

Epitaph for the Fallen

2 Samuel 1

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Now tonight we turn to the first chapter of 2 Samuel and we do this as a kind of appendix to chapter 31 of the previous chapter. I wanted to finish off the story of the death of Saul and Jonathan and the lament that we find in this opening chapter. And then from chapter 2, which we'll take up perhaps in September, then we're into the life of David and David's kingship. So this is a fairly natural break at the end of chapter 1. Now let's read together God's Word and before we do so let's look to Him in prayer.

Lord our God we come again tonight looking for Your blessing as we read the Scripture together, for the blessing of the Holy Spirit grant us insight, illumination. We want to read it aright and understand it aright. We pray O Lord that words of Gospel grace might come forth from this text this evening. We know that all Scripture is giving by the out-breathing of God and is profitable for doctrine and correction and reproof and instruction in the way of righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. So hear us O Lord. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear now God's Word:

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. And on the third day, behold, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. And when he came to David, he fell to the ground and paid homage. David said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." And David said to him, "How did it go? Tell me." And he answered, "The people fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead." Then David said to the young man who told him, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?" And the young man who told him said, "By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and there was Saul leaning on his spear, and behold, the chariots and the horsemen were close upon him. And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, "Here I am." And he said to me, "Who are you?" I answered him, "I am an Amalekite." And he said to me, "Stand beside me and kill me, for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers." So I stood beside him and killed him, because I was sure

that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the crown that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord."

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. And David said to the young man who told him, "Where do you come from?" And he answered, "I am the son of a sojourner, an Amalekite." David said to him, "How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" Then David called one of the young men and said, "Go, execute him." And he struck him down so that he died. And David said to him, "Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed.'"

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. He said:

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

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, no 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, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions.

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

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.

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"

Amen. May God bless to us that reading from His holy, inerrant Word.

Well, as the sports commentators are wont to say, and that's about as far as I'm going to go with a sports illustration there, this is a story in "two halves." There is a narrative section in the beginning and then there is this lament or elegy in the second half of the chapter.

David, of course, is unaware of what has happened. 1 Samuel ended in a graveyard. Saul and his three sons, Jonathan and the two other sons are dead. David has been dealing with the Amalekites who raided his home city of Ziklag and taken the women and the children and he has gone after them and killed them and brought all of the women and children safely back to the city. And perhaps, it's hard to be sure, perhaps a day or so — these are parallel passages that we have been reading — sometimes in Saul's camp and sometimes in David's camp. So he didn't know that Saul and Jonathan are dead. He didn't know anything about Saul's night visit to the witch of En-dor and the raising of Samuel's spirit with the prophecy that before the next day would be through Saul and his sons would be dead. And then, all of a sudden running into the camp, bedraggled with mud on his head, clothes torn, comes this man, this Amalekite. It's a distance of about eighty miles. It might have taken him several days to get there. Looking the worse for wear he bows to David. He has escaped from the camp of Saul and proceeds to tell David of the death of Saul and Jonathan and his two brothers, and when pressed begins to tell this story of how Saul was mortally wounded and he begged this Amalekite to kill him lest he be tortured by the Philistines.

Now, he has a crown an armlet to prove the story. He has most certainly come from Saul. But you know this is not the right story. This is not the story we read in the previous chapter, so what do you do? What do you do when you have one chapter that tells us Saul took his own life, and another chapter — actually the very next chapter — that tells us that an Amalekite took Saul's life. Now you can do one of several things. You can assume that the editor was a hack. You can assume that the editor was a bungling dimwit who just didn't notice that these chapters contradict each other. Well, obviously that's not going to work. They're right next to each other. You're not the first person to say, "You know, these stories are not the same." The man who wrote this saw that. So what's going on here?

You may assume that this is typical of Scripture. Scripture is a human document brought together over hundreds of years and it contradicts itself, but that's not important. What's important is you just get the *lesson* out of the story. What is God saying to me? That is the important thing, the "reader response hermeneutic" as it's called today. It's not important what the Bible is saying. What's important is what you get out of the Bible. How do *you* see it?

What's your opinion? And sometimes, you know, your opinion isn't important!

What's important is — What is the text actually saying?

Now obviously one of these stories is wrong. And the story that is wrong is the one that we are reading. This is a lie. This Amalekite is lying through his back teeth. He wants a reward. He probably saw Saul take his life and he saw an opportunity. He knew that David was next in line — that story was all over the country by now — so he sees a golden opportunity to take the crown and the armlet and give it to David, and David would slap him on the back and say, “Atta-boy! My enemy is dead! Give this man a reward!” And instead David executes him. Now you may get bent out of shape about the ethics. How could David do that? Well, first he has killed the Lord's anointed and the law was clear. David was following Mosaic Law. To kill the Lord's anointed was an act worthy of the death penalty.

