

A Surprising Lament

2 Samuel 1:1-27

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I don't know about you, but I rarely.....if ever.....have wished that anyone was dead. **However, at times I have thought life would be easier if a particular individual would move to Australia.** And I've wondered how sad would it be if that person's name showed up in the obituary column.

Knowing that about myself and believing my attitudes are not that much worse than most of yours, it makes what happens in the first chapter of 2 Samuel seem kind of remarkable.

For the past two summers, we've explored the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. The last thirteen chapters of that book describe a 10 or 11-year period where Saul is usually pushing David and often trying to kill him. I suspect there could have been many times when David wished that Saul would move to Australia.

In the final chapter (31), Saul is seriously wounded in a battle with the Philistines and ends up killing himself. At that point, one would expect David would be if not ecstatic, at least relieved! Finally, after ten years of being in exile, being on the run, he can come home. Yet, in our text, we see a rather different response.

As we begin our journey through 2 Samuel this morning, we will be exploring chapter 1:1-27 (page 254). Let's pause and pray that we would hear, understand, believe and obey as God speaks to us through His Word today.

The events in our text happened about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. Saul had served as the first king of Israel, for about twenty-five years. Then, because of Saul's disobedience to God, the Lord had the prophet Samuel anoint David, a young man unrelated to Saul, as the new king.

David is content to wait until God's time to take the throne, but Saul soon feels jealous and threatened. This leads to this over ten-year period where David lives in exile because Saul is attempting to kill him. That ends with Saul's death.

2 Samuel 1:1 – After the death of Saul, David returned from defeating the Amalekites (1 Samuel 30) and stayed at Ziklag two days.

This is a town in southwest Judah, near Philistine territory.

2 Samuel 1:2 – On the third day a man with torn clothes and dust on his head came from Saul's camp.

That was almost one hundred miles north. David asks him what happened in the battle between Saul and the Philistines. The man (who later says he is an Amalekite living in Israel) answers:

2 Samuel 1:4 – “The troops fled from the battle. Many of the troops have fallen and are dead. Also, Saul and his son Jonathan are dead.”

David asks:

2 Samuel 1:5b – “How do you know Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?”

The Amalekite replies:

2 Samuel 1:6, 9-11 – “I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and there was Saul, leaning on his spear. Then he begged me, ‘Stand over me and kill me, for I'm mortally wounded, but my life still lingers.’ So I stood over him and killed him because I knew that after he had fallen he couldn't survive. I took the crown that was on his head and the armband that was on his arm, and I've brought them here to my lord.”

Now, if we read 1 Samuel 31, we know this man's story is not exactly accurate. Saul killed himself. This Amalekite did not kill him. Some suggest Saul may have failed in his suicide attempt, so this man actually finished the job.

I doubt that happened because I think this fellow had plenty of motives to lie. As is almost always the case with liars, it is difficult to know which parts of the story are true and which are not.

I think the man arrived on the battlefield after Saul was dead, but before the Philistines had taken away the bodies. He is likely a scavenger, seeking to collect anything of value from corpses on the battlefield. Finding Saul, the king of Israel, dead apparently gives him an idea. "I will take credit for killing Saul. David, the man likely to be the new king, will be grateful to me; and I will be generously rewarded."

This fellow must have been surprised by David's initial reaction:

2 Samuel 1:11 – Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and all the men with him did the same.

In the ancient world, this was a symbol of deep grief. David is mourning for all the Israelites who died in battle, especially for his friend Jonathan, and especially for King Saul. David then asks the man:

2 Samuel 1:14 – "How is it that you were not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?"

In other words, what made you think you should take the life of the man God had chosen to be king of Israel? Yes, Saul failed to be the type of king God desired, and the Lord had chosen David to be the new king. Yet, Saul was still the king. And as far as David is concerned, this fellow who claimed to have killed the king is no better than an assassin. The fact Saul was already mortally wounded doesn't make a lot of difference.

In 1 Samuel 31, an account of what actually happened on the battlefield, Saul's armor bearer refuses to obey Saul's order for that man to kill him. Killing anyone, even with their consent, is still wrong. And killing the king, even with his consent, is especially wrong.

2 Samuel 1:15 – Then David summoned one of his servants and said, "Come here and kill him!" The servant struck him, and he died.

That is the punishment David feels is appropriate for a man who claimed to have killed the king. In David's mind, the man is no better than an assassin.

2 Samuel 1:17 – David sang the following lament for Saul and his son Jonathan.

That is recorded in verses 19-27. It is no surprise David mourns for Jonathan. That was his best friend.

2 Samuel 1:26 – I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother. You were such a friend to me. Your love for me was more wondrous than the love of women.

