

“How the Mighty Have Fallen”

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David’s story of grief, grace, and grit prepares us for the holidays ahead.

2 Samuel 1:17-27

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Domino effect

As we approach Thanksgiving, then Advent, Christmas, and New Year’s Day, we are winding up several months of study in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. It’s named after Israel’s last judge and first prophet. Samuel’s story begins with a godly mother who prayed for a son and gave him back to God. He leads Israel as its last judge and first prophet.

Most of 1 Samuel is about two towering figures, Saul and David. Both live out what we might call “the domino effect.” Dominoes have been around for centuries all over the world, but apparently it was a guy named Bob Speca in 1974 who was inspired by his high school math teacher to start toppling dominoes. He set the first world record with 11,111 dominoes, and then broke his own record five times until he topped out in 1978 with 95,500. The current world record for an individual is 321,197.

The “domino effect,” though, is not about lining up individual dominoes. A physicist named Lorne Whitehead discovered that each domino can actually topple a domino that is 50% larger. A 2” domino can topple a 3” domino, which can topple a 4.5” domino, and so on. If you kept that sequence going with larger and larger dominos, the 21st domino could topple the Washington Monument, and the 29th the Empire State Building. That’s the domino effect.

1 Samuel is a book about the domino effect in character. Saul illustrates it negatively, as his habits become increasingly destructive with larger consequences.

David illustrates the domino effect in the opposite direction, building the kind of legacy that will cause his name to tower across biblical history.

Today we come to the final sermon in our studies in 1 Samuel, but the reading was from 2 Samuel, chapter 1. Nobody asked my opinion when they divided Samuel in two parts. I would have placed the intermission a chapter later.

2 Samuel is about David's reign. In 1 Samuel David is the obvious successor to Saul, but years if not almost two decades pass before David becomes king. Insecure and jealous, Saul pursues David, who spends sixteen months in self-imposed exile within the boundaries of Israel's longtime nemesis. David plays that season of his life brilliantly, fooling the Philistine king into presuming David will be loyal.

As 1 Samuel closes, Saul is so fearful that he seeks assurance from the ghost of Samuel through a medium. He receives instead a prophecy of his death in battle. In 1 Samuel 31, the Philistines kill three of Saul's four sons and mortally wound Saul. Afraid he will be tortured and humiliated, Saul commits suicide.

The story of Saul and Jonathan is not over. Only when David hears and responds to their death do we have closure. 2 Samuel 1 is a story of grief, grace, and grit.

Grief

The grief of David is real and raw. As 2 Samuel opens, David hears how Saul and Jonathan died. But the story he hears doesn't match what actually happened, according to 1 Samuel 31.

David is still in Ziklag, in the south of Philistia. He's had his own issues while Saul was fighting the Philistines. Achish king of Gath had demanded that David join him in his campaign against Saul in exchange for living in Philistine territory. Fortunately, the other Philistine rulers sent him back.

When David and his 600 men arrived back in Ziklag, the Amalekites (enemies of Israel even longer than the Philistines) had burned their homes to the ground and kidnapped their wives and children. When they saw this, David and his men "wept aloud until they had no strength to weep" (1 Samuel 30:4). David's men even talked of stoning him at that point, but David found strength and direction from God. He and his men pursued them and brought everyone home safely.

Everything changed in Israel while David was carrying out his campaign against the Amalekites, but he didn't know it yet. 2 Samuel 2 tells us how he found out. Two days after David returned to Ziklag, a breathless, ragged, weary man ran into the camp and bowed low before David.

"Where have you come from?" David asks.

“From the Israelite camp,” the man said. David’s heart surely skipped a beat. The last he heard, the Philistines were marching to attack Saul and the Israelite army.

David wants the details. “What happened?”

“The Israelite soldiers fled. Many died. Saul and Jonathan are dead.”

“How do you know?”

“I was there,” the stranger says. Saul was mortally wounded, with Philistine chariots closing in on him. He asked me who I was, and I told him I am an Amalekite. I killed him as he asked, but I removed his royal headband and armband and brought them to you, sir.” The items are proof of his story.

