

“How The Mighty Have Fallen”

November 19, 2017

1 Samuel 31:1-13 & 2 Samuel 1:17-27

SI: Today we’re going to finish our study of 1 Samuel. An accomplishment! The theme verse of the book is in chapter 16 where it says that man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. In David we see a man after God’s own heart. He’s the great prototype of Christ.

This last chapter is about Saul’s death in battle.

But then we’re going to turn the page and read a few verses from first chapter of 2 Samuel because David wrote a poem about this battle. His response to it has some important faith lessons for us.

INTRO: David was a warrior.

And when he heard the news of Israel’s defeat on Mount Gilboa he did something that warriors have done throughout history.

He wrote a tribute. It’s one of the most heartfelt poems in the Bible. In this poem David grieves the death of Saul and Jonathan on the battlefield, he celebrates their bravery, and he expresses his deep affection for the fallen.

As I said, warriors throughout history have done this.

I’ve read many books about WWII, but the one most deeply moving to me was written by an Alabamian—Eugene Sledge’s book *With The Old Breed*.

It’s about his experiences as a Marine on Peleliu and Okinawa.

The reason it’s so moving is that it’s a tribute.

It’s full of grief over loss and celebration of bravery and deep affection.

In writing I am fulfilling an obligation I have long felt to my comrades in the 1st Marine Division, all of whom suffered so much for our country. None came out unscathed. Many gave their lives, many their health, and some their sanity. All who survived will long remember the horror they would rather forget. But they suffered and they did their duty so a sheltered homeland can enjoy the peace that was purchased at such high cost.

War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste... The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other. Marine Corps training taught us to kill efficiently and to try to survive. But it also taught us loyalty to each other—and love.

That sounds like David:

David doesn’t say war is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste, he says:

How the mighty have fallen! How the weapons of war have perished.

And he expresses love for his comrades in arms like Eugene Sledge.

I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me.

Your love for me was wonderful . . .

Tributes by warriors have a great and noble place in human society.

But why do we have a warrior's tribute in the Bible?

What are we intended to learn from it?

I think David's poem is in Scripture to show us that followers of Christ ought to be big-hearted people.

What do I mean by big-hearted? Two things. I'll give them to you as we go.

MP#1 Big-hearted Christians express and affirm universal human emotions.

They don't allow good theology to squelch feelings about important things.

Commentators often point out something about David's poem.

There is no reference to God in this poem. No mention of the Lord.

In fact, there are no religious or theological expressions in it at all.

David does not interpret the last battle on Mt. Gilboa based on anything he believes about Saul and Jonathan's eternal destiny.

He doesn't mention Jonathan's faith in God.

He doesn't mention the Lord's rejection of Saul.

He doesn't reflect on why God's chosen people were defeated and what the Lord might be teaching them.

None of that.

Instead David writes a tribute that expresses universal human emotions.

Soldiers of every background and every religion, even soldiers who are atheists can resonate with David's feelings of grief, anger, and loss.

We talk a lot about the sovereignty of God.

What a powerful truth that is. What a life-changing doctrine, sovereignty of God.

Occasionally you'll hear Christians say that since God is sovereign,

and nothing is an accident, and everything that happens to us is the will of God then we shouldn't really grieve anything that happens.

There will be no grieving at this funeral.

This was God's timing and the person is in heaven.

There's nothing to grieve. This is a celebration.

After all, whatever happens is the perfect will of God.

James says to count it all joy when you fall into trials of various kinds.

So why did David grieve over the death of Saul and Jonathan?

He knew Saul was going to be removed so he could be the king.

God had told him it was going to happen.

It was not a bad thing, it was a good thing.

And Jonathan's death was not an accident.

There are no accidents in God's universe

Plus, Jonathan trusted the Lord and was certainly in a better place.

But David mourned like someone who has suffered a devastating blow.

It came to him as a great shock, unexpected, out of the blue.

And he freely expressed his deep emotion.

As Christians it's right to experience life as it comes to us as human beings.

It's right to talk about it as all people do and not feel compelled by our good theology to squelch those feelings.

There may be no accidents in God's world in the big sense—
but there are many things that feel like accidents to us.

They come out of the blue to us and suddenly overturn our lives.

For Christians there may be no setbacks or losses in the ultimate sense.

We have God's promises and his presence and heaven.

But there are things that happen to us that we experience as devastating losses.

