne, he will become the only king in the world who is a son of God. He functions in that way. He is the king's king. Now that is not the only way the phrase "son of God is used" – we'll get to another – but it's one of them.

Now, what does this mean? It really is God showing David his heart! God is saying, "David, you're a sinner. Your son will be a sinner. He will be punished for his sin, as will you. BUT, "my love will never be taken away from him as it was taken away from Saul." You see, this is what David has really been frightened of. This is what really has motivated David to make God a palace. God might cut me off like Saul, so I will guarantee his love by putting God in my debt." And God says, "C'mon. I'm your father."

I wish I had time to look at the rest of the chapter where David understands this, and recognizes the amazing grace God is showing him.

Now, in the New Testament, we are told that by faith in Christ, God is *your* father. A father, of course, is not a boss. So think about your work: If you are an employee and you're good, you have a boss. If you're bad and you disobey company policy or laws, you're fired.

But if you're a child and you have a father or mother and you're good, you have a father or mother. If you're *bad*, you have a grumpy father or mother, but you *still* have a father or mother.

In fact, fathers and mothers, you know something, don't you? This is something very weird. If you have two or more children (like I do) and one of them is being disobedient, so often it's the *disobedient* one that has your heart the most. Why? It's the nature of parenthood. That is the way, friends, grace works. Grace is about undeserved favor.

Friends, when God says "No, not your way," it doesn't mean he doesn't love you! Jesus was in Gethsemane in Mark 14, at one of his darkest hours, and the son prayed to the father by saying "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

And God said no. But it wasn't because Jesus was not loved by the father. God said no because he was extending his love *through* the son! It was grace at work.

Do you live like that? Is that the truth by which you move through life – every fear, every trial, every personal challenge? By his royal blood, you are brought under the protection of God's house. In King Jesus' resurrection, you have the royal inheritance of life eternal. You can't do anything for him. But he has done so much, and does so much for us. This is God's plan. Grace. This is the promise of 2nd Samuel 7 to David, now fulfilled.

- Finally, the Present From the God Who Has Everything"

So what have learned so far? So far, we've learned that religion says that you build God a house, and then God will bless you. Christianity alone says that God builds *you* a house – it's sheer grace – and then blesses you on top of that. He makes you his child.

Ok. *But why would he?*

You know, there are two ways that this ultimate fulfillment of 2 Samuel could be achieved: 1) A kingship could be established forever if God kept renewing it with each subsequent king, right along in genealogical succession. Again, and again, and again. 2) Or, at some point you could have a king who comes along and actually lives forever. Now, there is no hint of that here in 2nd Samuel, but about 300 years later, in Isaiah 9, we have words we say or sing every Christmas, "[U]nto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.... Of the increase of his kingdom there shall be no end." Now that is a Davidic king who might live forever. And he is called God AND everlasting father.

And then in the beginning of Luke's gospel – Luke 2 – you read those famous verses, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Now, without tracing every line out in this history – the genealogies are in the gospels for that very purpose – here is what this means. God is born to a virtual tent. N. T. Wright says that "in Mary's womb temple and king came together once and for all," in the same town – David's city – that "God found at last the house, neither tent nor temple but flesh and blood, that would most truly and fully express his royal, self-giving love."⁴ Do you hear that? He does it to be self-giving. The king gives himself. *He* is the gift.

But why come like this? God, you see, the king, is stripping himself bare to show you how he comes to love you. This is a God whose tent is a womb. And there is no army with him. He isn't coming as a fearsome, conquering king – though he will conquer sin and death. No, he's come for you.

And to receive this present, you have to strip down, too. Most people reject Christianity, reject Jesus, because of some non-negotiable in their life. "I want happiness, I want love, I want to be married, I want beauty..." They come to God with conditions. And they say, "Christianity won't give that to me." What that means is that "I will love God if... If he adds to me, I will bow to him." But that isn't following or believing in him – that is not a response to grace – that's using God. That's getting God to bow to you.

You see, you're serving something else – that other thing is your REAL king (love, marriage, beauty, health, degrees...*whatever*). And you're saying, I'll serve Jesus, too, IF he delivers the king I really want. Tim Keller says, "Unless you drop the 'ifs' you'll never know the king. You're still on the throne of your life." Either you're on the throne of your life or God is... who will it be?

Jesus comes as a baby to show you – "I come in love, peace, and grace. And I have already bowed down. I have stripped myself of my glory to be a person. A baby. To make YOU a house. I strip myself of my glory to give it to you. Will you take it?"

⁴ Wright, N. T. (2002). *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings, Year B (8–9)*. London: SPCK.

Here is the Christmas challenge. You DO have to give something. You have to give "in."

It's one of the hardest things to give – will you give in, and let him be your king? Jesus strips down. And like David, you have nothing to give. Nothing! But can you give in?

That is when the God who has everything gives you himself. He becomes your beauty. He becomes your life. He becomes your true king. He comes as a baby who is destined to hell for you. Can you give him your heart?

Let's pray.