**David hears of Saul’s death and responds** 26/3/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 1, Romans 13

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Psalms: 146, 147:10-15, 49:12-20, 72old

We completed sermons on 1Samuel some time ago and I have been preaching from the Psalms. In doing so, I find myself wanting to know more about David, about his life and especially about his heart. David, as you know, was man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), and indeed, a ‘type’ of Christ.

In our Bibles the Book of Samuel is divided into two; this was done when it was translated into Greek. Samuel was the prophet who anointed Saul, the first king of Israel, and then anointed David. He did this reluctantly because Israel was a theocracy, rather than a monarchy. The people’s call for a king so as to be like other nations backfired badly when Saul failed to obey the Lord and then pursued David with murderous jealousy. David patiently waited for the Lord to deal with his persecutor, refusing to take matters into his own hands. Surely this is an important lesson for us to learn! It is in fact a mark of David being a ‘type’ of Christ: ‘Father, not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42).

At the end of 1Samuel, Saul commits suicide on Mt Gilboa after being wounded by the Philistines. Mt Gilboa rises sharply from the plain of Jezreel - according to photos I have seen. 2Samuel continues with the life of David who, although not of royal birth, rose to the throne of Israel. Summary verses at the end of chapter 8 mark this rise to power. Another summary section comes at the end of chapter 20, with the intervening chapters telling of David’s adultery and the wickedness of his sons, one of whom briefly grabbed the throne. The closing chapters detail further wise and foolish actions of King David.

In chapter 1 we read of David being informed of Saul’s death by a young man who got it terribly wrong when assessing David’s heart: ‘How mistaken!’ The second half of the chapter is an elegy or funeral dirge: ‘How the mighty have fallen!’

**1. How mistaken!**

We have a saying, ‘Don’t kill the messenger’, but the man bringing news of Saul’s death to David thought he could somehow profit from the message he carried. He did not ask for a bribe in return for information. What he did was embellish the facts in a way that he thought would be profitable to him.

David was attacking the Amalekites in the south when Saul was defending Israel against another Philistine attack in the north. David defeated and slaughtered the Amalekites, rescuing his own family and all Israelite captives. It was on the third day after his return to Ziklag that a man came to him with his clothes torn and dust on his head (1:2). Ziklag was a long way from Mt Gilboa, about a three day journey, but the appearance of this man was more than that of a weary traveller, or a defeated warrior. His appearance was of a man in mourning. He may have been mourning the death of comrades, or even the king, but not for a moment did he think that David would mourn Saul’s death. This young man bowed low as he approached David (1:2, 5).

David saw that this young man had something to tell him so asked where he had come from. ‘From the camp of Israel’ he replied (1:3). David, who had not yet heard about the battle on Mt Gilboa and its outcome, asked for details. The young man spoke the truth, thus far, saying that Israel was defeated with many soldiers being killed, including Saul and his son, Jonathan (1:4). David asked how he knew that Saul and Jonathan were dead. He had evidence in the form of Saul’s crown or helmet, and bracelet (1:10), but decided to embellish his report to gain favour in the eyes of David- a tragic mistake! His lie led to his death! ‘Be sure your sins will find you out’ we are told. This young man’s sin found him out the very same day. His detail of how Saul met his death differ from details given at the end of 1Samuel.

Mt Gilboa, as we have noted, rises steeply from the plain of Jezreel. The Philistines had chariots, the most feared weapon of war in those days. But chariots were useless in the hills. King Saul was hit by archers, but in 1Samuel there is no mention of chariots; Saul was slain on Mt Gilboa. The young man said he was on Mt Gilboa when ‘chariots and horsemen followed hard after’ Saul (1:6). He went on to tell how Saul saw him and called out to him. He told Saul he was an Amalekite; he later tells David he was the son of a resident alien, an Amalekite (1:8, 13). He may have been in the service of the king; he was familiar with Saul’s jealous attempts to kill David, and should have been aware of David’s regard for the Lord’s anointed.

The young man told David that at Saul’s request he stood over Saul and killed him; he reckoned that Saul would not survive anyway (1:10). In truth, Saul asked his armour-bearer to finish him off but he refused, so Saul fell on his own sword (1Sam 31:4). The young Amalekite may have witnessed Saul falling on his sword; at least he must have seen Saul thrust through by his own sword when he came upon the tragic scene. He quickly grabbed Saul’s crown and bracelet, maybe because they were valuable, or maybe because he was already planning to run off with what he thought would be good news in the ears of David. He probably made up the story about killing Saul on the way to meet David.

David believed the young man, especially when he showed evidence of Saul’s death, and went into mourning, tearing his own clothes and weeping (1:11, 12). All David’s men did the same, mourning and weeping and fasting for Saul and Jonathan and for the army of Israel; they mourned all that day (1:12). This is remarkable in light of how Saul and his army pursued David for years! Here we see David rising above normal human emotion because of his faith in God, and his commitment to obeying God’s word. David refused to harm the Lord’s anointed on two occasions. And now, learning of Saul’s death, he does not gloat or even quietly thank the Lord, but goes into mourning. Sceptics say he was thinking of his political future but there is no indication of this at any time in David’s life. His mourning was genuine.