Now, you may read this in the light of 21st century evidentiary policies — where's the evidence? He was killed on the basis of his own confession. Now that may not stand the test of the courts of the 21st century but this was war. And besides, he was an Amalekite. And David has just killed a lot of Amalekites and he had killed them because God has said they were to be put to death, part of that policy that God enacted — that the Canaanites, the Amalekites among them, were to be put to death. And there's one standing right beside him, and besides which, he's just told David he's killed the king. So move on. There's no real problem here.

I. David laments — these deaths must not be forgotten.

It's the lament that I want us to look at. It's an extraordinary lament on David's part. “David,” verse 17, “lamented with the lamentation over Saul and Jonathan.” And he issues this word. This was written later of course, and he said this is to be remembered. This is to be put in the book of Jashar, “the book of the upright” it literally means, some historical document outside of Scripture now, where famous men, famous men of war, famous soldiers perhaps and leaders were to be remembered. And Saul and Jonathan are to be among them.

This is grief. You notice in verses 11 and 12 that David took hold of his clothes and tore them, as did all the men around him, fasted until evening, and then in verse 17 David laments with this lamentation. This is more than just a death. It's a national catastrophe. As I was saying last week, this is Israel's 9-11. This, on the scale of battles in Israel, this is the worst. Mount Gilboa is strewn with the bodies of fallen Israelites and the king and his sons are among them. It is a national catastrophe and it is appropriate, it is absolutely appropriate that David mourn, that he expresses grief for what has happened. And he wants the people to remember it; generations to come are to remember this catastrophic battle.

Some of you have seen *Invictus* about a rugby match in South Africa at the time of the release of President Nelson Mandela. And the captain of the rugby team — they are playing abysmally, appallingly badly. They are a disgrace. And at the end of one particular match where all of the players are really upset, the captain makes them drink this bad tasting concoction and he says to them, “Drink it and taste the bitterness of defeat and vow never to taste it again.” Well, that's what David is saying here. David is saying this is a catastrophe and it must not be forgotten.

We live in an age, a post-modern age that forgets the past. How many actually engage in Memorial Day? I mean apart from shopping and cutting out coupons in newspapers, how many actually engage in Memorial Day to remember the fallen, to remember those who gave their lives for us? This is an age that despises the past, forgets the past. It's the snobbery of the present.

Do you know “In Flanders Fields the poppies blow between the crosses row on row”? It was written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in May in 1915 in Flanders, in France, during the First World War when his dear and best friend, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who was twenty-two years old had died. And on the next day he wrote this poem:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Well those words are repeated on Memorial Day in Canada, of course, and in Britain and sometimes here in the United States too, but it's a poem pleading with us to remember the past. And David is saying, “Saul and Jonathan and this battle must not be forgotten.” That's the first thing.

II. David's grief is God-centered.

The second thing is, the God-centeredness of David's expression of grief here.

You notice how it begins here? “Your glory O Israel, is slain.” Your glory — Saul had been slain, Jonathan had been slain, the two brothers had been slain, hundreds perhaps thousands of Israelites had been slain on Mount Gilboa but as far as David is concerned, his chief concern is God's glory has been slain on Mount Gilboa. Do you notice how he goes on? “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon.” You see, the Philistines have taken Saul's head, they pinned the headless body of Saul and his sons to the walls of the city of Bethshan and they're publishing the newspapers, CNN are talking, talking, talking all over Israel and the women are gossiping, daughters of the Philistines, daughters of the uncircumcised, and there's all this trash talk about Israel and about king Saul and about how Jehovah, how Yahweh, the covenant promised keeper of Israel is dead on Mount Gilboa. That's the trash talk. It's like when a moral catastrophe takes place in the church and you turn on the news and there's all this talk and all this exalting that some evangelical has fallen and they seem to glory in it and draw everything they can out of it. And David is saying, “Don't let this happen! Don't let this happen!”

You know, modern Israeli soldiers, conscripts of course, all of them, are taken to the top of Mount Masada at the time of their graduation before they begin their service. And they're taken to this mountain down west and south of the Dead Sea where in the second century they — 960 Jews withstood the whole of the Roman army led by Flavius, and for seven months on that mountain they withstood that Roman army and when that Roman army eventually broke through, you know that Roman army built a highway, that can only be described as a highway, right to the very top of the mountain, bringing rocks and stones — using slaves of course to do it — until they could just walk onto that mountain. And those 960 soldiers threw themselves off the cliff of that mountain and killed themselves rather than be given into the hands of the Roman army. And Israeli soldiers to this very day are taken to that spot to remember, to remember. David is saying, “The glory of God is at stake” and he is grieving. He is grieving. This is a lament. This is a song of sorrow. There's soul in this song.