They produce shock and pain.

The Bible is full of authentic, spontaneous expressions of emotions

by godly people that are entirely appropriate—surprise, pain, pleasure, anger.

Jesus Christ wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus even though he knew that in
just a few moments he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead.

It seems like Jesus would have been having trouble hiding a grin.

(Y'all just wait to see what I'm about to do.)

Instead he lived in the immediate present and mourned the sorrow of his friends.

Jesus Christ felt and expressed universal human emotions.

Let me expand this a bit and relate it to something else.

What about the achievements and successes of unbelievers?

We all know that when unbelievers are successful and happy and enjoying wealth
and good health they aren't going to cry out to God for salvation.

It's when they lose things or when they become desperately unhappy and weary—
that's when people turn to Jesus.

So if we're thinking from an eternal, theological perspective, shouldn't we
frown over the successes and achievements of unbelievers?

We know those things will keep them from repentance and add to judgment.

But David celebrated the achievements of Saul—an unbelieving, wicked man.

Big-hearted Christians should rejoice over the success of unbelievers and mourn
over their losses—even if we know theologically that nothing but hardship
will make them think seriously about their need for Jesus.

Big-hearted Christians should celebrate the achievements of an athlete,

appreciate the work of a singer or actor—even if you know not a Christian.

Even if you know the person leads a degraded life or is anti-Christian in their
moral or political views—

If that actor or athlete is talented in his or her field, Christians should appreciate
their work in a big-hearted way.

God never expects your good theology to make you less human.
What is interesting and impressive to all other human beings, and what is painful and sorrowful to all other human beings will be to Christians too.
Even though we may look at these things from a very different perspective from unbelievers, it's right to be moved by them as our fellow human beings.

The Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God.
The Bible is also a wonderfully human book.

It celebrates the emotions and affections of human life and calls them good.
You see it so vividly in David's poem.

He describes the clash of arms on the battlefield.

He is angry at the thought of enemy women cheering his country's defeat.

He grieves the death of those he loved. He laments the ruin of war.

And he expresses it all in beautiful, carefully crafted poetry.

There's nothing uniquely Christian about those things.

They're human. And big-hearted Christians embrace the human experience, even as we look at all of life from an eternal, theological perspective.

It's so appropriate that we have David doing this.

Let me read you something I said earlier in sermon series.

All the heroic men and women of faith in the Old Testament foreshadowed Jesus Christ in different ways. We could say they are prototypes of Christ.
But David is the greatest of all prototypes of Christ.

Many of the ways we know Jesus as our Lord and Savior and relate to him are through our understanding of David.

Jesus was not a shepherd, he was a carpenter's son.

But we know Jesus and relate to him as our shepherd because David was a shepherd, and out of his experience, he wrote the 23rd Psalm.

In a way, David is the most complete human being in the Bible.

His life is given more chapters than anyone else. We have numerous Psalms he wrote that show us his deepest thoughts and feelings.

And Jesus Christ came and took on human nature and affirmed as good our experience of life in this world.

Tonight, as we gather to feast together,

let us freely express our feelings and emotions with one another.

MP#2 Big-hearted Christians acknowledge and celebrate the good in people.

They aren't compelled to point out sins, faults, and failures.

It's not at all a surprise to hear the David's emotion over Jonathan.

But it is surprising to hear him grieve over Saul.
Saul had wronged David in many ways. Chased him, hounded him.
Saul had come apart morally and psychologically.
He had become unpredictable and homicidal.

If David had said something like this:

God gave Saul so many opportunities, so many gifts, but he squandered them.
He also gave Saul numerous chances to repent, but he didn't.
His death a sad and tragic warning of what happens when you turn back on God.
If David had said that it wouldn't have been surprising.
It would have been the most obvious and accurate thing to say.
That's one of the great lessons of 1 Samuel—the effects of unbelief and its end.

But David speaks as if Saul had been a fine king and a great warrior.
He calls him the glory of Israel.

He describes his reign as clothing Israel in expensive garments gold jewelry.
But he had become such an erratic ruler, people were afraid of him.
He speaks of his bravery in battle, not allowing his sword to be unsatisfied.
But Saul's cowardice at key points in his kingship caused a lot of damage.
He says Saul and Jonathan were loved and gracious and even in death
they were not parted. Swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.
But on two occasions, if you remember, Saul came close to killing Jonathan
over his friendship with David.

