

The Life of David

David's Lament for Saul and Jonathan

2 Samuel 1:17-27

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Scripture

The Book of Second Samuel opens with David hearing of Saul's death. The Philistine army defeated the army of Israel on Mount Gilboa. Among the dead were Saul and three of his sons, including Jonathan. An Amalekite came to David with the news of Saul's death. David was in the Philistine town of Ziklag when he received the terrible news of Israel's defeat and the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. The Amalekite lied to David, saying that Saul, knowing that he was mortally wounded, had asked him to kill him. The Amalekite probably thought that David would reward him for his action. Instead, David ordered the execution of the Amalekite. David and all the men with him mourned and wept and fasted for Saul and Jonathan and for the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Philistines. Then David lamented for Saul and Jonathan.

Let's read about David's lament for Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:17-27:

¹⁷ And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, ¹⁸ and he said it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar. He said:

**¹⁹ "Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!**

**²⁰ 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.**

**²¹ "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.

²² “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.

²³ “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.

²⁴ “You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

²⁵ “How the mighty have fallen
in the midst of the battle!

“Jonathan lies slain on your high places.
²⁶ 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.

²⁷ “How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!” (2 Samuel 1:17-
27)

Introduction

On March 24, 1991, one of the oldest and largest Redwoods in California crashed to the ground.

People called the tree the Dyerville Giant, and it lies where it fell. When it stood, the tree was 362 feet tall (the height of a 30-story building). Its diameter was 17 feet. Its circumference was 52

feet. Experts estimate its weight at over one million pounds and its age at nearly 2,000 years.

When the tree hit the ground, a person living a mile away said that it sounded like a train wreck. Vibrations were felt 10 miles away.¹

Saul's death was momentous. His kingship had come to a crashing end. The end of an era had come. News of his death vibrated throughout Israel and Philistia.

It was right that Saul's death be acknowledged. To signify the importance of Saul's death, none other than David, who came to be known as "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Samuel 23:1), wrote a national lament for Saul.

Lesson

Second Samuel 1:17-27 gives us a written lament for someone who has died.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Lament for the Loss to a Nation (1:17-18)
2. Lament for the Loss of Mighty Leaders (1:19-24)
3. Lament for the Loss of a Dear Friend (1:25-27)

I. Lament for the Loss to a Nation (1:17-18)

First, note the lament for the loss to a nation.

The author of Second Samuel writes in verses 17-18 of chapter 1, **"And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he said it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar."**

Note four points regarding this lament for the loss to a nation.

First, this was David's lament. We read in verse 17a, **"And David lamented with this lamentation...."** When we first hear that

¹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/november/1110512.html>.

a loved one has died, we express grief in our emotions, such as sadness, heartache, tears, and so on. A lament, however, is a written expression of grief. This lament by David is in fact the first lament in Scripture. It was not merely a personal and *private* expression of his grief, but it was a *public* expression of grief.

Second, the focus of this lament was Saul and Jonathan. Verse 17b says, “And David lamented with this lamentation **over Saul and Jonathan his son.**” While the people of God had suffered a national defeat at the hands of the Philistines, and many thousands of Israelites had been killed, the focus of this lament was on Saul and Jonathan. Saul’s reign as king started well, and there were some positive aspects of his reign. David highlights these in his lament.

Third, this lament was to be taught to the people of God. Verse 18a says, “**...and he** [that is, David] **said it should be taught to the people of Judah.**” You may have noticed that the army of Israel was defeated, but here the song was to **be taught to the people of Judah.** The tribe of Judah belonged to Israel, and it was David’s own tribe. The people of Judah were the first to acknowledge David as king. Notice too that David’s first act toward his subjects was that they should learn this song. This was a very astute political move. In fact, in the Hebrew text it is literally, “**...and he** [that is, David] **said it** [the Bow] **should be taught to the people of Judah.**” “The Bow” could be the name of the lament’s tune. But it could also be that David wanted his men, the fighting men of Judah, to know this song by heart. He wanted them to have these words memorized and ringing in their ears. He wanted it to become motivation for their response to the attack of the Philistines. Dale Ralph Davis writes:

Gilboa was not the last time Israel would fight Philistines—and David wanted his men to remember Gilboa, remember the tragedy, remember the pagan arrogance. He wanted them deeply stirred and moved—for the next time.

