

The Covenant Pulpit



PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD
"David, a man after God's Heart"

"THE FAIR HEART"

1 Samuel 30

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After wrestling with the story of Glen Chambers for years, I still can't squeeze it neatly into an airtight theological box.

From the time he was a little boy, Glen wanted to be a missionary. As a teenager, he worked extra jobs to save enough money to attend Bible College. He held down a fulltime job in college while carrying a full load of studies. As he was about to graduate, his college sweetheart broke his heart when she said that she wasn't cut out to be a missionary's wife. Still, he plowed forward to learn the difficult Quichuah language of the Inca Indians.

With the rigors of language school behind him, he was finally on his way to his first missionary job with *The Voice of the Andes* radio in Quito, Ecuador. His dream of a lifetime was just over the towering mountains ahead, when a thunderstorm struck with sudden fury. His Avianca Airlines plane slammed into the side of 14,000 foot-high Mount Tablazo, exploding on impact. Everyone aboard died instantly.

Earlier that day, before his flight took off from Miami, he wanted to write a letter to his mother. He spied a piece of advertisement on the terminal floor. A single word was emblazoned in bold letters at the top:

WHY?

He turned the flyer over and wrote a note on its blank backside, stuffed it in an envelope, and dropped it into a mailbox. It arrived at his grieving mother's house, just hours after she heard the news of Glen's death. With shaking hands, she pulled out the final letter from her son. Leaping off the page, as if to mock her grief was that question:

WHY?

That's the question that haunts us most: Why? Why me? Why this? Why now? There are seldom any answers that satisfy.

I was barely out of seminary when I visited Elizabeth in the I.C.U. She was in a body cast. The day before a coed, while smoking a joint of marijuana, swerved across the centerline and hit her car head on. Her husband and little girls died in the fiery crash. In one terrible moment she was left widowed and childless, bruised and battered in body and soul, facing life alone. A single tear rolled down her swollen cheek, as she whispered through puffy lips: "Why?"

I didn't have an answer then, and I don't have one now. I didn't know how to answer Craig and Cheryl when I conducted the funeral for their three-year-old son six months after we buried their stillborn daughter.

Answers to the “Whys” of life are seldom tidy. In his book *The Road Less Traveled*, Scott Peck opens with a terse line that packs a powerful punch:

“Life is difficult.”

With one word, you could change that line: “Life is *unfair*.” Or you could change two words: “*God is unfair*.” The world is full of people who would agree with that statement. So is the church.

Maybe you can relate to the complaint of Bill Watterson, the creator of the cartoon strip, *Calvin and Hobbs*: “I know the world isn’t fair. But why isn’t it ever unfair in my favor?”

Unfairness is especially unfair when it victimizes good people like Glen Chambers or my friend, Elizabeth. Where’s the fairness in Glen working so hard to be a missionary, only to have his dream snatched away? What’s fair about a faithful Christian like Elizabeth losing her husband and little girls when the coed, whose recklessness caused the crash, walks away unscathed?

At the heart of today’s edition of *Pursuing the Heart of God* is the issue of fairness. 1 Samuel 30 records a fight to the death between David’s men and an army of Middle Eastern cutthroats. After God gives them a great victory, David makes a command decision that sparks a firestorm of controversy. On the surface, his order seems grossly unfair. Yet, he appeals to God’s heart as the basis of his decision. For all of us who have ever questioned the fairness of God, this is a welcome principle:

God is not fair.
He is *super* fair.

Before we dive into the story in 1 Samuel 30, let me telegraph a truth that we will revisit: **life is not fair**. No one says it better than journalist Dennis Wholey: “Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is like asking the bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian.”

Please allow me to telegraph a second truth: **God is not fair**. Only the naïve want him to be fair. If he gave us exactly what we deserved, we would all be in deep trouble. D. James Kennedy, in his book *Truths that Transform*, said that instead God is ***super* fair**. He doesn’t give us all the bad things we *do* deserve, but he does give us a lot of good things we *don’t* deserve. The Bible calls this grace and mercy.

But even God’s people are prone to forget the goodness of his grace when life doesn’t play by their rules of fairness. Maybe today you are like David’s weary soldiers. You have fought the good fight, but the rewards haven’t

matched the risks. What makes it worse is that those who stayed on the sidelines are reaping rewards you should have received. If you feel like life has given you a bum deal, allow me to share four truths that might help you regain the heart of God:

1. Grace unravels when you ask, "What's in it for me?"

Let's summarize the narrative of 1 Samuel 30. David is an outlaw, on the run from King Saul, hiding out in the badlands of the Negev Desert. His charisma and military prowess has attracted desperados and drifters and molded them into a fearsome fighting force. They are ancient Israel's version of "Robin Hood and his Merry Band of Outlaws."

But today they aren't merry.

They have just returned to their desert hideout from a stint as mercenaries for the king of Philistia. There they discover that their village was burned down and their wives and children carried off by Amalekite raiders who've been terrorizing and plundering the Middle East.

