

How the Mighty Have Fallen - 2 Samuel 1-4

Date: 7 April 2024, 1st Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 1:1-2:4a

How the Mighty Have Fallen

On Wednesday I buried Vic Peck. Many of you won't know Wendy, his wife. She used to attend our 10am service but now she joins us online from Sandown nursing home in Sandy Bay. In many ways Vic's death was a mercy. He was 96. He had dementia. He had terrible problems with his knees. Watching him decline and die, I think of my own father. He cut his teeth as a young missionary in the jungles and swamps of the Sepik river in PNG. He and mum travelled all over the world, recording the message of Jesus in other languages. While we were in the UK last year he lost his licence. He's got dementia. We have to get someone to chauffeur him from his house right to the boarding gate at the airport when he comes down to visit. When I think about Vic, or my Dad, or most funerals I go to, the words that echo in my head are "How the mighty have fallen!" They're taken from David's song in our text today, 2 Samuel 1. David sings in lament and grief over the death of king Saul and his son Jonathan.

Today we're starting a new sermon series on 2 Samuel, or rather this is part 2 of a series we began last year on the book of Samuel. It's called 1 and 2 Samuel in our Bibles because the story was too long to put on one scroll. Why a sermon series on Samuel? First, the book is absolutely key to understanding the whole storyline of the Bible. In 2 Samuel 7 God makes a promise to David that one of his descendants will build God a temple and that his throne and kingdom will be established forever. It is through this kingdom that the blessing God promised to Abraham will come to the whole world. This is the great Messianic promise. So without Samuel, you cannot understand the Bible. Second, through the book we see that despite human evil, God is at work to bring about the kingdom of his Messiah. In fact he is at work through flawed and sinful people, which is great news for you and me! Third, it's simply a terrific story.

But, a little bit of context for this book. Hundreds of years earlier God had promised a man named Abraham that through his family, all people on earth would be blessed. His descendants became the people of Israel. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He made a covenant with them, promising to be their God. They in turn promised to obey him and the laws of the covenant which he gave them through the prophet Moses. God brought them into the promised land of Canaan. But over the following generations Israel kept rejecting God and turning to the idols and wicked practices of the nations around them. The nations

oppressed them. God raised judges to rescue them, but the nation spirals downward. God raises up Israel's first king Saul, to lead his people. But Saul rejects God and so God, through the prophet Samuel, anoints David to be king. 1 Samuel charts the rise and fall of Saul and the corresponding rise of David. The book ended with David in exile because Saul tried to kill him, and tragically, Israel's defeat and Saul and his son Jonathan's death at the hand of the Philistines, her arch enemies.

So 2 Samuel opens with king Saul dead, and it looks like the path for David to the throne of Israel is clear. This however takes 4 chapters. This morning we'll look at that narrative under the heading "**God will give strength to his king**", picking up the words of Hannah's poem at the start of Samuel. Then we'll zero in on David's lament in point 2, "**I grieve for you Jonathan my brother.**"

"He will give strength to his king"

2 Samuel opens with these words:

After the death of Saul, David returned from striking down the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days.

We rejoin the story in the aftermath of the Philistines' devastating victory over Israel. David has been in exile among the Philistines. He marched out with them, but they, perhaps wisely, have not trusted him to fight against his old master Saul. So they send him back home to Ziklag. There David and his men rescue their families and property from an Amalekite raiding party. Meanwhile Saul and Jonathan die in battle at Gilboa, Saul falling on his sword rather than facing humiliation at hands of the Philistines.

Now back at Ziklag a man appears in mourning carrying word to David of Saul and Jonathan's death. What's more he brings Saul's diadem and armband. He claims to have come upon Saul in the battle and then mercifully ended his life. As readers we know something is amiss here as we've just read a completely different account of Saul's death. Yet David's response to this report still chills the blood. In verse 15 we read,

Then David called one of his men and said, "Go, strike him down!" So he struck him down, and he died. **16** For David had said to him, "Your blood be on your own head. Your own mouth testified against you when you said, 'I killed the LORD's anointed.'"

