

Introduction

We have all faced tragedy in our lives. I was thinking this week about my own tragedies or times when the darkness was really dark. One such instance was when I parted ways with my previous church down South. It had seemed for me and my family that we had found where we would invest the remainder our lives. The sun had arisen it seemed. But abruptly, it ended with sorrows and hurts, and the glow of our hopes was snuffed out. It seemed that the sun had now set and oh so quickly. Almost a year went by as we cried out to the Lord and waited and sought his guidance. And then one day a call came which eventually resulted in my being right here, now for twelve and a half years of joyful and fruitful ministry. There was tragedy, but it has been transformed. I wouldn't have chosen the painful circumstances we experienced, but it was the opportunity for God to rescue us and put us right where he wanted and restore and energize our joy. This morning we see the same kind of experience in David's life. Joyful relief is turned to grief, but that grief is transformed into even greater rejoicing.

[Read text and Pray]

As we engage with this text this morning, I want you first to see that . . .

I. The Lord Tests His King.

The sun had risen on David. He left the Philistine battlefield spared from the awkward potential of fighting against his own countrymen, or removed from playing a role in the defeat of the Philistines from behind, whichever it was going to be. It was the will of God that Israel be given into the hands of the Philistines. And it was the will of God that Saul and his sons die in the defeat, thus clearing the way for David to come to the throne.

So, early in the morning, David and his men began their three-day trek back to Ziklag to reunite with their families. Meanwhile, and unbeknownst to them, the Amalekites were raiding their town and destroying it with fire. The Amalekites are the pests that had launched an attack on the Israelites when they were making their way from Egypt to the land of promise. These are the folks God had instructed Saul to completely wipe out. His disobedience allowed the tragedy to take place. The Amalekites burned Ziklag and took everyone captive including the wives and children of David and those of his men. For all they knew, they would never see their wives and children again. The absence of dead bodies indicated that their loved ones had not been killed yet, but it also indicated they would likely be sold into slavery or abused and would spend the remainder of their lives in bondage and misery.

You can imagine the upbeat spirit of David and his men as they neared Ziklag. They had escaped the Philistine and Israelite conflict. The three day journey was at an end, and they could look forward to hugs and kisses and home-cooked meals and a day and night of rejoicing. Instead, the stench of smoke alerted them that something catastrophic had taken place. Anticipation turned to horror and grief. David and his men were now facing a crisis of faith. And you mean to tell me that the sun was rising on David while it was setting on Saul, and yet, God allowed this to take place? Yes, indeed. Some of the most favored and blessed of God's children have faced some of the most heartbreaking circumstances. Folks are mistaken who think that if the Lord is with you, you won't encounter tests, trials, and even extreme afflictions in this life. Sometimes they defy our comprehension. But Christians are not told that we won't grieve. We are told that we need not grieve as the rest. Jesus said, "in the world you will have tribulation." And with tribulation, you will

face grief. David and those with him raised their voices and wept until they had no more strength to weep. Everyone was equally affected.

To make matters worse for David, the talk was going around that they should stone David. The men were bitter in soul. This was just too much. They had lost everything. When tragedy strikes we want someone to blame. Someone has to pay. Someone's head needs to roll. And usually that person is someone in charge. Looking at the situation from the outside, we would say that's unreasonable, but in the midst of grief reason is sometimes lost.

For David, this was a time when the bottom fell out. It was a time when he hit rock bottom. Put yourself in his place. Your wives and children have been taken captive. Your home has been burned. And so it is with all the men you lead. And now they are talking about taking your head. You have eluded Saul these many times but now the very ones who joined with you in your cause want your scalp. What is a man or woman to do when all hope is on the brink of being lost and there is nowhere to turn? One thing we have to continue to acknowledge is that the God who is sovereign when he DELIVERS us from catastrophe is also sovereign when we ENCOUNTER tragedy. Tragedy is a test of faith. How will we face it? Well, let's observe how David faced it. The Lord tests his king, but next we see that . . .

