

Introduction

There is something about the element of military honors at a funeral that always impresses me. The solemnity of silence commands your attention as uniformed soldiers remove a draped flag from the casket of a military veteran. Respect and honor settle upon onlookers as the flag is carefully and methodically folded into a perfect triangle consisting of only the star-spangled navy blue. The soldiers pay their final respects as they salute the flag as a symbol of the comrade they have lost. Then comes the profound moment when the soldier places the carefully-folded flag in the arms of the nearest relative of the deceased and repeats these words: On behalf of the President of the United States, the US military, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service."

It is a final good-bye and solemn expression of gratitude for the contribution to the defense and security of this nation that has been made by the deceased. It is a fitting honor to those who have served. This morning, as we continue to consider the life of David, we come to a place in which David gives a sort of good-bye and solemn expression of gratitude for the recently deceased king and his son. He is filled with sorrow and writes a dirge by which to express the grief of the moment. Let's turn now to give attention to what he recorded.

[Read text and Pray]

History is an inescapable and fundamental part of the fabric of the purpose of God. What actually takes place in the course of time matters. And history is important for what it teaches us. We are meant to learn from history. When Saul and Jonathan died in the midst of battle on Mount Gilboa, it was a historic moment in the life of the nation Israel. It was also a time of intense sorrow both for the people nationally and for David personally. So he penned a lamentation, and he advised that it should be taught to the people of Judah. It was recorded in a collection of writings called the Book of Jeshar, a book which has since disappeared. The dirge instructs God's people about grief, sorrow, and the proper way to respond to the death of a king—even King Saul.

A lament is a thoughtful expression of sorrow and grief. It represents ongoing distress of soul that is not quickly alleviated. A lament aids earnest contemplation and emotional release. The Bible does not tell Christians not to grieve. Grieving is not a bad thing. It was appropriate for an entire nation on the occasion of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Weeping is an appropriate activity at many points in our lives. It need not consume us as though we have no hope, but there is a time to mourn. And there is a time for us to learn and to grow as we do so. We know that God is sovereign. We know that he withholds no good thing from his children. We know that in all things God is working for the good of them that love the Lord, but that does not mean that we should be stoic and unaffected by tragedy. For David and the nation Israel, the deaths of Saul and Jonathan were tragic. It was a time for lamentation.

In this dirge, David directs attention to six aspects of sorrow in the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. I first want you too see . . .

I. The Stunning Death of the Mighty.

This is the theme of David's lament. "How the mighty have fallen!" He says it three times: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the lamentation. We could have used the three points of this statement as our outline.

"How ... the mighty ... have fallen!" is an exclamation that points us specifically to Saul and Jonathan. The word mighty is plural. These two men are the glory of Israel of which David speaks at the outset of verse 19. The glory of Israel is her king and heir-apparent. Aspects of their strength are celebrated as the lament unfolds. God used Saul and Jonathan powerfully in the life of Israel.

But the mighty have FALLEN. They have died. They were slain on the high place of Mount Gilboa. Oh Israel just thought that if they had a king like all the other nations, their fears would be alleviated. Their hopes would be fulfilled. But here is sad news. The mighty ones, in whom they placed their hopes, were slain. Hopes were dashed.

And how! HOW the mighty have fallen. When we use how in this sense, we are speaking of a stunning way in which something has happened or a striking magnitude with which something has happened. David is communicating that the fall itself was great and so was the way in which it happened. We will consider some of those markers as we make our way through the text.

For the moment let's just be mindful of the weight of this statement as a whole. The ones in whom Israel had placed such hope and had seen great works are dead. They are departed. They have perished. It is final. They are slain. They are not coming back. Death. It is was their enemy, and it is our enemy. And it is the last enemy to be destroyed according to 1 Corinthians 15:26. When death invades our lives it is sad. It is real. It testifies to us our vulnerability, our brevity, and our weakness. Even the mightiest fall prey to death. And unless Jesus comes back first, we will all die.

It is not the way things are supposed to be. Death is the result of sin. And that's one thing that death should remind us of. If there was no sin, there would be no death. Paul articulates this truth in Romans 5:12. Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and death spread to all men because all sinned.

Nothing gets our attention quite like death. The nearer it gets to us, the more we are cognizant that we too will surely die. And we dare not sidestep the testimony that death bears with increasing clarity as it draws nearer. That testimony is that we have sinned. We have acted in defiance and hostility to God. We have transgressed his commands. We are lawbreakers and death is the consequence. Now, thanks be to God that through Christ he has overcome death. All those who are in Christ have nothing to fear in death. For the believer death is the door which opens heaven to our souls. But for everyone else, death is the entrance to hell and an eternity of judicial torment.

