

A ROYAL LAMENT

2 Samuel 1:17-27

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Your glory, O Israel, is slain on you high places! How the mighty have fallen! (2 Sam. 1:19).

Instead of facing the reality of death, there are people who try to avoid it. One approach is to refuse to mention the word. You may have noticed, for instance, that people do not seem to die anymore. Instead, they “pass away.” Others try to blunt the grief of sin by normalizing it. This was the approach of Forrest Gump’s mother in the movie that bears his name, who told her learning-impaired son, “Dying’s just a part of living.” The English novelist Evelyn Waugh wrote a comic novel on this phenomenon, based on the posh Forest Lawn cemetery in Hollywood. There, the viewing room is renamed the Slumber Room and the deceased are referred to as the “loved ones.” As much as possible, viewings present bodies in familiar poses from life. One woman was even laid out for her funeral with a telephone raised to her ear. The purpose of it all is to avoid facing the reality of death.¹

The Bible never takes this approach, but instead presents its readers with the cold, stark facts about death. Wise Christians follow this lead, treating death as the offensive enemy that it is. According to the Bible, Forrest Gump’s mother is simply wrong: dying is not a part of living, but rather a cursed, insulting, violation of God-given life. This is why Jesus not only wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, but he did so with anger in his heart (Jn. 11:35). Death is a cause not for glib dismissals but for tears and bitter grieving. For those who

¹ Cited from Robert Godfrey, “Redeeming Blood,” in Richard D. Phillips, ed., *Precious Blood: The Atoning Work of Christ* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2009), 35-6.

possess the wisdom and grace of God’s Word, the bitterness of death is tasted even when an enemy has suffered death. One of the best examples is the royal lament authored by David on the occasion of the death of King Saul and his noble son, Jonathan.

As we consider David’s response to news of Saul’s death, we see him grieving emotionally and intellectually. The emotional grief was the immediate response to the grievous news: as soon as he was told, David “took hold of his clothes and tore them” (2 Sam. 1:11).

Different people will express emotional grief in different ways, and their friends are wise to allow them to do so. In authoring the poem of lament that concludes 2 Samuel 2, David also grieved with his mind. Dale Ralph Davis describes this as “an expression of *thoughtful* grief.” This kind of lament involves the careful selection and crafting of words in way that expresses our loss as closely and fully as possible. Davis comments: “The lament-form of the Bible assumes that our grief is deep and on-going, and it invites us to enter the discipline of expressing that grief in words that convey our anguish, in images that picture our despair, in written prayers that verbalize despondency.”²

David’s lament over Saul’s death was more than a personal exercise of grieving. It was also a prudent political act and a potent form of national leadership. His poem is introduced with these words: “David lamented over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he said that it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold it is written in the book of Jashar” (2 Sam. 1:17-18). David composed this lament and published to the nation. In this way he showed that while he had been exiled from Saul’s realm he had neither renounced the nation nor distanced himself from the aspirations and griefs of Israel. In the Hebrew, the title given to this poem is “the bow”; where the English Standard Version states that “it should be taught to the people of Judah,” the original version says, “the bow should be taught to the people of Judah.” This title suggests that David intended the themes of his lament to motivate his countrymen in taking up arms against the enemy who had caused their pain and loss.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1999), 21-2.

THE SHAME OF SIN

David's lament for Saul begins with words that are considered by some to be a charitable overstatement, but they were an accurate depiction of what Israel had lost in battle with the Philistines: "Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!" (2 Sam. 1:19).

How could David speak in this way about a man so advanced in depravity, who died under God's wrathful hand of judgment? The answer is that Saul had really been a magnificent specimen of a man, especially in his younger years. This was why God gave Saul to Israel as king in the first place, providing them the kind of man they would esteem and follow. "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he," we read at the time of Saul's selection. "From his shoulders upwards he was taller than any of the people" (1 Sam. 9:2). Today, Saul would be picked by a talent scout to play the role of king in a movie. He had been a real success in the true-life role of king, uniting the Israelites and leading them victoriously in battle. Israel had gloried in Saul and trusted in his might, and now Saul was fallen and Israel defeated.