As we noted in 1 Samuel, there is no sexual dimension in the relationship between David and Jonathan. David simply recognizes what C.S. Lewis says in his book, The Four Loves. The highest form of love is not "eros," romantic love, but "agape," unconditional love, a love which flows out of God's love for us.

Since David and Jonathan have that type of relationship, it is no surprise David's grief for Jonathan is deep. But Saul?

2 Samuel 1:23-24a – Saul and Jonathan, loved and delightful, they were not parted in life or in death. They were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions. Daughters of Israel, weep for Saul.

Wait! Weep for Saul? Saul, the man who had been chasing and trying to kill David for over ten years? That seems almost crazy! But it is what David does. And what he encourages others to do. This is a surprising lament for someone who had tried to kill David.

OK, that is 2 Samuel 1. An account of events that happened about 3,000 years ago. What is the Lord saying to us today through this text?

One commentary suggests that honoring those who died in military battle, observing Memorial Day, is the main application from this passage. Now, I believe Memorial Day is a really good idea, but I think the Lord has a couple of more lessons for us today.

Remember that for over ten years, Saul has treated David as an enemy; and, in many ways, was David's enemy. During that period, there were likely many times when David wished Saul would move to Australia. Yet, when Saul dies, rather than rejoicing, or even just giving a sigh of relief,

David mourns. He has the man who claims to have killed Saul executed. From this, folks, I see two lessons we need to heed:

#1 Don't let bitterness define your life.

There were certainly reasons David might have been bitter. Saul had tried to kill him numerous times. And Saul's hatred of David was completely unjustified. Saul believed David would try to take the throne from him, but that was not David's intention at all. And more than once he told Saul that.

Yet, despite being on the receiving end of Saul's paranoid hatred, David did not become bitter. When Saul dies, he mourns. When the Amalekite claims to have killed David's enemy, David has the man executed. In this way, David is a stark contrast to a lot of folks today.

"I cannot go to that event because she will be there!" "Oh, I know we are supposed to forgive, but you don't realize how much he hurt me." "It just feels good to see her get what she deserves."

Friends, those statements are all rooted in bitterness. **And the ironic thing is that bitterness usually does far more damage to your own soul than it does to the person with whom you are angry.**

Someone said, "A bitter person is like a rattlesnake that bites itself."

Buddy Hackett, the comedian, said, "Whenever I am tempted to sit around nursing a grudge, I remind myself that the person I am mad at is probably out dancing!"

Folks, at that point, you can either let the grudge go or you can become more bitter – because the other person doesn't share your misery.

One of the crazy things about bitterness is its longevity. People can be bitter for a long, long time. Some folks hate another person, even though they can't remember why they don't like that individual. Sometimes the bitterness is not even directed toward the right person.

Pastor Underhill in Spokane, Washington knew another man in the community didn't like him, but he was unsure why. Then he learned that the

man was angry because thirty years earlier, a pastor had failed to show up for the fellow's wedding ceremony, and the man thought Underhill was that pastor. However, thirty years before, Underhill lived in another state and had never been to Spokane.

Other times, people have incredibly detailed memories of how others have supposedly wronged them. My uncle was mad at his first grade teacher, who fifty years earlier, put him in "the dumb group" for math class. Now, he was suffering from some mental illness, but whether the mental illness was the cause of the bitterness or caused by the bitterness is difficult to know.

Friend, don't let bitterness define you. Many years ago, a couple of monks, Brother Patrick and Brother Francis were on a journey when they encountered an older woman who was afraid to cross a stream.

The two ended up carrying her across. As they continued down the road, Patrick began to complain about his clothing being wet and about how his back hurt. Francis merely smiled, but Patrick's complaints continued.

Finally, Francis said to him, "Patrick, I think the reason your clothes feel wet and your back hurts is because you are still carrying that woman. I put her down as soon as we crossed the stream."

Oh friends, put those burdensome grudges down and see how good your soul will feel!

"But, Pastor Dan, you don't know what she did to me." "I have tried, but I just can't forgive him."

No, I don't know what she/he did to you; but I do know that by God's grace you can get rid of that bitterness! I will mention three resources the Lord gives us that enable us to do so:

First, there are some great examples.

David was not bitter toward Saul, even though Saul had tried to kill him. Even more important is the example of the Lord Jesus. Even as he suffered great agony on the cross, Jesus says:

Luke 23:34 – "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Friend, to be like Jesus is to be willing to forgive and avoid bitterness. Those who are believers in Jesus, those indwelt by the Spirit, are empowered to do just that.

Second, our experience of being forgiven enables us to forgive others.

Ephesians 4:32 – And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

As Christians, because God has forgiven our sins against Him, we should be able to forgive those who wrong us.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells the story of a king who forgives a great debt one of his servants owes. Yet, that same servant then goes and demands another servant immediately pay the much smaller debt owed to him.