The same principle is at work in the state of Israel today.

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The Israel Armored Corps swear their oath of allegiance on top of the old fortress of Masada. Masada was a fortress west of the Dead Sea, where, in 72-73 AD, some 960 Jews held out against Flavius Silva's Roman army. After seven months of siege the Romans breached the fortress but were denied the pleasure of Jewish blood since the defenders had committed suicide in the night. Masada then stands as a symbol of courage, and Israeli troops today stand on its summit to swear their oath of allegiance: "Masada shall not fall again."²

And fourth, this lament was to be recorded for posterity. Verse 18b says, **"...behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar."** We no longer have **the Book of Jashar**, also known as "the Book of the Upright." It has been lost. However, this book was apparently well known in David's day, and also in the following generations too, because the lament was recorded in **the Book of Jashar**.

At a time of national loss, it is appropriate for a nation to grieve. It is also appropriate to write a lament, a eulogy, a poem to express the loss that is being experienced by the nation.

II. Lament for the Loss of Mighty Leaders (1:19-24)

Second, note the lament for the loss of mighty leaders.

David began his lament by saying in verse 19, **"Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!"** Israel suffered a great defeat on Mount Gilboa. Her king was dead, three of his sons were dead, and countless numbers of soldiers were dead, and the nation was utterly humiliated by the Philistines. Note four points regarding this lament for the loss of mighty leaders.

First, the people of God are disgraced by the enemies of God. David wrote in verse 20, **"Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the**

² Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 25–26.

streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.” The two cities of **Gath** and **Ashkelon** were major cities in Philistia. David did not want the people in these cities, nor anyone in Philistia, to know about the victory of the Philistines over the Israelites. Of course, by the time that David heard about Saul’s death, the Philistines would have already broadcast the news all over Philistia: “We won! Philistia beat Israel! Dagon defeated Yahweh!”

The people of God are always disgraced when the enemies of God triumph over them. God’s name is disgraced when unbelievers cause believers to fall into sin. Disgrace comes when believers divorce each other, sue each other in civil court, allow homosexual couples into church membership, distort the good news of the gospel, and so on. Let us not disgrace the name of God.

Second, the site of the battle must mourn the loss of mighty heroes. David wrote in verses 21-22, **“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. 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 and all the other mighty heroes of Israel died in defense of the land that God had given to his people. It was there on Mount Gilboa that **the shield of the mighty was defiled**. David wanted the very site of the land—the site of the battle—to mourn the loss of the mighty heroes of Israel.

Nations sometimes do this to commemorate the loss of their wartime heroes. They erect statues or memorials to honor those who have lost their lives. And we even do this in the church. We erect statues or memorials to Christian men and women who have died in service to their Lord.

My call to vocational ministry came as a result of reading the biography of Jim Elliot, who along with four other young men,

was martyred in the jungles of Ecuador. A plaque honoring Jim Elliot and Ed McCully, both graduates of Wheaton College, is displayed at the college. The full text reads as follows:

“GO YE AND PREACH THE GOSPEL” DEDICATED TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF EDWARD McCULLY, PRESIDENT OF THE CLASS OF 1949, AND JAMES ELLIOT '49, LIKEWISE AN OUTSTANDING ATHLETE AND LEADER. BECAUSE OF THE GREAT COMMISSION, ED AND JIM, TOGETHER WITH NATHANAEL SAINT EX '48, ROGER YOUDERIAN AND PETER FLEMING WENT TO THE MISSION FIELD WILLING FOR “ANYTHING—ANYWHERE REGARDLESS OF COST.” THEY CHOSE THE JUNGLES OF ECUADOR—INHABITED BY THE AUCA INDIANS. FOR GENERATIONS ALL STRANGERS WERE KILLED BY THESE SAVAGE INDIANS. AFTER MANY DAYS OF PATIENT PREPARATION AND DEVOUT PRAYER, THE MISSIONARIES MADE THE FIRST FRIENDLY CONTACT KNOWN TO HISTORY WITH THE AUCAS. ON JANUARY 8, 1956, THE FIVE MISSIONARIES WERE BRUTALLY SLAIN—MARTYRS FOR THE LOVE OF GOD. ERECTED BY THE CLASS OF 1949 JANUARY 8, 1957 “FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST CONSTRAINETH US” II COR 5:14.³

It is right to mourn the loss of mighty heroes.