David sets a good example for our response when a notable Christian leader falls into disgrace. Just as Israel was aggrieved by the death of Saul, the church today is grieved by frequent news that a prominent and gifted spiritual leader has fallen in moral failure, usually involving sex, money, or both. Such fallen leaders normally cannot remain in positions of spiritual influence. Yet we often err by heaping abuse without appreciating the gifts and graces God invested in that person and even honoring legitimate achievements. John Calvin comments on David's reasoning: "'Since God elevated Saul to such dignity, that is reason enough for me to honour him'. That is how greatly [David] esteemed the grace of God in a man who was so perverse."³

Having honored the memory of Saul as glorious and mighty, David's main point is the disgrace to which Israel had been publicly subjected by this defeat. This seems to be David's point in lamenting that God

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 27.

struck down Israel's mighty leader in a public, rather than private, manner. "Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places!" (2 Sam. 1:19). Calvin compares Saul's demise to the public hanging of a criminal on a scaffold in the public square: "It was as though Saul had been lifted up on a mountain, so that it would be widely known – 'Saul is dead'." God's aim in this was "to humiliate his people to such a degree that they would recognize their offence every time this defeat came to mind."⁴

David mourns this disgrace with a specific concern for the glory of the Lord in the midst of the nations. "Tell it not in Gath," he laments, "publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult" (2 Sam. 1:20). There could be no doubt that news of Saul's defeat would be celebrated in the Philistine cities, yet David expresses the wish that this could somehow be averted. Reminding his hearers that these are "uncircumcised" pagans, people who were abominable to Israel and to God, he is galled that the Philistines would rejoice over the slaying of Israel's king. Even worse is the idea that the false god Dagon would be given glory at the expense of the true and living God of Israel. In this way, David reminds the Israelites that their defeat at Gilboa was both a national and a religious disgrace.

Americans got a taste of David's outrage when videos were shown of women and children dancing in the streets of Middle Eastern cities rejoicing over the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. David intends for this kind of image to fuel the martial ardor of his downcast countrymen. "Don't let us learn that your daughters have been celebrating this victory in Gath and Ashkelon," David says, knowing full well that they would be rejoicing. He was acting like a football coach who posts a taunting or boastful statement made by a member of the rival team, knowing what effect it will have on his players. In a similar way, David intends to fuel the fires of Israelite fury so as to gain maximum unity and effort in the battles to come.

With the taste of humiliation bitter in his mouth, David vents his fury symbolically against the cite of the disaster: "You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings!"

⁴ Ibid., 28.

(2 Sam. 1:21). The fruitfulness of any land depended on the watery blessings that fell from heaven. Without rain or dew, Mount Gilboa's barrenness would memorialize Israel's disgrace. With this, curse David anticipated Jesus' withering of the fig-tree outside Jerusalem as a symbol of the curse that the nation would suffer for rejecting him (Mt. 21:19). Gilboa should be cursed, David says, "For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul not anointed with oil" (2 Sam. 1:21). In the ancient world, shields were a sign of prowess and might and were anointed so as to sign brightly in the face of the enemy. The sight of discarded and dented shields was therefore the very image of defeat. So littered with the emblem's of Israel's disgrace, David prays for Mount Gilboa to be turned into a perpetual expression of Israelite death and grief.

Gathering these images together – the mighty fallen, the wicked rejoicing, the land memorialized in despair – David's sees the shame that results from sin under the hand of God's judgment. Why had Israel fallen and suffered, if not for her idolatry and sin against the Lord under Saul's leadership? Likewise today, sin exhibits itself in the shameful disgrace of those who have embraced it. Proverbs 14:34 says, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." So it is that for all our wealth and might, Western society is disgraced by the broken families resulting from sexual sin, the broken lives resulting from the pleasures of substance abuse, the broken truths resulting from atheistic teaching, and the broken cities resulting from the legacies of slavery, class warfare, and corrupt government. Like Mount Gilboa, which was and remains a largely barren hill, the sight of our disgrace should lead us to humble ourselves in repentance before God, seeking his mercy.

Moreover, David's lament over glorious and mighty Saul's death reminds us that the possession of great gifts from God does not exempt anyone from God's judgment on our sins. Those granted positions of privilege and power fall into sin precisely because they come to think the normal rules no longer apply to them. The slaying of Saul should remind us how untrue this thinking is. Furthermore, whenever Israel or anyone else glories in a mere man, the result can only be disastrous. "Your glory, O Israel, is slain," David laments over fallen King Saul. This shows that the best way to preserve

ourselves against the bitterness of grief is to glory only in God and place our true hopes only in the eternal salvation he gives through our Savior, Jesus Christ (cf. Ps. 118:8-9).

THE LOSS OF SIN

Having begun his lament by mourning the disgrace of sin, David continues with his awareness of what Israel has lost through God's judgment on their sin in the battle of Mount Gilboa. For this, he celebrates the virtues of the father-son partnership of King Saul and his heroic heir, Jonathan.