II. The King Takes Refuge in His Lord.

The word of transition in verse 6 is also a word of contrast. But. What David does in the midst of the testing is David acts in contrast. He acts in contrast to his circumstances. It is a time when many would turn and be tempted like Job was by his wife to curse God. Everything is against him it seems, but he refuses to cave in. David also acts in contrast to his men. They were overcome with bitterness and refused to see any hope. Bitterness turned to rage. They felt they needed to take their sorrow out on David. But David did not behave that way.

David also acted in contrast to his recent self. Hitting rock-bottom was good for David. For at least a year and 4 months, he had been drifting in relation to the Lord, but now he put his oars back in the water and began paddling with purpose. He was heading back home, back to the open arms of his Lord and God. This is where David turned back from self-dependence to depending on and drawing near the Lord. Verse 6 states that "David strengthened himself in the LORD his God." It had taken a terrible situation. But strengthening oneself in the LORD is where the man or woman of the Lord needs to be.

Are you drifting in relation to the Lord? What would it take to humble you before the him to prostrate yourself before him to seek the strength and perseverance only He can provide? There is nothing more important in the lives of God's people than having this posture before the Lord. It should be a daily delight and discipline to seek the Lord and strengthen ourselves in him. How do we do that? There are a couple indicators in the text.

For one thing strengthening yourself in God means to draw near him fully assured that the Lord IS YOUR God. We see that David was mindful of his own personal connection with the Lord. David strengthened himself in the Lord HIS GOD. He recalled that he belonged to the Lord and the Lord belonged to him. It is as he said in the 23rd Psalm, the Lord is MY SHEPHERD. David was not a nominal worshiper who merely carried on the outward trappings of religion. Even though he had wandered, he did not turn away. Alexander Maclaren points out that David could no longer say, "my house," "my city," or "my possessions," but he could still say, "my God." David prayed in Psalm 27, "Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me! You have said, 'Seek my face.'

My heart says to you, 'Your face, LORD, do I seek.' Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation! For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me in."

Most all of us drift from time to time. Be assured though that the Lord is there if he is truly your God. And even if he is not, he is there if you want him to be. Draw near to the Lord. Own him as the one you love and worship. Draw near to him. Say with the psalmist, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God!" Remember what is true of him according to Nahum 1:7: "The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." (Not he knows who takes refuge in him, but he KNOWS THEM. He loves them.)

There is also a second aspect to David's finding strength in the Lord. No doubt at this time he recalled the promises of the Lord as Jonathan had done when he visited David on the occasion when they last saw one another back in chapter 23. We draw near to the Lord as we remind ourselves of his many assurances to us.

The third aspect of David's finding strength in the Lord is that he sought word from the Lord. He called for Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod to which were attached the urim and the thumim. It is not so important that we know HOW God made his word clear by these means as to know that David was seeking the Lord's direction. He is not leaning on his own understanding but seeking the direction of the Lord. For you and me the Lord has given by far and away the direction we need in his holy word. We demonstrate that the Lord is our God as we seek and obey the word he has given.

Think of this, we do not have Abiathar, and we do not have an ephod. Followers of Jesus do not have Abiathar, but our high priest is Jesus himself, the Son of God, who has passed into the heavens. To his throne of mercy we can draw near that we might receive the grace we need in the time of need. Followers of Jesus do not an ephod, but our guidance comes from the sufficient and complete word of God. Its principles, precepts, and wisdom are God's gracious provision for every decision we face.

Now, next I want you to see that . . .

III. The Lord Guides His King.

David sought the Lord and he sought an answer to the question, "Shall I pursue this band?" and "shall I overtake them?" And the Lord answered with clarity and certainty. David wanted to know if the Lord would have him go after the band who had raided his town. Would he be able to catch up with them? And the Lord spoke; he said, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake AND SHALL SURELY RESCUE." This was more than a prediction. It was a promise to guide David and make certain that he indeed did catch up with the raiders.

