

2 Samuel 1

'On Being Human and Godly'

Public grief

In the last two weeks we Australians have witnessed the tragic death of two famous Australians—Steve Irwin and Peter Brock.

Both died tragically.

Both died engaged in the very activities that had made them famous.

I have personally been taken aback by the public grief that has been expressed.

This is particularly the case in relation to Steve Irwin.

People who never met him have wept.

They have scrambled to get tickets to his memorial service.

They have taken time out to write letters of thanks to newspapers and on websites.

I suspect that some of the Australian reaction is affected by our guilt at not having recognised him appropriately in life.

Nevertheless, the public grief has been deep and passionate.

It has been full of humanity.

Two weeks ago we looked at the last chapter of 1 Samuel.

We witnessed the tragic death of Saul, Israel's first king.

Today we will watch that news come to David.

We will see him respond.

And as we do, my hope is that we will learn more about what it means to be humans in a world created and redeemed by God.

So, please turn with me to 2 Samuel 1.

2 Samuel 1

2 Samuel 1 is divided into two sections.

The first section is in verses 1-16 and it contains a war report.

The second section is in verses 17-27 and it contains a lament by David.

The lament by David is one of the great poems of the Old Testament.

Let's just take a quick look at each of these sections.

An Amalekite war report

Verse 1 opens with a reference to the death of Saul.

The story of Saul has finished.

The rest of the books of Samuel will now be taken up with the story of David.

But before this happens, we need to see how David handles the death of Saul.

David has been off waging war against the Amalekites.

At the same time, Saul has been defending Israel from the Philistines.

David is aware of the scale of the Philistine operation because he was invited to participate in it.

But he does not know anything of what we know from 1 Samuel 31.

He does not know that Israel has been defeated.

He does not know that Saul is dead.

He does not know that Jonathan is dead.

And on the third day after arriving back in Ziklag, a messenger arrives.

His clothes are torn.

He has dirt on his head.

He bears all the signs of a long and arduous journey and of mourning.

He bows down before David.

David questions him about the war against the Philistines.

The news comes thick and fast.

Included in it is the report about Saul and Jonathan.

David presses the man for evidence as to the death of Saul and Jonathan.

The messenger rehearses his story in verses 6 to 10.

'I happened to be on Mount Gilboa;

*and there was Saul leaning on his spear, while the chariots and the horsemen
drew close to him.*

*⁷When he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. I answered, "Here
sir."*

⁸And he said to me, "'Who are you?"

I answered him, "I am an Amalekite."

*⁹He said to me, "Come, stand over me and kill me; for convulsions have seized
me, and yet my life still lingers."*

*¹⁰So I stood over him, and killed him, for I knew that he could not live after he had
fallen.*

*I took the crown that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I
have brought them here to my lord."*

Now we have already heard the story of Saul's suicide from the narrator and so we know the truth of what happened.

We know that this man is an opportunist.

We know that he is embellishing the story because he wants some kind of reward.

We suspect that he has been looting after the battle.

Or perhaps he has simply observed Saul's death from a distance.

We know he has taken advantage of the situation for his own gain.

He has travelled 80 kilometres in good time in search of benefit.

But we also know something that this Amalekite doesn't know.

We know that David views Saul as God's anointed king.

We know that David has a high view of Israelite kingship.

And we have seen him scrupulously avoid harming God's king himself.

And so we wonder what is going to happen here.

But we are held back for a moment.

We are told of David's first reaction.

It is one of personal and public grief.

God's king has died.

Jonathan has died.

The army of the Lord has been defeated.

Many of the house of Israel have deid.

And then, in verse 13 the conversation resumes with the messenger.

Davis quizzes him as to his identity.

Although he is an Amalekite, he is the son of a resident alien.

In other words, he is familiar with Israelite culture.

He ought to be familiar with Israelite views of kingship.

And David makes this point to him.

Look at verse 14.

David said to him,

Were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?

When David had cut off the corner of Saul's robe in the cave he experienced heart palpitations.

But this young man has had no scruples in killing Saul, the anointed of the Lord.

His sin is evident.

And the punishment is carried out quickly.

He came with dust on his head in mourning, seeking reward.

He leaves with his blood on his head.

Death is the reward for killing the Lord's anointed.

A Davidic dirge

With verse 17 we move into David's dirge over Saul and Jonathan.

My own view is that what we have here is a genuine poem of David.

It has been taken from a collection of poems or songs that is called the Book of Jashar or the Book of the Upright.

It seems as though this might have been a book of heroic war songs.

My own view is that although the song is genuinely about both Saul and Jonathan, the focus is on Jonathan.