Third, there is a generous recognition of her leaders. David wrote in verse 23, **“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.”** If you recall the life of Saul and Jonathan, you may wonder at David’s words when he wrote of them, **“In life and in death they were not divided.”** Their relationship at times was tumultuous. In fact, Saul tried to kill his own son, Jonathan on two occasions (cf. 1 Samuel 14:29, 44; 20:33-34)!

³ See <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jimandedplaque.jpg>.

Nevertheless, David was not intending to write a blow-by-blow account of their relationship. Jonathan had been astonishingly faithful to his father, even after his father Saul had tried to kill him. Jonathan stayed with Saul to the very end of both their lives. And this is what David wanted to recognize when he said, **“In life and in death they were not divided.”**

It is appropriate to recognize leaders when they die, even if they have not been faithful to the end.

And fourth, there is a recognition of national prosperity. David wrote in verse 24, **“You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.”** Saul presided over an economy that prospered under his leadership. He had been able to secure the borders of the country, something that the prior leadership of Israel—the judges—had largely been unable to do. Nevertheless, now that Saul and Israel had been defeated, there was reason to mourn. But, even in mourning, there was a recognition of national prosperity and the leadership of Saul.

III. Lament for the Loss of a Dear Friend (1:25-27)

And third, note the lament for the loss of a dear friend.

David reiterates the refrain from verse 19 at the start of verse 25, **“How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!”** But then he personalizes the loss of his dear friend in the next line, **“Jonathan lies slain on your high places.”** The lament now shifts for the first time into the first person when David writes in verse 26, **“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.”** David concludes the lament with the refrain in verse 27, **“How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!”**

David’s deepest grief was for his dear friend Jonathan. They

had a special and deep friendship. Jonathan was the first to recognize that David would succeed his father Saul as king over Israel. And he was not at all jealous. He gladly submitted himself to the Lord's sovereign will and to stand second to his friend David.

Some people believe that David and Jonathan had a homosexual relationship. But, as Davis notes, "It is utterly wrong-headed to read the idea of homosexuality into this text. The comparison between Jonathan's love and a wife's love is not at the point of sexuality but at the point of fidelity."⁴ This is how the Puritan commentator Matthew Henry put it centuries ago:

[David] had reason to say that Jonathan's love to him was wonderful; surely never was the like, for a man to love one who he knew was to take the crown over his head, and to be so faithful to his rival: this far surpassed the highest degree of conjugal affection and constancy.⁵

David had lost his very dear friend, and that was an enormous grief to him. And so he lamented the loss of Jonathan.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "The deep pain that is felt at the death of every friendly soul arises from the feeling that there is in every individual something which is inexpressible, peculiar to him alone, and is, therefore, absolutely and *irretrievably* lost."⁶ Isn't that true for us when we lose a loved one to death? There is something that is irretrievably lost when a loved one dies. It is certainly appropriate to lament that loss.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the incident of David's lament

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, 29.

⁵ Quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, 29.

⁶ See <https://www.bustle.com/articles/49217-12-quotes-for-strength-in-a-time-of-loss-or-grief>.

for Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:17-27, let us place our hope in Jesus.

David put into words the grief that he felt for Saul and Jonathan and, indeed, for the nation of Israel. It is good to give verbal expression to our grief, as David did.

However, even as David lamented for Saul and Jonathan, he reminds us of our need for Jesus. How? David's refrain in his lament was, "How the mighty have fallen" (1:19, 25, 27). In due course, David himself would fall into sin, as Saul did, and die, as Saul did. All mighty leaders eventually fall. All dear friends also fall. The reason is that all of us are sinners. There is only one who never sinned, and that one is the Lord Jesus Christ. Even though he died, he did not die because of his own sin. No, Jesus died to pay the penalty for David's sin. Jesus died to pay the penalty for the sin of his elect.

So, as we contemplate the birth of Jesus, let me encourage you to put your trust in Jesus. If you have never done so, do so today. Jesus is your only hope. As the Bible says, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Repent of your sin, and believe that Jesus alone can save you. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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