It’s probable that the Amalekite knew the historic animosity between Israel and the Amalekites, but he most likely also knew that Saul had been trying to kill David and that David had lived in Philistia. He may or may not know that David had often raided Amalekite towns, but he almost surely did not know that David had just returned from retrieving women, children, and plunder from the Amalekites. He thought David would celebrate this news and even reward him for finishing off David’s enemy.

He was so very wrong. He must have been stunned to see what happened next. David and, surprisingly, even his men, tore their own clothes to rags and wept and fasted all day long. Rather than exaltation or even relief, there was anguish and sorrow – and that, as grief often is, was accompanied by blame and anger. The Amalekite who had thought he was doing David a favor to his horror realized that in David’s eyes he had committed a capital offense – killing the king that God himself had anointed.

This is a story of grief.

Grace

It’s also a story of grace. That day or sometime soon David “lamented a lament” (17, literally in Hebrew) for Saul and Jonathan. Soon he would be back home in Judah. It was his home tribe, the place he had found refuge among the hills and caves when Saul pursued him, the towns he had protected (1 Samuel 25:16) and provided for (1 Samuel 30:26-31) after plundering the Amalekites. They would also be the first tribe to recognize him as God’s anointed king after Saul’s death (2 Samuel 2:4). David wanted to be sure his people also mourned Saul, so he taught this “lament of the bow” (18).

The lament is filled with words of grace about Saul and Jonathan. David had loved Jonathan and had admired Saul. He had wanted to be close to them. He had wanted to be with Jonathan – to laugh and hunt and fight. He had wanted to serve Saul and learn from him as a great warrior and military leader. But “how the mighty have fallen,” as David’s lament says three times (19, 25, 27). In his mind and heart, they will always be mighty.

David didn't have to chronicle Saul's impatience, disobedience, insecurity, and jealousy. He didn't have to repeat the story of how Saul hunted him like prey and forced him into the wilderness. His lament doesn't mention Saul's murderous rampage against the priests who had harbored David. David had passed up opportunities to kill Saul with his own hand, and had been forced out of his own homeland, feigning mental illness at one point and finally taking up residence in Philistia for 16 months.

None of that finds its way into David's lament. It's possible he's doing what we often do in a funeral – highlighting the positive traits and temporarily setting aside the faults of one who has died. Surely some of what he says is also simply poetic – it is metaphor and hyperbole and alliteration. Some lines in the lament point more toward Jonathan than Saul, especially the end. But most of the lament is about both father and son, who were joined in life and in death (23).

Perhaps the most remarkable expression is contained in the words “loved and admired” (23). The first adjective is translated similarly in almost every translation – “loved” or “beloved.” Saul was handsome, tall, and successful. He was charismatic in personality, persuasive in leadership, and brilliant in strategy – or he couldn't have won all his battles against the Philistines and other neighbors. Most of his nation remained incredibly loyal to him, even as he pursued David and declined in mental and spiritual health. His people and his army loved him.

The second word is variously translated “admired,” “beautiful,” or even “gracious.” When I looked up the Hebrew, I was surprised that it could mean “pleasant.” That's not a word I would ever have used for Saul. It might refer to his physical attractiveness. He and Jonathan were both easy on the eyes. But it could mean that David is recalling the earlier, charming Saul, without reference to his later decline. David also knew both men were “swifter than eagles and stronger than lions.”

David saw Saul and Jonathan in life's rearview mirror through the lens of grace. David himself had needed and would need so much of God's grace poured into his life, and he lived it toward Saul especially in 2 Samuel 1. Oh, how he wished the story could have turned out otherwise. He would have loved reconciliation, maybe even for Saul to be his mentor.

If you didn't love Saul, you don't have a heart like David's. This is where David prefigures the gospel so beautifully. Jesus said, “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). Paul wrote, “Love keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Peter wrote, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

David was no saint, but he had begun to see what he would later write about –

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,*

*nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities. (Psalm 103:8-10)*

Grit

The reason I see 2 Samuel 1 as closure to 1 Samuel has only a little to do with David's grief and his grace. It has a lot to do with David's grit – his perseverance.