First, David returns to the most obvious achievement of Saul's regime, his former success in battle: "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" (2 Sam. 1:22). Their military campaigns were so rapid that David describes them as "swifter than eagles," and their assaults so violent that David says "they were stronger than lions" (2 Sam. 1:23). One example is Saul's stunning mobilization against the Ammonites who had besieged Jabesh Gilead early in his career (1 Sam. 11:1-11). During the period of the judges, Israel had easily been defeated and was frequently subjected to foreign occupation. Along had come the bow of Jonathan and the sword of Saul, neither of which turned back from the fight without securing victory. Now these martial resources had been stripped from Israel, not only by the Philistine army but more fundamentally by the sinful corruption into which Saul and the nation had fallen over the years. The mad degradation of once-noble Saul had resulted from the progressive hardening of his heart against God and the failure of Saul's sword brought defeat to Israel.

Jonathan and Saul also blessed Israel by their mutual fidelity to the family dynasty. This is what David emphasizes in verse 23: "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided." David was well aware, of course, that the father and son had been estranged over Saul's mad persecution of David, who was Jonathan's covenant friend. Yet Jonathan had remained loyal to his father, staying at his side to the bitter end.

Under the protection and stability of Saul's regime, Israel flourished in economic prosperity. This, too, was now lost with the defeat and death of Jonathan and Saul. David laments this by addressing women who had been able to wear fine clothing and jewelry because of the prosperity Saul's victories fostered: "You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel" (2 Sam. 1:24). Of course, Saul did not personally adorn Israel's womanhood in the scarlet and gold of nobility, but he might as well have done so, so instrumental was his former leadership in the prosperity that Israel enjoyed.

Just as the Philistine army had stripped Israel of its rulers and the benefits of their protection, sin also brings great loss into our lives. Consider a man who dabbles in pornography and is driven by enflamed passions into adultery. The resulting loss may grievously afflict multiple generations in the family that is broken apart. Consider scholars who are tempted to traffic in novel doctrines for the sake of academic prestige, ultimately causing the loss of whole churches and even denominations through the ravages of heresy. Or consider a woman who grants herself with sharp pleasure of passing gossip about others, so that the resulting discouragement causes a breaking of relationships and of spirits. The point for us in David's lament for the loss involved with Saul's defeat is that sin is not worth it. The Bible goes so far as to say that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Let us therefore abhor the first stirrings of sinful desires in our hearts and let us put to death sinful habits, seeking God's help in prayer and enlisting all the aid provided to us by God's Word.

"How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!" David laments over Israel's loss (2 Sam. 1:25). The real battle of our lives is the battle waged against sin for our hearts, our minds, our affections, and our habits. We must fight this battle to win, arming ourselves with God's spiritual power in order to avoid the bitter loss of defeat.

THE GRIEF OF SIN

David's lament has to this point served his political purposes, since it would be his task to rally the nation's courage. By putting words to Israel's grief he ministered to the needs of others. In the final verses, however, David expressed the poignancy

of his own personal grief over the death of his covenant friend, Jonathan. Having previously directed his lament to Israel, to the heights of Mount Gilboa, to the exultant Philistines and to the bereaved daughters of Israel, David now addresses his lament to Jonathan, whose death has brought such grief to David's own soul. "Jonathan lies slain on your high places," he moans. "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" (2 Sam. 1:25-26).

One of the highlights of David's story is the wonderful friendship he shared with Saul's son, Jonathan. They were the most unlikely friends in all of Israel, since David was God's anointed replacement for King Saul and Jonathan was Saul's expectant heir. They were joined, however, by a shared passion for the Lord and his people. Jonathan recognized the power of the Lord that was upon David and he eagerly subordinated his own future to the advancement of David, realizing that this would be for the glory of God. Recognizing in Jonathan a spiritual commitment equal to his own, David reciprocated the friendship so that "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18:1). Theirs was a friendship that richly blessed both believers, and which survived all the trials brought about by Saul's mad hatred for David. David therefore had every reason to grieve the death of worthy Jonathan, whose fidelity to his father had cost him his life on Mount Gilboa.

In ancient society, it was not uncommon for men to make outward displays of affection and commitment to one another. Since our contemporary society is not comfortable with such brotherly displays, some have suggested that David and Jonathan's relationship had sexual overtones. Nothing in the text, however, suggests such a thing, and the very idea would have been abhorrent to both the biblical writer and the original readers. In his grief, David simply states that his relationship with Jonathan had been more important to him than any of the relationships he had known with women. "Very pleasant have you been to me," David grieves; "your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1:26). Jonathan had been a partner in David's military campaigns, in his political struggles, and most importantly in his devoted service to the

Lord. It is not surprising, then, especially given Jonathan's intense devotion to David's cause, that Jonathan's loss grieved David as no other could have done.

