



Please turn to 2 Samuel 1 (p. 237), which contains David's song of lament following the deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan. I stole the title of today's sermon from a commentator who captures the beauty of David's lament in two words:

### **Good Grief 2 Samuel 1**

Everybody grieves. It's part of being human. Although you don't remember it, the first sound you ever made was a cry – when you emerged from your mother's womb.<sup>1</sup> Life begins with tears, and they continue to be shed throughout our earthly pilgrimage. This past Wednesday I stood beside a grave and watched those gathered there weep over the loss of their loved one. Billy Graham said, "Life at its best is full of sadness." That's not to say there isn't any joy in life – there is! But joy is accompanied by grief. Grief will remain part of our human existence until that day when God "will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things [will be] gone forever" (Rev. 21:4 NLT). Won't that be wonderful?

In the meantime, we must continue walking through this vale of tears. Scripture shows us how to grieve in a good way. One way to do this is through lament. "A lament is an expression of *thoughtful* grief."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, a lament is more than gushing out words in a moment of intense sorrow – like emotional vomit. Because lament is an expression of *thoughtful* grief, words are chosen carefully. Not coldly or callously, but carefully. A lament unites the intensity of one's emotions with the discipline of one's mind to produce a "structured sorrow, ... a coherent agony" in which "words are carefully selected, crafted, honed to express loss as closely yet fully as possible."<sup>3</sup>

That's what David bequeaths to us in 2 Samuel 1 as he mourns the loss of King Saul and his son Jonathan. God has provided this Scripture for our encouragement so that when we go through times of sorrow, we can grieve well. With that in mind, let us consider . . .

#### **1. The Grievous Report**

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. <sup>2</sup> And on the third day, behold, a man

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 19. Cited by Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*. Focus on the Bible Commentary Series (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999, reprinted 2018), 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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. <sup>3</sup> David said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Then David said to the young man who told him, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?" <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, 'Here I am.'<sup>8</sup> And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite.'<sup>9</sup> And he said to me, 'Stand beside me and kill me, for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers. <sup>10</sup> 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."

- 2 Samuel 1:1-10

At first glance, the Amalekite seems like a decent man. He has traveled 75-80 miles from Gilboa to Ziklag, where David and his men had been recovering from an exhausting week of travel, battle, and rebuilding their charred homes. (If you missed that part of the story, read 1 Samuel 30.) The Amalekite shows up all "disheveled and obviously in mourning" (2 Sam. 2:1 MSG). He falls to the ground out of deep respect for David and delivers the tragic news of Israel's devastating defeat and the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. As proof of Saul's death, the Amalekite hands David Saul's crown and armband.

But there's a clear discrepancy between the Amalekite's account of Saul's death and the narrator's account in 1 Samuel 31. The Amalekite says he killed Saul, whereas the narrator says Saul fell on his own sword, and when his armor-bearer *saw that he was dead*, he fell on his sword too. Some commentators try to harmonize the two accounts, but there's no need to. The events of 1 Samuel 31 are recorded as they took place. The Amalekite falsified his report, hoping to score brownie points with David. Apparently, the Amalekite came across Saul *after* he was already dead, took his crown and armband and brought them to David, thinking the king would reward him with a cabinet position or whatever.

The Amalekite "assumes that David is driven by the same passion for power as he is."<sup>4</sup> But he's wrong. *Dead* wrong.

## 2. The Godly Response

<sup>11</sup> Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 18.

an Amalekite.”<sup>14</sup> David said to him, “How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?”<sup>15</sup> Then David called one of the young men and said, “Go, execute him.” And he struck him down so that he died.<sup>16</sup> 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.’”

- 2 Sam. 1:11-16

These verses reflect David’s godly response.

#### **a. David’s sorrow (vv. 11-12)**

You would think that after the Amalekite says he killed Saul, that David would have him killed on the spot for doing so and then spend the rest of the day with his men grieving the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. But David expresses his sorrow *before* executing the Amalekite, who must have stood there awkwardly for hours on end while David and his men mourn, weep and fast until evening for Saul and Jonathan and the Lord’s people. Their grief is great and cannot wait. Matthew Henry rightly observed,

***The more we love,  
the more we grieve.***

The grief of David and his men are exemplary and should prompt us to examine ourselves. Do we show such love and concern for God’s kingdom, for the Lord’s people? When we see spiritual apathy plague the church or see a denomination or Christian institution drift from the truth of Scripture in their attempt to be more culturally relevant, how do we respond? Or rather, what is our *first* response? Is it censure or sorrow? Dale Davis warns against “a kind of evangelical arrogance,” “a sort of humble version of Luke 18:11,”<sup>5</sup> where the Pharisee prayed, “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people...” as he proceeds to point out their sins and highlight his own perceived virtues. We can be marked by the same arrogance on a broad scale as we criticize other churches, denominations and institutions, and also in a narrower sense, on a more personal level, as we see other believers go astray or families in disarray. May we, like David, like Jeremiah and Daniel and Nehemiah and God himself grieve over the tragic state of the Lord’s people, making godly sorrow our first response.