David's own story had so many layers to it. When we first meet him, he's the youngest of eight boys. That's why he's out in the field, watching the family's flocks. He finds himself in grave danger. Did his father and brothers know he encountered bears and lions as he guided the sheep to green pastures and quiet waters?

David fearlessly took on Goliath in the name of the LORD as a mere teenager. He couldn't have been more than twenty or so when he rose to a high rank in Saul's army. But his success provoked envy in Saul as the women of Israel sang his praises. Trying to kill David, Saul gave him the bride price of 100 Philistine foreskins. David brought back 200. Saul tried to kill him at least twice at the end of the spear, and David had to run. He sought refuge among priests and prophets, only to have Saul come looking for him. He lived as a fugitive in Judean caves, and spared Saul's life twice.

He fought both Philistines and Amalekites in the name of the Lord, leading multiple military campaigns at the risk of his own life. He fled his homeland with his six hundred men and all their families, serving a Philistine king to protect his life. All along, as far as we know, he was writing poetry calling out to God for protection and vengeance. David was not always the model of confidence and peace. One of my favorite verses inserted in the middle of David's refugee life was when Saul came after him again. "Jonathan went to David...and helped him find strength in God" (1 Samuel 23:16).

David struggled mightily and his faith wavered significantly. But he kept going – fighting when he needed to and running at other times. That's what I mean by "grit" – tenacity, determination, resolution. It doesn't seem to be driven by the act that David had been anointed by Samuel. That never comes up again in 1 Samuel after chapter 16. David doesn't say, "I've got to stay alive and not give up because I've been anointed as the next king." It's almost as if he forgets about it. David never speaks about himself as "the LORD's anointed" – only about Saul with that language.

Even in his lament, it's not about himself. It's about Saul and Jonathan. Jonathan is "my brother," he says. "Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women" (26). What a deep, powerful, manly friendship these two had.

David never gave up. He's still here. It's notable that his lament doesn't mention God. Maybe that's why it doesn't find its way into the book of Psalms. All of

the psalms are God-focused. All name the Lord. This one is recorded in a different book of poems, the Book of Jashar (18). Still, even when God is not named or seems absent or distant, David will grind it out.

A Long Obedience

Last week we said that Saul's life can be summarized as "a long disobedience in the same direction." David is a contrast. He's far from perfect – in 1 Samuel or 2 Samuel. But his is a long obedience in the same direction. When he gets off course – physically or spiritually – he will not stay there. He will repent and return.

This story of grief, grace, and grit prepares us for the holidays with three very practical lessons. As you look toward the weeks ahead,

First, own grief. Many of you have suffered deep losses in the last year. There will be many empty places at your tables. The "first" Thanksgiving, Christmas, and every event are the hardest. We tend to avoid the pain or bottle it up. David models for us how important it is to own it – to name it, to weep, to engage in active grief work.

The timing is good for our annual "[Surviving the Holidays](#)" GriefShare program tomorrow. The facilitators offer a Christ-centered strategy for dealing with emotions, social events, and traditions.

Second, say grace. We use that expression to refer to a prayer at the meal, and that's definitely one opportunity to say grace. But David models for us that it's important to communicate out loud through our words the grace of God. In today's polarized environment, many dread conversations about politics or the virus or more.

You may even know who's going to say what and when. Spend some time in prayerful preparation this week. Ask the Lord to give you words that represent his grace in the moment. Maybe write some of them down. Rather than hoping a conversation won't happen, think through how your words can represent to others God's grace.

Finally, renew grit. It's time to look ahead to 2022. Washington, DC pastor Mark Batterson has written a book titled, *Do It for a Day: How to Make or Break Any Habit in 30 Days*. I know you'll be thinking about New Year's Resolutions in some form in a few weeks. Why not start now? I haven't even read this book yet, but I'm going to read the book, as the book suggests, 10 minutes a day, in December. That gives me a whole month to ponder not only what habits need to be formed or broken, but how to do it.

David's life was "a long obedience in the same direction¹." Over and over again he had to "renew grit" – renew his determination to take one step at a time toward holiness, faithfulness, and intimacy with God. Amen.

¹ A phrase coined by Friedrich Nietzsche and borrowed by Eugene Peterson in a book title.