

*August 14, 2016
Sunday Morning Service
Series: The Life of David
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2016 David J. Whitcomb*

HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN **2 Samuel 1:17-27**

Political intrigue, subterfuge, clandestine conspiracies, assassinations and such wickedness have been associated with kingdoms and kingdom transfers throughout history. Most of the great nations or dynasties have had their share of questionable activity during the changing of the guard at the local palace. This was especially true in ancient times, though not quite as common in our age among the leading nations of the world.

Even Israel was not exempt from underhanded dealings. The evidence for such intrigue popped up by the time the third king was preparing to take the throne. David, possibly the most popular king in Israel's history, had promised that Solomon would succeed him as king. Half brother Adonijah was quite sure he had seniority which logically should grant the throne to him. He took steps to transfer leadership to himself and it cost him his life.

One of the most wicked connivers was Athaliah who attempted to kill every male child who had any claim to the throne of Judah. However, she missed little Joash who was hidden away and groomed to be king until he was seven years old. At that time, a band of legitimate leaders of Judah introduced Joash as the rightful heir to the throne. Again, Athaliah's sinister plans lead to her death.

In the years just before Babylon sacked Judah and Jerusalem, rebels were knocking off kings, or enemies captured kings frequently. The rulers and wanna-be rulers of Israel and Judah simply fell into the same kinds of sins their neighbors had been doing for centuries. God's people struggled perennially with wanting to be like their neighbors, and in the end they were.

Therefore, we should not have been surprised to read in the first section of this first chapter of second Samuel that the young Amalekite messenger brought news of Saul's death to David. He, like most people in the area, probably understood that David was in line to replace Saul as king of Israel. The Amalekite was sure that news of Saul's death would be good news to David. Killing the reigning king in order to take his throne was pretty common in human kingdoms because sin ruined God's creation and brought such consequences with the ruin.

We should also understand that the Amalekite must have been shocked when David responded to the news of Saul's death by tearing his robe and grieving intensely. Then when David ordered the guy's execution, the Amalekite went to his death wondering how in the world his perfect plan to gain reward from the new king could have gone so awry.

Things didn't turn out well for the Amalekite because David was not normal. David was God's choice for king and, therefore, the object of God's special favor. That David was God's chosen king is the theme of first Samuel. It is stated specifically or hinted at least seventeen times in the book. No wonder we read that David was a man who generally focused his heart on the plans, purposes, and desires of God's own heart. People whom God has chosen will begin to emulate His traits. That is why David did not rejoice when the mighty Saul fell. That is why David composed this song of lament and required everyone in Israel to learn it. And that is why we too respond differently than our world does.

We live in a world that naturally assumes that we hate our enemies and long for their demise. We live in a body that naturally desires the same thing. We are taught from childhood that life is about me and, therefore, loyalty is not important. We are taught that real men don't cry or express grief at the loss of a friend. We are taught that history is not important because all that matters is what we can gain for the future. David, who had a heart like God's heart, displayed a response that was contrary to everything we have learned and know by nature. People who are born again and indwelt by God the Holy Spirit will often act so contrary to common expectation that it should take the world by surprise. Let's learn what this looks like from David.

A Song of Lament.

This song of grief or lament is broken down into an introduction in verses seventeen through eighteen and then the body of the lament in the remaining verses in the chapter. We learn in the introduction (vv.17-18) that David truly lamented the death of Saul and Jonathan. *And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son (v.17)*. While grieving and mourning were often taken to an art form in the ancient Middle East, this word carries a unique expression of grief. The wording even in the English translation emphasizes the depth of lamentation by a repetition of the word. Literally the text can read, *“With this dirge David was dirging.”* The word translated *lamentation* refers to a poem authored specifically to express deep grief and lamentation over the loss of a friend or loved one. David was obviously, deeply moved by news of the death of Israel’s king and his sons.

So important was this event that David required people in Judah to learn the song to commemorate it. *He said it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar (v.18)*. David concluded that this even was so significant that everyone needed to learn this dirge. In practical terms, the new king decreed that the death of Israel’s first king at the hands of the Philistines would be taught in history class from that point on. It was a significant and critical part of Israel’s history because it was about God’s work in the background to bring about His will in the nation. This event was as important as the day God made the sun stand still in the sky so that Joshua could defeat Amorites—which was also written in the *Book of Jashar* (Joshua 10:12-13).

Now let’s consider the content of the song David composed (vv.19-27). He began by stating that Saul and Jonathan, the mighty, have fallen (vv.19-23). It is fair for us to translate that “Israel’s gazelle has fallen.” That idea is found in the words, *Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen! (v.19)*. The word translated *glory* typically means an ornament or a gazelle. Since in this case the word is connected with the word slain, the translation “gazelle” seems to fit better.