#### **b. David’s standard (vv. 13-16)**

David exhibited godly integrity not only in his sorrow but also in the righteous standard he upheld in his execution of the Amalekite. Before having him killed, David asks, “Why were you not afraid to kill the LORD’s anointed?” (v. 14). Then after sentencing him to death, David declares, “You have condemned yourself, for you yourself confessed that you killed the Lord’s anointed” (2 Sam. 1:16 NLT). Even though the Amalekite had not actually killed Saul, he said that he did, therefore his own words condemned him.

In this brief exchange between David and the Amalekite and his subsequent execution, we can take away two key principles for us:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.

**(1) Words designed to please people will eventually hurt you, not help you.**

The Amalekite's version of Saul's death wasn't all that different from what really happened. He altered the facts just enough to make himself look good in front of David. Yet he had no idea that his spin was a sin that would cost him his life.

Jesus said, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:37). In the end we will answer to God for everything that we say. One of the identifying marks of Christians is "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul stated matter-of-factly, "I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant" (Gal. 1:10 NLT). No wonder David prayed in Psalm 19:14, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." Let this be our prayer as well.

**(2) A godly person will not only adhere to God's standard but also hold others to account.**

Not only did David refuse to touch the Lord's anointed, but he also restrained his own men from doing so. Thus when the Amalekite said he killed Saul, David killed him. This wasn't vigilantism but a proper use of David's authority as God's anointed king.

In the New Testament, Peter exercised his authority as an apostle by pronouncing judgment two Amalekites in the church named Ananias and Sapphira. They weren't Amalekites ethnically but spiritually. They falsely represented themselves to look good to others and wound up "in twin graves" for it.<sup>6</sup> Apparently this severe act of discipline was not a unique occurrence. In teaching on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul tells believers to examine themselves, saying that if we don't, we're eating and drinking judgment on ourselves, incurring the Lord's discipline. Paul says, "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (v. 30). God takes sin seriously and so should we. In the church, God doesn't want us to kill each other, but he does want us to kill sin and to call one another to account. Paul says,

This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

- Ephesians 4:13 NLT

The Lord is our standard. David recognized this and showed it in his godly response to the tragic deaths of Saul and Jonathan and Israel's terrible defeat on Mount Gilboa. David responded by expressing genuine sorrow, by upholding God's standard, and by writing a song of lament.

**c. David's song (vv. 17-27)**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15.

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

<sup>19</sup> “Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places!

How the mighty have fallen!

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> “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.

<sup>22</sup> “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.

<sup>23</sup> “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.

<sup>24</sup> “You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,

who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,

who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

<sup>25</sup> “How the mighty have fallen

in the midst of the battle!

“Jonathan lies slain on your high places.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> “How the mighty have fallen,

and the weapons of war perished!”

- 2 Samuel 1:17-27

In commenting on David’s song, Old Testament scholar Bill Arnold wrote, “In one of the most emotional and moving scenes of the Bible, David’s genuine pain comes through with singular clarity.”<sup>7</sup> David’s song is an outstanding example of lament as an expression of *thoughtful* grief, where the intensity of one’s emotions are united with the discipline of one’s mind to produce a structured sorrow, a coherent agony.<sup>8</sup>

In verse 18, in the ESV translation, David says “*it* should be taught to the people of Judah...” (italics added). This rendering is based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The original Hebrew text says not “it” but “The Bow.” This was probably the title of David’s lament, which makes sense in light of verse 22, which appears at the center of the song and says, “the bow of Jonathan turned not back.”

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<sup>7</sup> Bill T. Arnold, 1 & 2 Samuel. The NIV Application Commentary, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2003), p. 412.

<sup>8</sup> See the second to the last paragraph on page one and the related footnotes.

David says this song is to be sung and that “it is written in the book of Jashar” (v. 18), which evidently contained a collection of early poetry as a resource for God’s people. This outpouring of David’s distress was meant not only to benefit him but others also. So, if we incorporate the intent of a lament into our basic definition of it as thoughtful grief, as structured sorrow, we could say, as Dale Davis does, “A lament is a formal expression of grief or distress, one that can be written, read, learned, practiced, repeated.”<sup>9</sup>

The Bible assumes that loss is real, loss is felt, and when one suffers we all suffer. As the Lord’s people, we are to bear one another’s burdens, share in one another’s sorrows. By grieving well, we can help others to grieve well too. With this objective in mind, let us point out various features of David’s lament that may be of help to us.

In the opening stanza in verse 19, David introduces us to the theme of the lament: “Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!” The high places were typically the last to be conquered, and it was there on Mount Gilboa that the glory of Israel – their king and his sons perished. “How are the mighty fallen” becomes the catchphrase of David’s song and is repeated in verses 25 and 27.