What is going on here? Why does David execute this guy for bringing him news that his great enemy Saul, the one who has been hunting him down to kill him, is now dead? It's one of those moments where the text invites us to ponder what is happening. Robert Alter in his commentary writes, "Does one accidentally stumble onto a battlefield while the killing is still

going on?”¹ Further, the Amalekite’s story doesn’t add up. He said Saul was overtaken by chariots, but you don’t take chariots up mountain slopes. Much more likely he had come after the battle as a scavenger, discovered Saul’s body and brought his regalia to David in hopes of reward.

David’s response is however entirely unexpected. Where the Amalekite can only imagine David acting out of self interest, like himself, instead, David is distraught. He and all his men tear their clothes. They mourn and weep and fast till evening, “for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and for the nation of Israel.” David had had the opportunity to kill Saul but he had refused to raise his hand against the LORD’s anointed. So now he executes judgement. The Amalekite’s own words have condemned him.

We’ll return to David’s lament, but for the moment, let’s focus on David’s path to the throne. David’s pious actions show he respects God’s choice and leaves room for him to work and does not want to take things into his hands. And yet at the same his actions are politically astute. By executing the Amalekite he makes clear he did not want and had nothing to do with the death of Saul, even though now it is he alone who remains the LORD’s anointed. The pattern is repeated 2 more times through the following chapters until at last, all Israel anoint David king over them in chapter 5.

David moves to Hebron and there the men of Judah anoint him king over them. But it turns out that Saul still has one son left, Ish-bosheth. Abner, Saul’s general, makes Ish-bosheth king over Israel. Now there’s civil war between Israel under Abner, and those who follow David. Joab is David’s commanding general. In one of the battles Abner kills Joab’s brother Asahel. Ish-bosheth means “Man of shame”, and it turns out he’s a weakling. Abner is the one pulling the strings. They fall out and Abner decides to play kingmaker and transfer the kingdom to David. He goes over to David who throws a banquet for him and sends him away in peace.

But Joab will have none of it. He says Abner is tricking David. And then Joab and his brother Abishai lure Abner into a private meeting and stab him. It’s a moment of personal revenge for Abner killing Asahel. But that was in battle. This is murder in cold blood. And we wonder whether Joab also isn’t thinking that Abner would have been a rival for the top spot as David’s general. And so a second time David distances himself from the elimination of another potential obstacle to the throne. When he hears the news he says,

¹ Robert Alter, *The Story of David*:196

I and my kingdom are forever innocent before the LORD concerning the blood of Abner son of Ner. May his blood fall on the head of Joab and on his whole family!² But the strongman Joab is too valuable to execute. Instead David curses he and his family, but Joab retains his position at the head of the army.

Then David said to Joab and all the people with him, “Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and walk in mourning in front of Abner.” King David himself walked behind the bier. **32** They buried Abner in Hebron, and the king wept aloud at Abner’s tomb. All the people wept also.³

David then sings a lament for Abner, like he had for Saul and Jonathan, and he fasts till sunset. We read,

All the people took note and were pleased; indeed, everything the king did pleased them. So on that day all the people there and all Israel knew that the king had no part in the murder of Abner son of Ner.⁴

David’s grief is real. For Abner, but we also get a sense he grieves for the violence and bloodshed which the civil war and personal vendettas inflict upon the nation. Unlike Joab and Abner, he has a sense that his position as king is not for himself but for the sake of the people under his care. And yet at the same time, his actions are those of a masterful political operator. In distancing himself from the murder he endears himself to the people.

Finally in chapter 4, two of Ish-bosheth’s commanders murder him in his bed. Like the Amalekite they take his head to David seeking a reward. David says to them,

As surely as the LORD lives, who has delivered me out of every trouble, when someone told me, ‘Saul is dead,’ and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and put him to death in Ziklag. That was the reward I gave him for his news! How much more—when wicked men have killed an innocent man in his own house and on his own bed—should I not now demand his blood from your hand and rid the earth of you!⁵

And so he has them executed. There is one last descendent of Saul we’re told. Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth, but he is disabled after his nurse dropped him when she fled hearing the news of Saul and Jonathan’s death.⁶ The path is finally clear for David to be anointed king over all Israel.