I think that for a number of reasons.

First, the poem is called 'the Song of the Bow' and the bow was Jonathan's weapon of choice.

Second, because of the way the song ends with Jonathan.

And third, because of the way the song begins.

You see, most of our English translations translate it as the NRSV does.

However, the word that is translated 'glory' is probably better translated 'gazelle'.

This is how it is translated in the very next chapter where a young man called Asahel is said to be 'as swift of foot as a wild gazelle' (2 Samuel 2:18).

So, we could translate it as follows:

The gazelle of Israel lies slain upon your high places!

How the mighty have fallen.

And so we ask, who is this gazelle of Israel?

Who is it that lies slain upon the high places?

Well, verse 25 answers this.

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of battle.

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

So, I think that this is primarily a lament about Jonathan.

Having said this, it also a lament for Saul.

And it is not just a gushy outpouring of emotion.

It is a well thought out and well structured rehearsal of the things that matter and that should be remembered about these two men.

In verse 20 David wishes the impossible.

He wishes that the news not travel back to the Philistine cities.

He knows that they will ascribe the victory to their gods and to their superior army.

And he knows that this is a terrible insult and public shame on Israel.

In verse 21 he utters a curse upon Gilboa.

For it was the scene of this shame and dishonour.

In verses 22 and 23 he hones in on Saul and Jonathan.

They were warriors of renown.

Jonathan with the bow.

And Saul with the sword.

But they were also people of character.

Our version of the Bible calls them beloved and lovely.

In our language 'lovely' often refers to appearance.

But in the original it refers to character.

It means gracious or charming or pleasant.

And then David notes that that they were not divided in life and death.

This is particularly poignant here.

After all, we know that Saul and Jonathan argued fiercely.

We know that Jonathan loved David.

But we also know that Jonathan chose to stay with his father.

We know that he chose to die with his father.

David chooses to honour this and to focus on this.

In the second half of verse 23 David returns to imagery from nature.

These two were grand.

They were swifter than eagles.

They were stronger than lions.

In verse 24 he balances out the earlier reference to Philistine women rejoicing.

He urges the daughters of Israel to weep over Saul, who brought the benefits of kingship to his people.

And then, in verses 25 and 26 the focus shifts to Jonathan.

David is deeply distressed.

He and Jonathan were related because David married his sister.

Therefore it is appropriate to call him his brother.

But he was also bound to Jonathan in covenant.

Therefore it is even more appropriate to call him his brother.

Saul may have brought riches to the daughters of Israel.

But Jonathan brought more to David.

He gave him a love that exceeded the love of women.

Two observations

- Amalekites and Saul

Friends, there is the story of this chapter.

Now before I explain why I think it is here and how we might appropriate it for ourselves, I would like to make two observations.

First, I want to reflect on a deep irony in the first 16 verses.

You see, the Amalekites have occurred a number of times before this in the books of Samuel.

One of the most memorable accounts is in 1 Samuel 15.

There Saul is told to utterly destroy the Amalekites in holy war.

He doesn't follow God's commands and allows the Amalekite king to live.

As a result, God tears the kingship away from Saul.

And the Amalekites live on.

They grow in power and David makes war on them in 1 Samuel 28 and 30.

He succeeds where Saul had failed.

And now we meet an Amalekite again.

In 1 Samuel 15 Saul claimed to have destroyed the Amalekites but preserved the life of the Amalekite king.

Samuel promptly kills the Amalekite king.

Now, in 2 Samuel 1, an Amalekite claims to have put to death the Israelite king.

And David kills the Amalekite opportunist.

In recalling this interplay, the writers is subtly reminding us why Saul failed and why David will succeed.

- Love more wonderful than the love of women

The other observation that I want to make has to do with the language that David uses of Jonathan.

A number of commentators have taken the language to hint at a homosexual relationship.

However, I don't think that this is what is going on here for a number of reasons.

First, I think that it misunderstands ancient culture.

You see, in ancient culture the relationship of a man and woman wasn't primarily one of friendship.

Marriages were largely arranged marriages.

They were often arranged for political or tribal or family reasons.

They were also about producing children.

This doesn't mean that ancient relationships were not close.

Nor does it mean that they were not about companionship and friendship.

It just means that they may also have had a more functional aspect than our more romantic modern view.

Second, when you look at the passage there is no hint that sexuality is in view.

The language is that of covenant.

You can see that in the reference to Jonathan as brother.

And love is often used in the context of covenant.

It is used to convey the ideas of faithfulness.

The narrative of 1 Samuel told us that Jonathan was willing to hand over his hereditary right of kingship to David (1 Samuel 23:17).