David’s lament in verse 20 shows that though he had been living in Philistia, his heart was still loyal to Israel. The thought of the Philistine women celebrating the Philistines’ victory the way that the Israelite women of had celebrated David’s victory over Goliath makes him heart-sick.

The news of what happened on Mount Gilboa is so sad, so tragic, that David wants the landscape itself to sorrow, to feel the loss, to join in the lament. He doesn’t want any dew or rain to fall on the mountain or any crops of grain grow on its slopes. For it was there that mighty Saul died and was God’s anointed king no more.

David chooses to remember the best about Saul and pictures him as a mighty warrior fighting side-by-side with his son Jonathan, saying in verses 22-23, “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.”

In verse 24, the women of Israel who at one time rejoiced are now called to weep because the king that provided so well for them has perished.

The theme of the lament is repeated in verse 25, only this time as song begins to culminate, David narrows his attention to Jonathan, saying, “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain on your high places.” Then David speaks directly to Jonathan, saying, “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” (v. 26).

It’s a shame that some modern interpreters have taken this statement by David as evidence that he and Jonathan had a homosexual relationship. But there are good

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, 24.

reasons to reject such an interpretation: **(1)** The standard Old Testament verb for sexual activity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is *yada* (“know” – cf. Gen. 4:1), and that word is never used to describe the relationship between Jonathan and David. **(2)** The noun for “love” used here is the same word used in 1 Samuel 18:3, which says, “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (see also 20:17). This was a soulful love, not a sexual love, and it proved more meaningful to David than the love of women. Like no one David had ever known, Jonathan had put aside his own interests for the good of David.

So knit was the heart of David to Jonathan, that near the end of David’s lament, he addresses Jonathan directly, as if he were still alive. I remember doing this quite often shortly after my mom died. I would look at her picture and tell her how much I loved her, how much I missed her. We do this when our sense of loss is intense. Not that many years ago, I went to a wake at a funeral home, and the man who had lost his wife kept instinctively turning to his side as if to speak to her, when he’d suddenly remember that she wasn’t there. It’s like a part of him was missing. I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose my wife Ruthie after nearly 33 years of marriage. Yet other couples we know – some in our church family – have been married twice as long.

***The more we love,  
the more we grieve.***

“How can we endure such sorrow unless we are convinced that underneath it all stands a love from which we can never be separated”<sup>10</sup> – “the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39)? Remembering this truth in the midst of sorrow prompted George Matheson to write the hymn, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.” Do you know the story behind it?

At age 20 George Matheson (1842-1906) was engaged to be married but began going blind. When he broke the news to his fiancée, she decided she could not go through life with a blind husband. She left him. Before losing his sight he had written two books of theology and some feel that if he had retained his sight he could have been the greatest leader of the church of Scotland in his day.

A special providence was that George’s sister offered to care for him. With her help, George left the world of academia for pastoral ministry and wound up preaching to 1500 people each week – blind.

The day came, however, in 1882, when his sister fell in love and prepared for marriage herself. The evening before the wedding, George’s whole family had left to get ready for the next day’s celebration. He was alone and facing the prospect of living the rest of his life without the one person who had come through for him. On top of this, he was doubtless reflecting on his own aborted wedding twenty years earlier. It is not hard to imagine the fresh waves of grief washing over him that night.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

In the darkness of that moment George Matheson wrote this hymn....<sup>11</sup>

*O love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee....*

For the final stanza, Matheson wrote,

*O Cross that liftest up my head  
I dare not ask to fly from thee  
I lay in dust life's glory dead  
And from the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.*

In the midst of our grief we cling to the gospel and look forward to the glorious future that awaits the people of God!

As I stood by the grave of Nino Campagna this past Wednesday with his daughter Rosemary and other family members weeping over their loss of their loved one, we were reminded from Scripture that we don't grieve "as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:13b-14 MSG).

Yes, "life at its best is full of sadness," but there's a new world coming in which God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. These things will be gone forever (Rev. 21:4).

In the meantime, let's make the most of our sorrow and learn to grieve well. In his helpful book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*, Pastor Mark Vroegop writes,

Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God. Without lament we won't know how to process pain. Silence, bitterness, and even anger can dominate our spiritual lives instead. Without lament we won't know how to help people walking through sorrow. Instead, we'll offer trite solutions, unhelpful comments, or impatient responses. ...

Lament is how Christians grieve. It is how to help hurting people. Lament is how we learn important truths about God and our world. ...

A broken world and an increasingly hostile culture make contemporary Christianity unbalanced and limited in the hope we offer if we neglect this minor-key song. Christianity suffers when lament is missing. ...

There is deep mercy under dark clouds when we discover the grace of lament.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dane Ortlund, "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go." The Gospel Coalition, 04 August 2010 [online]. Retrieved on 12 February 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/o-love-that-will-not-let-me-go/>.

<sup>12</sup> Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, 21-22.