You know, my friends, do we ever grieve like that for the church? David's concern here is for the kingdom of God and the kingdom of God at this point is at one of its lowest ebbs and he's hurting. He's hurting because God's honor is at stake.

You know the amazing thing — I've been looking at this poem all week long and do you know the amazing thing about it is, if you had been David and somebody comes to tell you that your mortal enemy is dead — this is Saul. Saul was nuts! Saul was stark raving bonkers! And if somebody came to tell you he's dead, wouldn't this be a time to just rejoice just a little? To see this as God's gracious act of providence because after all David is the anointed king? This is the way God is going to raise me to the position that I ought to have! And there's none of it. There's not a trace of it.

Proverbs 24:17, Proverbs 24:17 — “Do not gloat when your enemy falls, when he stumbles do not let your heart rejoice.” You see that in David. David is full of what the enemies of God are saying about the kingdom of God and it's all bad.

And then there's this poignant expression of gratitude in the middle of this lament. He begins to talk about Jonathan. We've seen this before in chapter 18 of 1 Samuel. It's back again. And he says this extraordinary thing. “I am distressed for you” — verse 26 — “my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women.” And I suppose by 21st century standards we read that, and we're a little uncomfortable with the language.

Now let me say, I don't even want to go where so many modern commentaries see this as a homosexual relationship between Jonathan and David. And there are sermons galore, by the truckload, on the internet. I looked. I read about six of them and got sick of them because this is the text that they use to justify homosexuality and to have sermons against the discrimination of the church against the gay community and so on and so on, when nothing could be further from the truth. It would be impossible in the culture of Israel for such a relationship to exist without some form of condemnation. It is unthinkable that such a relationship could have existed.

So what is this? Well, it is no different — and I've talked to soldiers in battle, who've come back from battle. I've talked to soldiers who are at the seminary who have faced battle in Iraq or Afghanistan and they speak about their fellow soldiers who've gone through battle with them, who've looked after their backs, who've saved their lives, and they speak of their fellow soldiers in terms that they don't even speak about their wives. It's a different kind of relationship. They love their wives but they have this fraternity, this bond, this band of brothers, this fellowship, and David and Jonathan had that band of brothers fraternity. It's a unique thing. I don't have that. I've never been in battle, but I've spoken to soldiers who can use language that's very similar to the language that David is using here.

Let's go up from this passage. Let's ascend. Let's go right up, 36,000 feet. Let's look out the window and look down. What's going on here? This is a terrible moment in the history of redemption. This is a moment of defeat. This is a moment of calamity and David says, the people of Judah must remember this. This happened because Saul had sinned. David doesn't mention that in this poem. He doesn't want to bring that into this poem. But when you go up to 36,000 feet and you look at the whole story, that's what's going on. This calamity has come upon Israel because they had sinned. They had refused to do what God had told them to do.

It's not without some irony that Saul had refused to deal with the Amalekites, and who is it that comes to David with a message that Saul is dead by his own hand,

by this Amalekite's hand, a lie of course, but an Amalekite.

But God is sovereign. This is not the end of the story. Just waiting now in the wings in the very next chapter David is going to be anointed king. The man after God's own heart is going to be anointed king. What happened to Saul and Jonathan and the rest of them was exactly what God had said would happen. Nothing happened here that was outside the sovereignty and control of God. "God moves in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm."

You know, Saul was not the Messiah, nor will David be the Messiah. He will be a better king than Saul but he won't be the Messiah either. Within ten chapters you'll see David go all the way down. But there is one who sticks closer to us than a brother, great David's greater son, the Lord Jesus.

Yes, it's from this messy history that God sends the Messiah, His Son, our Savior, and in the mess of these chapters, God has not forgotten His promise.

You know, that's a great comfort, isn't it, when things go awry, when terrible things happen, when we find ourselves saying, "This is the worst day of my life" — that God is still in control, that His purposes will stand fast.

"He that keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps."

May God bless His Word to us for His name's sake. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You now for the story that we've been following these many months, conscious that You are in complete and absolute and total control. We thank You for the promise given to Adam and Eve in the garden and now in this story looking so dim and distant, yet Jesus was born of the seed of David. And we thank You O Lord for this glorious Gospel that is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto You by Him, the Lord Jesus Christ. Now bless Your Word to us. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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