Verse four says, "So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left." The Hebrew words speak of loud wailing. Finally their grief frenzy reduces them to a state of exhaustion. When verse six says "...each one was bitter in spirit..." the Hebrew word for *bitter* means to cut or hack away until something is shredded.

You would understand their shredded souls if you knew the Amalekites. These nomads stalked the edges of the Sinai and Negev deserts, terrorizing neighboring nations with lightening-quick raids, plundering villages, slaughtering their inhabitants, and selling survivors to slave traders. David's men were horrified that their families would be auctioned off in the flesh markets of North Africa and the Middle East.

Verse six adds, "David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him..." When things were spiraling out of control, the giant-killer from Bethlehem did what he had always done in times of distress. The end of verse six says, "But David found strength in the LORD his God." When your heart is failing, and the hearts of those around you are falling apart, pursue the heart of God. There you will find the answers, courage and power to fight on.

In his prayer David formulated an action plan, and then took command of the chaos. He led his posse on a frantic chase of the Amalekites. They found the desert raiders feasting on their plunder. For 24 hours David and his warriors fought them in frantic hand-to-hand combat. Only a handful of

Amalekites escaped, leaving behind their loot and captives. The desert battle ended with a joyous reunion of rescued families.

Surely David and his men were praising God for his grace. Families they had given up for dead were back in their arms. On top of that, they recovered a wealth of Amalekite plunder. God is not fair; he is **super** fair! Jesus speaks of such grace in Luke 6:38 with these lavish words: "...good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over..."

But notice how quickly God's people turn grace into works. As David's merry band of outlaws came back loaded down with plunder and their happy families in tow, verse 21 says that they stumble across two hundred of their men who had been too exhausted from their grief and the chase to follow them into battle. Instead, they had stayed behind to guard the horses and baggage. Verse 22 reports the ensuing crisis:

"But all the evil men and troublemakers among David's followers said, 'Because they did not go out with us, we will not share with them the plunder we recovered. However each man may take his wife and children and go.'"

Their logic is rooted in the universal laws of fairness. You know the rules: the early bird gets the worm; the hard worker gets the raise; the first are first and the last are last; the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer; and risk and reward go hand in hand. Those who risk their lives on the battlefield get the rewards, not those who stayed behind with the horses. Those slackers should consider themselves lucky to get their families back.

But David turns fairness rules on their heads in verse twenty-three: "No my brothers, you must not do that with what the Lord has given us..." Everybody is going to get an equal share of the plunder: those who laid their lives on the line and those who played it safe. Do you see the difference between David and the troublemakers? They are focused on what *they* did to win the day. David is focused on what *God* did to win the victory. Look at three phrases in verse twenty-three: "...the Lord has given us...", "...he has protected us..." and "...handed over to us the forces that came against us..."

Whenever we focus on ourselves, or *our* contribution, we have already lost sight of God's grace. Last week I talked to an embittered Christian woman who works at a camp in Wisconsin. The tips left in the restaurant and cabins each day are saved in a huge jar. At the end of the season they are equally divided between all the staff. Instead of rejoicing that she has a job, or taking delight in her share of the tips, she is angry because she fancies herself as the hardest worker. She keeps an eagle eye on all the slackers who

shuffle in late and sneak away early, doing precious little during the shift. But, to her consternation, they get an equal share of the summer tip.

I felt sorry for that bitter Christian who has lost the joy of her salvation over a tip jar. I feel sad that David's men lost the joy of getting their families back over the division of the plunder. I pity Christians who cannot celebrate God's graciousness because they are festering over life's unfairness: the single who feels left out, spouses who complain they got a raw deal in their marriage, middle-aged adults who still obsesses about the unfairness of childhood, the angry worker who can't understand why *she* was the one to lose her job, the investor who can't get over being cheated, or weary church workers who feel like other people get the applause that *they* deserve more.

Most of all, I grieve about how many times I ruminate over the good things I deserve instead of rejoicing in the grace I don't. We need to be brought back to our senses with St. Paul's jarring rebuke in Galatians 3:1, "Who has bewitched you?" Whenever we begin to ask, "What's in it for me?" or question, "Why do they get something for doing little, while I get so little for my labor?" we have turned grace into works. Nothing will unravel grace more than the graceless expectation of fairness.

2. We are better off when grace doesn't play by the rules

David knows that his little army won the battle because God gave them the victory. Their families were as good as dead, but now are alive by God's grace. But God knows something else. The Holy Spirit who wrote Scripture gives these complainers two names in verse twenty-two: *evil men* and *troublemakers*. David's followers were not gallant knights on a holy crusade. In 1 Samuel 22:2 we read about those who joined David when he was hiding out in the Cave at Adullam:

"All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader."

The Cave at Adullam was no Sheraton. Huddled in that clammy cavern were 400 losers who all had one thing in common—a bad record. They were desperados, drifters, and debtors. In the eyes of respectable citizens, they were thugs. These hooligans were so tough that they would make Al Capone sleep with a nightlight. They had a quaint name for those who crossed their path...*victims*. The only good one in the lot was David. It would take years to mold this *Mafia* into God's army.