He was willing to give up his own rights for the sake of his friend.

This is true friendship.

We Australians have such portraits of friendship etched into our history.

We know that men can be friends like this without there being sexual connotations.

And we know that women can be friends like this without there being sexual connotations.

Being Godly and Being Human

Having made these two observations, I'd like to notice two more things about this passage.

The first thing I want you to notice is that this text has an apologetic purpose.

Let me explain what I mean.

You see, I think that the primary purpose of this passage is to show us that David is innocent self promotion.

This theme has been present in the text since the day that David was anointed king.

The writer has been at pains to point out that David is innocent in relation to the shifting of the crown.

He did not take the crown.

He did not manipulate anything to gain the crown.

He had absolutely nothing to do with the crown coming to him.

In our text this is highlighted by a number of things.

First, his passion of the crown comes from the hands of an Amalekite.

He did not take it off the head of Saul.

In fact, he avenged Saul for it having been removed.

Second, the text clearly contrasts David's attitude with that of the Amalekite.

The Amalekite is an opportunist.

He sees an opportunity to improve his status or wealth.

He lies in order to do it.

And he reaps the just punishment.

Contrast this with David.

He does not take advantage of the situation.

His first and prime reaction is to grieve.

But he also acts justly.

David is clearly presented as a godly man.

He knows that Saul is God's anointed king.

He knows that it is ungodly to strike God's anointed king.

He knows that it is right to mourn the death of God's anointed king.

He knows that it is godly to feel Israel's shame of defeat.

David is presented as a godly man.

Now please don't get me wrong.

David is not a perfect man.

Nor is he a man who is without hints of opportunism.

Even when he does battle with Goliath we find him asking what shall be done for the one who kills this uncircumcised Philistine.

However, David IS concerned with being godly.

He does care about God.

He does care about God's glory.

He does want to be God's person.

In this sense, David is a model for us.

He is a model of a godly person.

He is a person for whom God matters.

The second thing that I want you to notice arises from the lament.

Now there are a number of things that strike me about the lament.

The first thing that strikes me is the absence of any mention of God.

The second thing that strikes me is the deepness of human grief in it.

And the third thing that strikes me is the depth of rejoicing in human love.

Now let me draw this out a bit.

You see, in this chapter we are witnessing one of the great turning points in Israel's history ... in God's history.

We are watching the shift from Saul to David.

We are watching God moving inexorably toward the appointment of Jesus as king.

This is a great moment in history.

But where is the weight in this chapter?

The weight in this chapter is on pathos and grief.

The focus is on humans as created beings.

These humans ARE concerned to be godly.

But they are also being so very human.

They are celebrating what is good.

They are grieving over loss.

They are being human.

Friends, I am an evangelical Christian.

That means that I am concerned with evangelism.

I am also concerned with Biblical truth.

I am a redeemed person.

And I am serious about God's redemptive purposes in his world.

These things are very dear to me.

And they are very dear to me because they are things that I believe are dear to God.

But I also believe that God created me human.

And I believe that being human is very important.

God wants me to be human.

He wants me to rejoice in his world.

To rejoice in music and art.

To rejoice in human relationships.

To mourn over death.

To enjoy an erotic relationship with my spouse.

To revel in playing cards with my family.

To enjoy a glass of wine while soaking up a sunset over the sea.

For these things come from the hand of God.

I am not just a redeemed human.

I am also a created human.

Both come from the hand of God.

And I think that sometimes we forget this.

I think that sometimes we get the doctrines of creation and redemption out of balance.

And tonight I want to urge you to not do this.

Don't overemphasise one doctrine to the detriment of the other.

You see, an over developed doctrine of redemption will cause you to not be able to be genuinely human.

You won't be able to grieve like David.

You won't be able to love like Jonathan and David.

You won't be able to enjoy the creation like the writer of Ecclesiastes.

You won't be able to take pleasure in sex like the writer of Song of Songs.

You won't be able to sing and dance like the Psalmist.

Your life will be stunted and not fully human.

But God created you human.

He wants you to enjoy life as a human.

On the other side of the coin, an over developed doctrine of creation will cause you not to be concerned with being godly.

You will find fulfilment in work and not in growing like Christ.

You will find pleasure in sport but not in relating to God.

You will spend your money and your time on yourself rather than on the things that last for eternity.

Friends, our God wants us to live as created beings.

Our God wants us to live as redeemed beings.¹

¹ If you want an example of this balance, think about the Old Testament attitude to the Sabbath. This sort of balance is captured in the OT's talk about the Sabbath. It is both a day for rest and recreation. It is also a day for reflecting on God's redemption.