The Bible teaches that God intends marriage to provide the most intimate and meaningful of human relationships (see Gen. 2:18-25). In Old Testament society, however, the reality often fell far short of this goal. Then, as now, prominent men often married for political and economic advantage. Robert Bergen comments, "A man's wife was his partner in procreation and parenting, but not necessarily his best friend, confidant, or social peer."⁵

There are few better examples in the Bible of both the compromising of marriage and the devastating effects of marital neglect and sin than the life of David. His very first marriage had been a political one (to Saul's daughter Michal, 1 Sam. 18:17-27), and the addition of multiple wives in the years to come ensured that David would never experience the edifying and sanctifying influences that God offers within the bonds of close, intimate, and faithful marital love. David's life would have been far more blessed if he had committed himself to a single woman in a faithful and godly marriage. Like David's, our lives will be destabilized if we relegate marriage to the periphery of our commitments. This is why the Bible teaches men, "An excellent wife is the crown of her husband" (Prov. 12:4). "She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain" (Prov. 31:10-11).

However David was impoverished by his unwholesome marriages, he was greatly enriched by his covenant friendship with Jonathan. His lament reminds us all – and men, especially – of the great blessing secured by faithful, devoted friendships. Matthew Henry rightly stated that few things are "more delightful in this world than a true friend, that is wise and good, that kindly receives and returns our affection, and is faithful to us in all our true interests."⁶ David's friendship with Jonathan was all this and more, so wonderful that Jonathan had been willing to take the crown off his own head and deliver it to David, out of love for his friend, his people, and his God.

⁵ Robert D. Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 293.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:352.

We should remember, again, that just as Israel's disgrace and loss resulted from a needless descent into sin, so also it is sin that ultimately stands behind every grief that we experience. Therefore, we should use all our grieving to harden our resolve against the spiritual realm of sin and darkness that has cast our whole world under the specter of death. Every grief should cause us to serve only the cause of the kingdom of Christ, who came to give life abundantly (Jn. 10:10) and whose reign advances in resurrection power against the realm of sin and the grave.

By displaying his heart as it grieves for beloved Jonathan, David performed a valuable ministry for his readers. As Israel heard the words of David's lament for his covenant friends, they gained help in expressing the particular griefs that each of them had experienced in Israel's defeat and distress. It is well documented that emotional distance in men has a crippling effects on the hearts of their children and other followers. Therefore, David performed a wise act of leadership by offering his readers access to his own heart, blessing them through his sympathy for the sorrows under which they suffered.

In this ministry of sympathy, David points our grieving and hurting hearts to Jesus Christ, who David typifies, and whose compassion, love, and sorrow for the hurts of this world enables us to connect with the heart of God. This is our true need amidst the grief of this world: to know and feel the Fatherly love of our Maker in heaven. We are blessed to read in Psalm 34:18 that "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted." But in the life, ministry, and suffering of God's Son Jesus, who came into this world and joined himself to our flesh, our hearts actually touch the heart of God and his love ministers a salvation that penetrates to the deepest needs of our souls.

LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH

David's lament reminds us that it will do us no good to deny or ignore the reality of death, along with all the other griefs in this fallen world. Responding to the song David composed from broken-hearted Israel, we cannot help but imagine what it will be like for us when the cold hand of death touches our lives. Matthew Henry expressed the truth when he wrote of David's sorrow over Jonathan,

“The more we love the more we grieve.”⁷ What will it be like for us when, after spending years cultivating a true unity of hearts, our spouse should be taken from us in death? How will our hearts be able to survive without being hardened if we should suffer the loss of a life-long friend or, much worse, the loss of a dear child?

Everyone who lives in this world can be sure that simply by living long enough we can expect terrible griefs like these. There is nothing we can do in a sin-cursed world to avoid sorrow and death. What we can do is soberly prepare ourselves by committing our cause into the hands of one who has overcome death by offering his life as an atonement for sin. Jesus said, “In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). Let us therefore commit everything that we treasure – our friendships, our marriages, our children, and our precious souls – into the hands of the Savior whose salvation will cover our shame with his glory, recompense all our losses with eternal gain, and wipe every grieving tear from our eyes when we enter his eternal joy. For all the loves that we may pursue and enjoy in this life, let us make certain to make covenant with Jesus, a friend more faithful than a brother, whose love truly surpasses that of husband or wife and is as “strong as death” (SoS 8:6). Let us be willing, in faith, to lament death as David did, and through a faith like his to embrace the life in Christ that will someday put death and sorrow away forever.

⁷ Ibid.