Jesus' point is it is ridiculous and evil for someone to do that, and it is ridiculous for us to refuse to forgive others when God has so graciously forgiven us. And I should add, there is this warning:

Matthew 6:14-15 – “For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses.”

Third, our choice to forgive doesn't mean justice will not be done.

Romans 12:19 – Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, “I will take revenge; I will pay them back,” says the LORD.

Often, when someone says, “I can never forgive him after what he did to me,” the person is saying there is something very wrong and unjust about the other individual not experiencing consequences for his/her sin. The Lord says don't worry, justice will be done.

Yes, Saul had wronged David in many ways. Yet, David knew it was not his job to pay back Saul. God would take care of that. David trusted the Lord to do so. And if we do that, as well, bitterness will not define our life.

The #2 lesson from this passage is this: We need to be content to do things God's way.

Despite Saul's paranoid hatred of David, David was confident of certain truths and realities:

1) **Saul had been chosen by God to be king.**

Though the king's orders should not be obeyed if they are contrary to God's law, the king is to always be honored. The office deserves honor, even if the individual does not. The death of the king was never something to celebrate, but always something to mourn.

2) **God's timetable is to be accepted and trusted.**

For about 15 years, Saul had been the reigning king, while David was the anointed king. David knew that eventually he would be king, but he refused to try and speed up that process. He would not take any shortcuts. God's timetable, not his, needed to be followed. The thought of someone trying to speed that up by assassinating Saul was something he simply would not tolerate.

Friends, the attitudes David displayed seem a bit out of style in modern American culture. We tend to admire people who are pragmatic, results-oriented, who know what they want and make it happen.

We often want to set our own timetable, and rarely think about what God's timetable might be. Now, this doesn't mean we are to be passive, just sitting around waiting for God to take care of everything for us. David certainly wasn't passive as he spent over ten years on the run from Saul. Yet, our actions should be actions we believe the Lord is calling us to do, not just things we decide we want to do.

One of the things being lost in our culture is a respect for institutions. That is not a good thing because **God uses not just individuals, but institutions to accomplish his purposes. That is God's way of doing things.** There are three primary institutions the Lord has established:

1) **The government**

Romans 13:1 – Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.

Yes, governments can forfeit their authority when they reward evil and punish good. I believe that happened in Nazi Germany and in Communist countries like the Soviet Union.

However, Paul believed Emperor Nero was still a legitimate authority, and David thought Saul was. This causes me to think that both our last two Presidents (Obama and Trump) were God-ordained authorities. That means that even though you may not like or agree with one or both of these men, there should still be respect for the office.

As Thomas Jefferson said, “If men were angels we would not need government.”

Because we are not angels, God has established government for us that we are to respect and, in most cases, obey.

2) The second institution God has established is the family – husband, wife and children.

I know there are a lot of other family arrangements now, and in a fallen world that is to be expected. If you find yourself in that situation, for example, as a single parent or a widow, put your hope in the Lord, do your best to honor Him and, I am confident you will experience His grace in many ways.

But, if you are in a “traditional” family – husband, wife and kids, remember – this is what God intended for both individuals and societies. Friend, if you are not married, I am not going to try to tell you whether that is a good thing or not. I will leave that between you and God. But, the fact the majority of adults in the U.S. are not married is not a good thing. Marriage and family are important parts of a healthy society.

3) The third institution God has ordained is the church.

God desires every single individual Christian to be part of not only the universal church, but a local church, such as CBC. Being part of a church

involves accountability. No one just does whatever he/she wants to do. Listen to what the Lord tells us:

Hebrews 13:7 – Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow.

Just to be clear, church leaders are to be accountable as well. As a pastor, I am accountable to our church board. And those board members are accountable to each other. And the church board is accountable to the congregation as a whole. No one just gets to do whatever he/she wants to do because:

Romans 12:5 – We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

Now, governments, families and churches are far from perfect. They are fallen institutions. My point is that they are God’s way of doing things. As individual Christians, we are to respect them and, in most cases, submit to their authority. That is a significant part of doing things God’s way.

Friends, as we go through the book of 2 Samuel, David is frequently not a good example. He has plenty of faults, flaws and failings. But today, in chapter 1, he is a very good model.

Like him, we should strive to make sure our lives are not defined by bitterness. Like him, we should seek to do things God’s way – especially in our relationships with government, family and church.

Folks, that is what I believe God is saying to us today. Now what that means to you as an individual – how specifically he wants you to respond is something about which you are much more of an expert than I am.

I do suspect the Lord probably wants you to make some adjustments, some changes in your attitudes. I am certain those changes often will not be easy. But I am confident that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, if you have experienced his salvation and are indwelt by his Spirit, you will be able to make those changes by his grace and for his glory!