David’s judgment upon the young Amalekite is further evidence of his respect for divinely delegated authority. He was subject to authorities appointed by God, just as we should be (Rom 13:1), remembering, of course, that God is the supreme authority. Despite great provocation, David refused to harm Saul, but this young Amalekite killed the Lord’s anointed without any provocation, or so he said. It seems he was looking for a reward or for respect from David, but he got neither. David condemned him to death saying, ‘How was it you were not afraid to put forth your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?’ (1:14). He signed his own death warrant by making up a story he thought would bring personal gain. Remember, ‘Beware your sins will, sooner or later, find you out’. The tragic irony for this young man is that he had not in fact killed the Lord’s anointed.

**2. How the mighty have fallen!**

At a funeral service we often hear a eulogy, literally ‘a word of praise’. We could give a eulogy for a person retiring, but by convention we call this a tribute or word of appreciation rather than a eulogy. The poem David writes as he mourns the death of Saul and Jonathan is a dirge or elegy or lament. David was a musician and also a poet, as we see here. We have many of his poems in the Book of Psalms of course, some of which were written before this point in time. We find psalms of lament but these are actually prayers directed to God. This lament is a simple dirge, although David wanted it taught to the children of Judah (1:18). It is called the ‘Song of the Bow’ and is written in the Book of Jasher, a book now lost that apparently recorded songs and poems related to people and events of renown within Israel. The ‘bow’ may refer Jonathan who was a skilled archer (1:22). The refrain, ‘How the mighty have fallen!’, divides this poetic lament into three sections: lament for Saul and Jonathan, lament for Jonathan, and a general lament of war.

‘How the mighty have fallen!’ refers to Saul and Jonathan, here called the ‘beauty’ or ‘glory’ of Israel (1:19). The high place is Mt Gilboa where both were slain (1Sam 31:1). All mighty men and women will one day fall and perish like the beasts; but God is powerful to redeem a soul from the power of the grave (Ps 49:12, 15). A funeral is a time to reflect on this truth, even as it is natural and right to mourn those we love and honour.

In war between nations, or even between individuals, death of the enemy is usually a cause for praise. David did not want the Philistines to start gloating over the death of King Saul. ‘Tell it not in Gath’ or ‘in the streets of Ashkelon’ (1:20); these were two of five Philistine cities, Gath being near the border with Israel and Ashkelon furthest away on the coast. David did not want ‘the daughters of the Philistines’ rejoicing and giving praise to their gods and dishonouring the true and living God of Israel.

Furthermore, David declares a curse on Mt Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan were slain. Rain and dew were seen as God’s blessing on the land, and he wanted no such blessing upon the fields of death (1:21). The shield of Saul still lay on this mountain, as far as David knew. This leather shielded had failed to protect Saul, and now lay unoiled and rotting. But David is assured that Jonathan and Saul fought valiantly for Israel, their bow and sword respectively devouring many enemies (1:22).

The father-son relationship is unique, and among the strongest of human relationships. But like all relationships, it can be severely tested, and this was certainly the case with Saul and Jonathan. Jonathan’s love for David, and defence of him, made his father angry; at one time he tried to kill his son. ‘Yet insofar as Jonathan could remain a faithful son without betraying David, he did’. Jonathan did not desert his father to join David in the desert. David understood and applauded Jonathan for his family faithfulness. He notes that even in death father and son were united. Both were great warriors, swifter than eagles and stronger than lions (1:23).

This elegy is a eulogy with no bad word being spoken of Saul. David called for ‘the daughters of Israel’ to weep over Saul. They should remember the good things Saul did for them, directly or indirectly giving them fine clothes and gold ornaments to wear (1:24). We have not heard such things about Saul before this but David, by God’s grace, saw the good side of Saul even as he experienced his brutality. When we struggle to see the good things done by people we consider our enemies, we need to ask for more grace.

In verses 25 and 26 the focus turns to Jonathan alone. David respected Saul as the Lord’s anointed, but he loved Jonathan as a brother. He felt the loss of Jonathan most deeply. Jonathan was heir apparent but he accepted the Lord’s anointing of David. He protected David from his father Saul. Their brotherhood was not superficial; they knew the deep bond of covenant love. We referred to verse 26 when looking at the relationship between David and Jonathan back in 1Samuel. David refers to Jonathan’s love for him as wonderful, ‘surpassing the love of women’ (1:28). It is only in our society that any mention of love is regarded as sexual in nature. Love between a man and a woman is unique, but does not define love. We referred to the father-son relationship. Obviously, men and women can have deep relationships that are not sexual in nature. The other day I met a man in church who was living with his brother-in-law after his wife left him; David was in fact Jonathan’s brother-in-law.

The third and final, ‘How the mighty have fallen!’ is attached to the words, ‘and the weapons of war perished’ (1:27). Weapons of war perish when there are no men to use them! It is men, and only men, who make war, which inevitably leads to death and to mourning. David was a warrior but ultimately a peacemaker. David’s greater son, Jesus Christ, is the ‘Prince of Peace’. Has He brought love and peace into your life?