So what's David doing?

There are some commentators who say that David doesn't believe any of this.

This was a purely political move on his part.
He knew that after Saul's death he was going to have to gain the support of
members of Saul's tribe, the tribe of Benjamin.

What better way than to write this stirring and emotional tribute?

Imagine a politician shedding a tear at the funeral of a political opponent.
It's captured on video and people say: Look, he cares. He's above politics.
But actually he faked the whole thing. Is that what David was doing?

Of course not. We utterly reject that interpretation of David's actions.

Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart.
David wasn't saying good things about Saul to gain political points.
David was a man who knew he had been forgiven his many sins by a gracious God.
And this is how a gracious, big-hearted man speaks about someone who has died.
There may be times when necessary to speak truth about another person's behavior.

David did that on several occasions with regard to Saul's behavior.

But if there is a time for that, there is also a time to draw a veil over the sins of another person. This was a time for that. So David did it.

He placed the best possible construction on Saul's service as king.

He remembered the good things and he simply ignored and forgot the bad.

The Lord does that for us too.

He forgets our sins and remembers them no more.

He buries them in the depths of the sea, removes as far as east is from west.

If he does that for us, then surely we ought to be able to do that with the sins of other people—especially if there is no need to remember them any longer.

If the person has died. Or closer to home, if you're trying to forgive the person.

Let me expand on this for a minute and talk about forgiveness.

I realize it is the opinion of some counselors that it's wrong to tell people to forgive and forget. Saying that trivializes the wrong done to them and hurt caused them.

I certainly understand that if a great evil has been done to a person, then forgiveness will be a struggle and will take a long time.

But it seems to me that authentic forgiveness ought to strive to forget.

Or come to a point where you speak and act as if you've completely forgotten.

God certainly can't forget our sins in the ultimate sense. He's all knowing.

So how does he forget our sins? He doesn't talk about them.

He doesn't think about them when he thinks about us.

Isn't that wonderful? When you see Jesus one day.

When you meet him face to face, he'll never bring up your sins against him.

He'll never say: You know, your sins sent me to the cross.

He'll talk to you in an open, big-hearted way.

Like David did about the man who had made his life miserable and tried to kill him.

If you don't try to forget, you'll probably develop some bitterness.

If you do that, you'll hurt by that bitterness.

It's almost like you are giving the person who wronged you permission to keep hurting you.

Your sins have been swept away by the blood of Jesus.

Your sins have been forgotten by your loving heavenly Father.

Because you are united to Christ and a child of God, you too have the ability to forgive and forget.

What does it look like? David gives us a pattern in his poem.
It means covering other person's sins and acknowledging the good you see in him.
Saul did some good things. Like the of city of Jabesh Gilead early in reign.
People of Jabesh remembered that years later, came and retrieved Saul's body.
David thought about those things when he spoke about Saul.

Try to do that in your conversation about people you don't like very much.
You'll see how resistant your heart is to the Gospel.
This is the Gospel. This is the way God talks about you.
When God the Father and God the Son talk about you, praise and commend you.
The Lord rejoices over you with singing. Zeph 3:17
He calls you his beloved.
He's told you ahead of time what he's going to say when you step into heaven.
Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your master's happiness.

We don't deserve those kind words of commendation.
We're unworthy servants.
Everything good in us has been put there by the Holy Spirit.
But the Christian man or woman who understands they are the recipient of that
incredible, big-hearted, grace will then express it toward other people.
And that means highlighting the good and covering the bad with love.

I wish I was a man who spoke that way about everyone. I'm not.
But I wish I was like David in celebrating the good and covering the bad in love.
The reason I wish I was like that is not so much because it would be a blessing
to other people, but because of what it would mean about my heart.
David felt this way spoke this way because he was a man whose heart had been
transformed by the grace of God.

So here we are at the end of 1 Samuel. As I've told you number of times, theme.
Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart.
What's in your heart?
Do you want the love of Jesus to reign in your heart and life?
Do you want to do great things for him?
Then remind yourself why it was that David forgot Saul's sins and mentioned
only the good things about him—even after all he had done to David.
Then tell the Lord you want to be like that.
Tell him you want to have a vivid awareness of his grace and forgiveness.
You want a deep assurance that he loves you and speaks highly of you.
And then ask him to empower you to open your mouth and speak big-hearted

words of forgiveness and praise and good.