The Bible pictures the gazelle as being surefooted on the mountains. Warriors who were swift runners were compared to

gazelles (1 Chron. 12:28; 2 Sam. 2:18). The gazelle was surefooted enough and quick enough to save himself from the hunter (Prov. 6:5). The “beloved” of Song of Solomon was like the gazelle on the mountains of spices. But here we read that the gazelle of Israel, the lovely specimen of strength and agility, had been slain by the hunter.

In response to that sad reality David cried out, “How the mighty have fallen!” This statement of shock and disbelief is the theme of the lament. It is repeated in verses 17, 25, 27. It sounds much like the opening of Jeremiah’s lament “How lonely sits the city that was full of people” (Lamentations 1:1). “How could this happen!” is not a question but an expression or exclamation of grief.

Furthermore, David sang of his fear that the enemy would boast. *Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult (v.20)*. Ashkelon and Gath, two of the five chief cities, represent the whole of Philistia. Of course the citizens of Philistia would rejoice over the victory of their soldiers. David wished that the horrible news would not be known lest the young maidens exult. In his imagination he could hear the daughters of the Philistines singing like the daughters of Israelites once sang, “David has slain his tens of thousands.”

David identified the young women as *daughters of the uncircumcised* in order to point out that they were not among God’s special chosen people. They were the enemies of God’s people. How could God allow this to happen to His special people, the ones who were marked out by circumcision – pagans! How could God allow a situation in which the pagan God-deniers would gloat over defeat of God’s people?

Because this was such a horrible event, David concluded that the place of defeat should be cursed. *You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil (v.21)*. The high places where Israel’s mighty Gazelle was slain is identified as the mountains of Gilboa. David desired for the mountain to be subjected to drought. Only God could withhold dew and rain. Only God could keep the crops from growing in the fields. Why this desire? What was David thinking? There was danger of the Philistines giving glory to their gods of fertility for the victory on

Gilboa. God would not lose His glory if He cursed the place and it never produced crops, never was fertile.

In David's opinion, the geographic location of such a catastrophe should be cursed because the shield of Saul was defiled there. Wait! Wasn't Saul David's archenemy who wanted to kill him? Yes, Saul wanted to kill David, but that is because David was Saul's enemy, not that Saul was David's enemy. David always acted as though Saul was his king. Therefore, in this song, David was lamenting the fact that his king was slain.

Saul and Jonathan were mighty. *From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty. Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions (vv.22-23).* The weapons of Saul and Jonathan had been successful so many times. They didn't lose battles. They were beloved by their people. They were lovely in the eyes of David. And even when it came to the impossible battle, Jonathan never was disloyal to Saul. Saul tried to kill Jonathan's best friend David. Saul cursed Jonathan more than once. Saul tried to kill Jonathan. But even when it was known (revealed by the witch) that Israel would be defeated, Jonathan was at his father's side in the battle.

Typically Jonathan and Saul were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions in battle. But now they were dead. How are the mighty fallen! David concluded that it was altogether fitting to grieve over the fact that the mighty are lost (vv.24-27). He went so far as to point out that Saul had provided as a good king. *You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel (v.24).* It was not that Saul himself gave people luxuries. But through his success in battle the people enjoyed rich possessions. Therefore, weep daughters of Israel weep because the source of your pleasures is gone.

And now we come to the pinnacle of the song where we learn that Jonathan was the mighty gazelle! *How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain on your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women (vv.25-26).* Verses twenty-five and twenty-six of the central

focus of the lament. Jonathan is the mighty one who was slain on Gilboa. Yes, Saul was included, and the other warriors of Israel are memorialized also. But the loss of Jonathan caused the deepest grief.

The normal, expected grief at the loss of a friend was intensified because Jonathan had also proved to be incredibly loyal to David. In no way whatsoever do these statements indicate a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan. In David's culture, a plurality of wives was the acceptable norm because their chief function was to produce an enduring lineage. A friend like Jonathan was a man's sounding board, an accountability partner, an advisor, a kindred spirit, one whose wounding words were faithful and helpful. David grieved most over the loss of his dear friend, the Gazelle of Israel, the mighty who had fallen. And so he repeated the theme: *"How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!" (v.27).*

Lessons Taught.

One lesson for us that sits on the surface of the text is that loyalty is precious. Jonathan's loyalty is instructive to us. It is hard for us to come to grips with a loyalty that was willing to abdicate the throne in deference to a friend. At the same time, Jonathan maintained loyalty to his father. We would have told Dad to go on to the battle without us. It was certain that he was going to be killed. Saul had made many bad choices. But Jonathan stuck with him. Besides that, we are typically of the opinion that we cannot be loyal to a friend who becomes the enemy of a mutual friend. Jonathan's loyalty was not effected by such things.