Then we come to the seemingly chance encounter with an Egyptian. He was nearly dead. David and his men show him kindness by refreshing him with food and drink. This was no chance encounter. God had already been at work to guide David to the Amalekite raiders. This slave had become sick and his Amalekite master left him out in the wilderness for dead. But in fact God was stationing this slave in the path of David in order to provide the guidance he had promised to his king. Thanks to the direction of this slave, David did indeed overtake the Amalekites.

We have many precious promises from the Lord. We are assured for instance that the Lord will withhold no good thing from those who fear him. But many times we haven't a clue the manner in which the Lord is going to provide. Ariail and I were talking with Melissa's dad the other day and he was recounting the path his life had taken. He didn't always know exactly where he was going, and sometimes the path went in directions other than he had planned, but looking back he could see that the Lord had always been his guide even through circumstances over which he had no control. The Lord knew the way of his king and he guided him where he should go. He knows your path as well. And if you will seek his guidance and do what his word bids you to do, he will take you exactly where he wants you to be.

Now, finally this morning, I want you to see . . .

IV. The King Triumphs Through His Lord.

The Amalekites were enthralled with the spoils of their raids. They were caught up in celebrating their successes, and they were captivated with their plunder. They were unaware that the leader of the people whose town they had burned to the ground was standing over them, observing them in their revelry, and ready to strike. He was about to bring justice down upon them. He had overtaken these Amalekites, and he was about to destroy them.

These Amalekites depict for us the hoards of folks who live their lives gorging themselves on the things of this world. They indulge in the riches of what really belongs to God but with no thought of the God who has given them life. They live it up. They love the world and the things in the world. They pursue the lusts of the flesh and of the eyes and the boastful pride of life. They are oblivious to the fact that all of their indulgence takes place under the purview of the God they ignore. They are caught up in getting all the gusto they can, but the God to whom they are accountable stands at the threshold. These folks persuade themselves that there is no God and there is no judgment; there is no reckoning. But they will be caught unawares. They will be eating and drinking just as always and the Lord will come.

Do not let that day come upon you in such a manner. First of all, do not become deceived by the world. Do not love the world and the things of the world. God did give us the world to enjoy, but not to love as we rather should love him. And no less importantly, do not overlook the fact that God watches and observes every facet of your life. He will not sit idly by and ignore your sin.

Now, the text in just a few brief words describes a decimating defeat. David struck them down from twilight until the evening of the next day and not a man of them escaped, except 400 young men who mounted camels and fled." And combined with the decimation of David's enemies was the rescue of his people who had been taken captive. This reality so aptly prefigures the return of Christ Jesus. When he comes it will be to bring decimating judgment upon his foes and at the same time bring release to his own people. He will conquer the captors AND set the captives free. Jesus is depicted in the book of Revelation as riding on a white horse as a victorious king who judges and wages war against his enemies who are also the enemies of his people. A sharp sword come from his mouth with which to strike the nations. And when he accomplishes this task, not a single person will escape on the back of a camel. They will try to escape. They will be in full flight; they will call on the rocks and trees to fall on them to keep them away from the gaze of Christ, but nothing can hide them from him. And since they took no refuge in Jesus, there will be no refuge for them. The full force of his judgment will fall on them.

While Jesus comes to judge his enemies, he will also come to rescue his own. Jesus read out of Isaiah one day to the citizens of Nazareth certain characteristics of Messiah. Among those

descriptions are these: he came to preach release to the captives and to set at liberty those who are oppressed. David's rescue of his people points us to the certainty that Jesus will do the same for those who belong to him. He will come for his people; he will come for his bride the church, and he will bring us home.

Now look at the full efficacy of David's work of rescue. Verse 18 declares in no uncertain terms: "David recovered ALL that the Amalekites had taken, and David rescued his two wives. NOTHING was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that had been taken. David brought back ALL." It is a staggering feat. Not a child was lost. Not a lamb was lost. You know Job rightly said, "The LORD gives and the Lord takes away." David and his men could turn that around here: "The LORD takes away, and the Lord gives back."