Death is all around us today. All die. Young and old. Tall and short. Rich and poor. Black and white. The mighty and the weak. It is appointed unto man once to die and after this the judgment. Whoever in this place today is resistant to the idea of sin, let death, even the deaths of others, be a warning to you. You too will die. Sin is the reason. And sin will be the reason you enter into eternal punishment unless you will turn to Jesus. He lived, died, and rose from the dead to defeat sin and death. Only those who believe in him will have eternal life even though they die. Won't you leave your stubborn resistance behind today and surrender yourself to Christ and trust in him?

Back to the subject of death. It is a sad reality to face, but we are the better for it. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart." It is better to be face-to-face with death because it reminds us of what is really important. And when you consider that even the mighty die, you know you are not exempt either. You will be better prepared to face both life and death.

The second aspect of sorrow to which David points us in this lamentation is

II. The Shame of Defeat.

In verse 20, David addresses the shame of this tragedy. He cries out a longing that the Philistines be kept unaware of what has happened. When they hear news of their victory, they will be beside themselves with joy and celebration. It will be in Philistia as it was in Israel when David decapitated Goliath. Remember how the women of the Israelite cities came out singing. Now God's enemies will be filled with the same delight and gloating. David cannot bear such a thought. It is a shame that the arch-enemies of God's people have been victorious! It is something to remember. Think about the psalm in which David says, "O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me. Indeed none that wait for you shall be put to shame."

Ultimately this defeat is attributable to a lack of trust in the Lord. The shame of the defeat is a shame for the name of the Lord as well as for his people. This shame though, is a bad taste that David wants to keep in the mouths of the Israelites lest it happen again.

The Alamo is legendary in my birth state of Texas. It is a former mission turned tiny fort during fighting between Mexico and the Republic of Texas. The Mexican army was under the command of Santa Ana. He led a comparatively massive army against a small group of Texans and their friends who took refuge in the Alamo. Santa Ana, refusing to take prisoners, killed most of the occupants. Across the republic, Texans would not forget his ruthlessness. A little over a month later, they defeated Santa Ana at the Battle of San Jacinto with the cry, "Remember the Alamo." The battle was over in a matter of 18 minutes.

Remembering the past can be a powerful motivator, especially when the past witnessed a tragic defeat. David hoped remembering the shame of the past, as it was taught in Judah, would motivate Judeans not to repeat the faithlessness of the past. Likewise, the shame of our sins in the past, when remembered, can be a helpful motivation not to repeat them.

This brings us to a third aspect of sorrow to which David points us in this lamentation. . .

III. The Tragedy of the Defeat.

In verse 21, David says, "You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings!" He is calling for a drought on the land so it would be useless. That is what fits the terrible tragedy that happened there. The tragedy was that "the shield of the mighty was defiled; the shield of Saul was not anointed with oil." Shields were oiled back in the day to make them slicker so that they could better repel objects. Saul's shield is hereby said to have been ineffective; it was defiled by the arrows of the enemies. The language of defilement suggests the shame and tragic nature of the defeat. The place where it happened deserves to be a wasteland. Devastation of the land's fertility would highlight the breathtaking devastation brought upon the nation because the anointed of the Lord had fallen before his enemies.

This lament is not just about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. It is also about the tragic deaths of so many warriors and the consequences for the nation. Israel has lost her king. It could have been different. What if Saul had obeyed? What if he would have repented when he was confronted? The

lament calls on the hearts of those who hear the lament and those who learn the lament to join together in being appalled at the devastation this is to the people.

We could say the same thing, we followers of Christ, whenever we fall to the enemy. I am thinking in terms of spiritual warfare wherein we cave to the lust of the flesh and sin against God. We fail to take up the shield of faith and extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one. The devastation of sin in our lives is real and tragic. It interferes with fruitfulness of the Spirit of God. Bearing this fact in mind will motivate us to fight hard in the strength of the Spirit against our foes.

We come next in David's lament to . . .

IV. The Gallantry of the Duo.

David extols Saul and Jonathan for their valor. Look to verses 22 and 23.

"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.

The deaths of Saul and Jonathan were not in vain. These men were valiant; they did not turn tail and run. They fought, each with his weapon of choice. And they were united. Now we know that Saul and Jonathan had their moments of disagreement over David, but Jonathan was at the same time faithful to his father. Here at the end he is at his father's side fighting together for the protection of their people.

David speaks here perhaps as many would NOT expect. Wasn't Saul out for his life? David could have described what a lousy man Saul was, how self-centered he had become, how envious he was, how irrational was his thinking. Instead he says, "his sword returned not empty" and he was "beloved and lovely" and he and Jonathan were "swifter than eagles and stronger than lions." It is because David did not see Saul as a rival. He was the Lord's anointed, and David was determined even after his death to honor him as such. He also was focused on the good Saul did over against the bad. Now that Saul is gone, David is graciously choosing to remember Saul at his best instead of at his worst. Here is a commendable way to look at people. It displays humility and a forgiving spirit. David loved him even though he sought his life. David honored him even in his memory as the king the Lord had anointed.