David's loyalty is a standard of righteousness. How could David be loyal to such a duplicitous, evil man? There is no doubt that David clearly perceived Saul's evil spirit. David had no choice but to remain loyal to the man God had put on the throne. Somewhere along the line David learned that God had picked Saul when the people clamored for a king. He might not have respected the man's wicked attitudes and actions, but he respected the position and God's ordained choice.

Maybe our loyalty, such as it is, doesn't measure up to the standard David established here. Our loyalty is based on personal

preference or gain. When a friendship is no longer profitable or beneficial for us, we walk away. If a relationship requires any sacrifice of time or energy, we break it. We see this attitude toward employers, churches, friends and even spouses. Do you even know anyone who shops at the same store all the time because they know the people who own it? Do you know anyone who drives the same brand of car because he has a relationship with the dealer? How many people are loyal to the same butcher, or baker, or plumber, or electrician, or teacher, or church, simply because they sense it is the right thing to do?

Solomon established the righteous standard for loyalty. He said that *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity (Proverbs 17:17)*. He understood that *A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24)*. It is true that there are some friends that are more loyal than a brother. But the ultimate friend who is loyal in all circumstances is Christ Himself. He sets the pinnacle of righteousness in loyalty. How does our loyalty compare?

A second lesson is that Christ's command for us to "Love your enemy" is possible. Frankly, in those words it seems like Jesus commanded what is impossible. He taught, *"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44-45)*.

Knowing that human weakness was going to really struggle with that, Jesus also showed us what that looks like. He taught the disciples, *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends" (John 15:13)*. Jesus surpassed that standard and laid down His life for His enemies. Paul pointed out that *while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son (Romans 5:10)*.

The theory sounds good, but what human could ever do it? David showed us how it works. While Saul was alive, David refused to lift his hand against the king who wanted to kill him. Furthermore, it is evident from this song that David genuinely grieved at Saul's death. He eulogized Saul in some pretty great words. Apparently, David practiced what we are taught in the New Testament. We are

supposed to be *bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Colossians 3:13)*. Jesus told us to, *"Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4)*.

It doesn't seem that easy for us, does it? We have too many requirements that must be met before we can love our enemies. They must agree with us. An enemy probably won't do that. They must admit that they are wrong. That's not likely. They must humble themselves before us and beg for forgiveness. That's pretty rare. But, Jesus didn't tell us to like our enemies. He told us to love our enemies. David certainly didn't like Saul's attitude and actions, but he desired the best for Saul which was a right relationship with God. Jesus certainly didn't like the hypocrisy of the religious leaders or even Pilate, but He longed for them to be reconciled with God which is love. You and I would be strange folks if we liked the way our enemies mistreat us. But we can love them with the desire that they would be right with God and walk in fellowship with Christ.

A third lesson we can learn from this song, and one that many people think we should just skip, is that it is okay for men to cry. Men don't cry because we are men. No, we don't cry because pride restrains us. My generation and earlier American men were taught that we should not weep. To weep was the sign of weakness. All Christian men know that God said that the woman is the weaker vessel (1 Peter 3:7). Because they are weaker, women weep. Therefore, to weep is a sign that you can't handle pressure. And so men don't weep.

David the mighty warrior wept. I would not have wanted to wrestle with that guy who wept, and grieved, and cried out in emotional pain. He was not a weakling, but a man who was able to express the depths of his grief. Oh, and Jesus wept too. He wept because of the pain He experienced in His humanity and His friends experienced at the death of friend Lazarus. He wept over the city of Jerusalem that represented the people of God. He was very sad for the way His people as a whole had rejected Him. He was grieved at the thought of the pain and loss they would experience within a

generation because of their unrepentance. If we cannot weep over the loss of friends and loved ones, if we cannot weep over souls on their way to hell, we are not much like our Creator.

Finally, an important lesson found in this lament is that we need to remember history because it is His “story.” David desired for the people of Judah to remember what happened on Mt. Gilboa. It was one of the most significant losses in their history. But most important was that David understood God’s hand in all of this. The history of Israel is the chronicle of God’s will, action, and responses.

Our nation does not figure in Bible history. It is ethically wrong to read America into favorite passages like 2 Chronicles 7:14. But, our nation does manifest God’s work and blessing. The history of America is a good illustration of the God of creation working through mere humans. Our history is not a series of coincidences but a series of special works from God. We do not worship a nation or a government, but we rejoice in our God who turns the heart of the king in whatever way He chooses (Proverbs 21:1). So, too, we should observe and remember the works of God in our own lives as the evidence of divine interruption occasionally breaks through the surface of the mundane.

This is some of what we should have learned from this lament. We must observe and acknowledge God’s hand at work. We should see that sovereign hand even in times of loss. We should, therefore, keep our relationships in perspective. God ordains our authorities to whom we should be loyal. God creates our relationships which we should honor. God understands when we grieve and grants us grace in our trial.