Once again David gives us a glimpse into the work of his greater son, the Lord Jesus. If you are familiar with John 6, you will remember a conversation between Jesus and the crowds around him. They were resistant to believe in him. And to them, he said the following: "ALL that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose NOTHING of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that EVERYONE who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." David in his dull rescue illustrates for us the complete confidence for everyone who believes in Jesus as well. Jesus will not lose you. He will not forsake you. His determination to do the Father's will guarantees that when he arrives and rescues his people, not one will be missing. The enemy cannot destroy you if you belong to Christ. Death cannot destroy you. Christ will raise you up.

So the great rescue took place and an enormous amount of spoil was taken along with all the captives that were returned to their families. What a day of rejoicing! And now the group that was not long ago talking of stoning David was singing his praise: This is David's spoil. How Saul would have loved it if he could have been sung about like that! But David would not have this go to his head. He knew it was not David's spoil. It was the spoil that was GIVEN INTO THE hands of the people BY THE LORD.

On their return home some in the group who did the fighting wanted to withhold the plunder from those who were too exhausted to continue. They had stayed with the baggage. But David said, "No." He understood that the victory of him and his people was a victory granted by the Lord. It was a gift of God that the captives were free. He was not about to be selfish or let his men be selfish with what was a gift of God's grace.

It is a fact too often forgotten that all we are and all we have in the Lord is a gift of grace. The Apostle Paul is so full of this knowledge however that as he begins his epistle to the Ephesians, he can hardly contain himself. He writes as though with shouts of joy, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." We need to remember that everything we have is by grace, pure grace. Everything Christ's people are is a gift of his grace. And if what you have is a gift that has been given to you, why would you boast as though it was some proof of your superiority. Gifts of grace are not proof of the greatness of the receiver. They are proof of the greatness of the giver. And it is completely unfitting for those who have received gifts of grace to hoard them as though they somehow belonged to them or were earned by them. For sure we should not enable folks who are caught in the sin of irresponsibility. But in the family, some fight and some stay with the baggage; in the body some are

eyes; some are ears; some are hands; and some are toes. And we all share the spoil of Christ's victory. David even shared the spoil with many others who had no part in keeping the baggage or in fighting the battle. He showed he was going to be a king of giving not the king of selfishness.

We need to notice finally the message David sent with the gifts he shared with nearby Judeans. "Here is a present for you from the spoil of the enemies of the Lord." The Amalekites were the enemies of the people of Israel. But for that very reason they were also enemies of the LORD. And as Dale Davis writes, "because they have mangled his flock they must deal with its Shepherd!" The conflict between Amalek and Israel is expressive of a historic division between two peoples, two kingdoms, two divisions of humanity. Every person belongs to one of these two groups. You are either among the people of God or you are the enemy of God. There is no middle ground and no place of neutrality. Jesus said, "whoever does not gather with me scatters." So it's fitting to ask this morning to which group do you belong? To take your place among the people of God is to admit that you are a sinner and to trust in Jesus Christ who through his death and resurrection has redeemed ALL who draw near to God through him.

Conclusion

What a contrast there is between the beginning of this chapter and its conclusion! The gripping sorrow of grief and despair descends with a sudden suffocating grasp as David and his men return to Ziklag to find it burned to the ground and everyone taken hostage. But this is the way God works in a world riven with sin. The most gripping day ever in the history of planet earth was the day the people of this world nailed our Creator to a cross. But the doom of that day gave rise to victory, rescue, and hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead. That is the central story of tragedy turned to triumph.

But everyone who is in Christ has our own tragedy transformation tale. It is an account of how we were lost and held captive by our sins. Yet one glorious day, by God's grace the Rescuer came and the chains fell off. Our hearts were set free as God gave us a new heart and we believed. Never get over the joy of that day. And if there is not such a day in the history of your life, wouldn't today be a great day for your tragedy to be transformed into triumph? Jesus has come into your captivity and proclaimed release if you will turn to him and believe. He will certainly not cast you out and he won't ever leave you behind if you will simply come to him.