² 2 Samuel 3.28-29

³ 2 Samuel 3.31-32

⁴ 2 Samuel 3.36-37

⁵ 2 Samuel 4.9-11

⁶ 2 Samuel 4.4

2 murders. 2 executions. It's all very Game of Thrones. The cut and thrust of real politics and power. One of the big themes in Samuel, signalled right back at the start in Hannah's song, is that God "will give strength to his king and raise the horn of his anointed."⁷ A second theme is that in his providence God pursues this plan despite and even through evil human actions. David has a sense of this when he says, "As surely as the LORD lives who has delivered me from the hand of my enemies". In these chapters we see God's providence at work, even as it is today. He is bringing his purposes about, even if it is hard for us to see. And yet that does not mean that people are absolved from moral responsibility. Yes, Joab helped David come to the throne, but murder is still murder! David's own actions spring from mixed motives, even as ours are so often. And yet God is still at work through flawed people like David, like you and me.

This theme of God's providential work and human responsibility is most clearly seen in the death of Jesus. Peter says to the Jews at Pentecost,

This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.⁸

"I grieve for you Jonathan my brother"

Running throughout these chapters is the sense that revenge is a natural and expected human desire. Taking pleasure in the misfortune of those we don't like or despise is so easy. Schadenfreude lurks at our door. We live in a culture where the sins of youth are so often dug up and exposed in order to shame and bring people down. But to open that door is to dehumanise us even as it damages others. Jesus teaches us,

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven."⁹

Job and Abishai take murderous revenge and are cursed for it. David three times distances himself from those who would curry favour by killing his enemies for him. He embodies the words of Proverbs 24:17 reads,

"Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice."

To love one's enemies is a terribly hard thing to do. And yet this is just how Jesus treats us, dying for his enemies, even us, that we might receive God's forgiveness. As we receive Jesus' forgiveness, we will find power to love even our enemies.

⁷ 1 Samuel 2.10

⁸ Acts 2.23

⁹ Matthew 5.43-45

David's judicial response as king is executing justice for the shedding of blood. I want to finish by returning to his personal response of lament. The grief and power of David's 3000 year old lament are such that they have entered the bloodstream of our culture with those words, "How the mighty have fallen". Lament is the right response to grief, giving words to the sorrow we find in our hearts. Indeed the majority of the Psalms are laments. They are a resource for us as we encounter the sorrows that will inevitably come as we journey through this vale of tears. Here David grieves for Saul and his sons and all Israel's slain. He grieves for the calamity that has come upon his people.

But most of all David grieves over the death of Jonathan.

How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.
I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.¹⁰

The secular Jewish commentator Robert Alter writes, "Repeated, unconvincing attempts have been made to read a homoerotic implication into these words. ... the bond between men in this warrior culture could easily be stronger than the bond between men and women."¹¹ To sexualise Jonathan and David's relationship, I would suggest, reflects modern obsessions and willfully overrides ancient sensibilities. Second, it devalues their friendship. And the truth is that some of us live without sex. But none of us can live without friends.

"One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother," reads Proverbs 18.24.

As someone who grew up as an only child, I've been so thankful for the friendships I've formed over the years. Some of the deepest grief I've known has been the loss of friendships, or grieving with friends in their loss. For years I've grieved the fading of particular friendships, punctuated with moments when they have flamed back to life and then flicked. The last time we saw David and Jonathan together was when they made a covenant of friendship together, and then they wept as circumstances forced them apart. Now David weeps that his deepest human relationship has been sundered forever. Jonathan lies slain upon the heights.

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 1.25-26

¹¹ Ibid, 200-201

For me, all partings, from saying goodbye to friends, to the final parting of death, make me long for the day when there will be no more partings. When we will see God, together with all his people. It's what we hope for as believers, that death is not the end, that love and friendship will last beyond the grave. It's why I take great comfort that Jesus calls us friends, and says he goes to prepare a place for us in his Father's house.¹² It is my hope also that the fellowship of God's people the church can be a place where we find friends to walk beside on the long grey road. In this life, we carry the wounds of grief. With David we weep. But if I can finish with the words of Gandalf at the close of the *Lord of the Rings*, "I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are evil."

¹² John 15.15, 14.2-4