If David spoke this way about a man as imperfect as Saul, how much more should we remember fondly all the ways and accomplishments of the perfect man, our king, the Lord Jesus. He was humble. He was valiant. He was mighty. He spoke with authority. He blessed the outcast. He fought our greatest foe and has won a great victory. He deserves honor and praise as no one else! This poem was to be taught to the people of Judah to reinforce the good that Saul did. Do you rehearse in your mind how great and glorious is your Savior? We should. He is worthy. And our hope and joy and confidence depend upon it.

David lamented the deaths of the mighty, the shame and tragedy of the defeat, and the loss of two men who were gallant. He also laments over ... **V. The Prosperity of the Monarchy.** The well-being of women in the ancient world depended so much upon the provision and protection of their men and their leaders in particular. The women sang when David defeated Goliath. David despises the thought of Philistine women rejoicing and exulting over the victory of their men and

their gods over Israel. So it is appropriate that the women of Israel weep on this occasion. In effect, Saul clothed them in scarlet and put golden ornaments on their clothing. In other words the women of Israel prospered under the monarchy of Saul.

Their tears of weeping would be an acknowledgment of their prosperity and an expression of gratitude for their well-being. David again is calling for honor for the late king.

And while the women are weeping for Saul, David will be weeping especially for Jonathan. The closing aspect of David's lament expresses . . .

VI. The Anguish of Losing a Devoted Friend.

Here is the climax of the lament. Here is where David's sorrow reaches its deepest depths and loudest crescendo. Not only has Israel lost her king, David has lost his dearest friend. All through Samuel Jonathan is referred to as Jonathan the son of Saul. It happens over and over. In stark contrast David now declares that he is such a close and dear friend, he considers him a brother. He writes, "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."

Off the bat, we must assert that there is NO WAY David is speaking of a homosexual relationship. The Hebrew word for love itself does not connote sex. The Old Testament word for sex is to know someone. The law of God that David loved so much forbade homosexuality. If the narrator does not hesitate to expose David's encounter with Bathsheba as sin, the narrator certainly would not have passed over sin if it was involved in this case either. Anybody who thinks David's relationship with Jonathan has to do with sex is ignoring the text of scripture and interpreting its words in light of our degraded culture.

David's concern here is for honoring all things right and of the highest relevance. Jonathan's love has been well documented. It involved the sacrificial embrace of the fact that God had anointed not him, but David to be the next king. The love of Jonathan involved fidelity to a formal covenant. Jonathan's love was seen in protecting David from Saul, strengthening David's heart in the Lord, and promising his intention that when David became king Jonathan would be by his side. This is the love of which David is speaking. David recognizes that Jonathan's self-sacrifice and devotion surpasses even what he has experienced in marriage. These men were soul mates, and the loss of that kind of friend resulted in extraordinary grief for the one who remained alive.

Grief is a divinely sanctioned response to death. It is not wrong to be sorrowful when loved ones die. We feel abandoned. We have been left by the one we love. And the greater and sweeter the love, the deeper the sorrow and sense of loss. Loss is real. And the pain of it is something God understands. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. When he gives we rejoice. Blessed be the name of the Lord. And when he takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord. But that does not mean we are without distress of soul. Stoic and callous responses to death are not godly. To love and lose gives us a better sense of the distress in the heart of Jesus in crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It gives us a better sense of the anguish in the heart of the Father to turn his Son over to wrath.

In death we experience separation. Separation comes ultimately because of sin. Sin and death are intertwined. But thanks be to God who gives victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ. For those who are in Christ, we grieve at death, but we do not grieve as those without hope. We know a day is coming when all of God's ransomed people will be gathered together with Jesus to EVER be

WITH the Lord. He is a friend even better than Jonathan was to David. The main question for you is this: do you belong to the Lord? Have you surrendered to him?

Conclusion

I close with the words of a hymn written by John Newton:

1 One there is, above all others, well deserves the name of Friend;
his is love beyond a brother's, costly, free, and knows no end.
They who once his kindness prove find it everlasting love.

2 Which of all our friends, to save us, could or would have shed his blood?
But our Jesus died to have us reconciled in him to God.
This was boundless love indeed; Jesus is a Friend in [our] need.

3 When he lived on earth abased, "Friend of sinners" was his name.
Now above all glory raised, he rejoices in the same;
still he calls them brethren, friends, and to all their wants attends.

4 Could we bear from one another what he daily bears from us?
Yet this glorious Friend and Brother loves us, though we treat him thus:
though for good we render ill, he accounts us brethren still.

5 O for grace our hearts to soften! Teach us, Lord, at length to love;
we, alas! forget too often what a Friend we have above:
but when home our souls are brought, we will love you as we ought.