The truth is: the Cave of Adullam is a pretty good picture of the church. Like David's men, we are *evil* and *troublemakers*. In Romans 3:10, St. Paul delivers this verdict: "There is no one righteous, not even one." He adds insult to injury in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the

glory of God.” And then, in Romans 6:23, he drives the final nail in our coffin: “For the wages of sin is death.”

But remember, David is the preeminent type of Christ in the Old Testament. These desperados at Adullam are criminals, hunted by the law that has condemned them to death. David is their only hope, their savior and future king. The Cave at Adullam is a picture of the church: a place where we desperados under the condemnation of the Law of God gather together to find and cling to our Savior and King, Jesus Christ.

Notice David’s appeal in verse twenty-three: “No my brothers...” We are not better because we fought in the battle. We are not less because we stayed with the horses. We are all brothers and sisters as children of our heavenly Father. We belong to God’s family by grace alone. He chose us even when we didn’t deserve it. His Son died for us. We don’t deserve anything but hell. We surely don’t deserve salvation purchased with Christ’s blood. Anything beyond that, it is **super** grace.

David says on verse 23, “...you must not do that with what the Lord has given us...” To turn the Lord’s grace into an issue of fairness is to pervert the gospel. If we apprehend the gracious heart of God, and grasp the sinfulness of our own heart, we will never again grouse about not getting our just due or fair share. Instead we will say, “I didn’t deserve the Cave at Adullam. I didn’t deserve a Savior and King. I can’t believe I’m part of a band of brothers and sisters. Anything beyond that—a spouse, children, a bit of the devil’s plunder, and a place to go home tonight—is beyond fair. It is **super** fair! It is grace! When you drop into bed tonight, and reflect on all the bad that could have happened, say, “Thank you God for not being fair.”

3. STOP CALCULATING, COMPARING, AND GRUMBLING

At the heart of the “fairness” game is the business of comparing. The troublemakers compared the risk and rewards. They cried out self-righteously in verse 22, “Because they did not go out with us, we will not share with them...” Three things follow in sequence. First, **calculation**: “We went out...” Grace begins to unravel the minute we calculate what we did, and the reward we should get. My friend in Wisconsin kept a mental record of how much harder she worked at the resort. Second, **comparison**: “We went out and they didn’t. We laid it on the line and they played it safe.” My Wisconsin friend became obsessed with comparing her efforts to the laziness of her coworkers. Third, **grumbling**: “It’s not fair that the horse keepers get the same reward as the Amalekite slayers.” Or, “It’s not fair that the slackers on the resort staff get the same portion of the tip jar as the hard workers.”

The disciples of Jesus struggle with the same issue. Jesus called the Rich Young Ruler to leave everything and follow him. Instead, he walked away. Peter began to calculate: "Hey, what about me? I left everything." So he blurted out to Jesus in Matthew 19:27, "We have left everything to follow you. What reward will we get." He figures he deserves something for following Jesus, especially when compared to the guy who walked away. Grace goes out the window when Peter starts playing the fairness game.

But Jesus has the heart of God that David had pursued. He responds in Matthew 19:30 by turning the fairness game upside down: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." Those who lagged behind, and stumbled onto the battlefield after the Amalekites were defeated, will get the same plunder as those who struck the first blows. Jesus thinks like David, because they have both seized the heart of their Father in heaven.

Jesus goes on to tell Peter a parable about vineyard workers in Matthew 20. In it he says that his Father is like a Vineyard Owner who pays the same wages to the workers who show up at 3 pm as those who arrived at six o' clock in the morning. But the early birds lose the joy of having a job and getting a paycheck by grumbling about the latecomers getting the same reward. It is a terrible thing to lose the joy of grace. The truth is: Peter was only following Jesus because our Lord found him and called him and stuck it out with him in spite of his weaknesses.

4. Turn grace into a lifestyle

We will never answer the *Why* questions of life. But we can turn to the *Who* of our salvation: the God who is super fair beyond what we deserve. David understood the grace of a God who chose a shepherd boy to be a king, and turned a stone thrower into a giant killer. This day he had given back families to wicked desperados. So he responded in three ways: 1) **He gave grace to those who didn't deserve it**, by giving them a share in the plunder; 2) **He turned grace into a lifestyle**. Verse 23 says, "David made this a statute and ordinance for Israel from this day to this." This sharing equally would become part of Israel's culture, codified in its very laws. Every marriage, every family, every friendship, every church, every business where Christians operate should operate with the gracious heart of God.

3) **He freely gave what he had freely received**. No one fought the Amalekites harder than David. He led the charge, and was the first one to lay his life on the line. But he knew that God had given him the victory. So he was willing to share the plunder with the keepers of the horses and baggage who hadn't lifted a sword. More than that, verses 26-30 tell us that he sent portions of the plunder to others in Israel who hadn't even been part of the chase or battle. When we have been apprehended by the gracious

heart of a **super** fair God, we will go beyond what is fair to lavish others with the same grace. Maybe then, the *Why* questions won't matter so much.

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