

The Covenant Pulpit



PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD

"David, a man after God's Heart"

"THE WOUNDED HEART"

2 Samuel 1

Dr. Robert Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

Clive wrote about faraway places he never visited.

He created magical worlds of witches and fairies as seen through children's eyes, though he was a middle-aged college professor.

Somehow he managed to write a bestselling book on love, even though he was a bachelor who had never experienced romance.

Later he wrote an acclaimed book on the problem of pain in spite of the fact that he lived an idyllic, almost pain-free life.

In short, he was the world's foremost authority on things he never experienced. Even while his nation was being ravaged by war, and its capital city bombed into rubble, he lived far from the terror in a small university town where he hid away in the ivory towers of academia.

The biggest excitement in his week was sitting at the same table in the same pub on the same evening with the same group, creating adventures none of them would ever experience in places they would never visit.

Beyond that, he was a slightly overweight middle-aged, dumpy professor who shared a cluttered cottage with his bachelor brother.

Then his life was turned upside down by a visiting author from America. He described it as the day he was "surprised by Joy." She would give him the greatest happiness in his life, only to leave him with unbearable grief.

They were polar opposites. She was a recent divorcee while he was a confirmed bachelor. Where he was stoggy, she was flamboyant. While he was conventional, she flaunted tradition. Though he had gingerly moved from agnostic to Anglican, she had jumped from Judaism to Communism to Evangelicalism. In spite of their stark differences, they fell madly in love.

Just when the 58-year-old bachelor had ratcheted up his courage to propose, she discovered that she had terminal bone cancer. When he heard the news, he insisted that marriage was out of the question. He told her that he couldn't bear the pain of loving her only to lose her.

She argued back with the words of psychologist Eric Fromm: "Grief is the price we must pay for love." She grabbed hold of his hands and said, "The extent to which we love each other now is the extent to which you will feel the pain after I am gone. That's the deal."

It took several days for him to realize that having Joy now was worth the pain later. On March 21, 1956, he married Joy Gresham in her hospital room.

The next four years of his life were deliriously happy. Then she died of cancer. He plunged into a suicidal despair that almost took his faith. He recovered to write another book on pain. Whereas his first work was a sterile dissecting of the problem of pain, this was a raw exposé of his tortured soul entitled *A Grief Observed*. In it he wrote,

“I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living in grief.”

Three years after cancer stole his beloved Joy, he collapsed in his bedroom and died on November 22, 1963. The world didn't even notice his quiet passing on the same day that a young U.S. President was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. But 47 years later, C.S. Lewis is a towering literary giant who reshaped the landscape of modern Christianity. His most passionate and insightful writing came after his dark season of grief.

Surely both C.S. Lewis and King David would agree with the 18th Century English hymnwriter William Cowper whose words capture the principle from today's episode in the *Pursuing the Heart of God*.

GRIEF IS ITS OWN MEDICINE.

We live in an age that abhors grief. Our postmodern era sees pain as the great enemy. We anesthetize ourselves with “happy” talk, take refuge in addictions, retreat into fantasies and entertainments, plaster “Happy Faces” over oozing cancers, and fill our church services with peppy praise songs.

But pain and grief are inescapable. The wisest man who ever lived summed up a human's lot in Ecclesiastes 2:23: “All his days his work is pain and grief...” In an *MTV* interview, actor Keanu Reeves gave a postmodern twist to that ancient observation: “Grief changes shapes, but it never ends.”

Yet grief is not something to be dreaded. The Roman sage Cicero said tongue-in-cheek, “It is foolishness to tear one's hair out in grief, as though sorrow would be made less by baldness.” Grief is not a bad thing. The Bible says that God grieves. Because we are in his image, we too must grieve. Grief is not only a good medicine, it is necessary for our very salvation. We avoid it to our damnation. Sometimes we exclaim, “Good grief!” But the truth is: there really is *good* grief. I would even add that there is *saving* grief.

Come with me to 2 Samuel 1. David has just received word that his best friend and worst enemy have both been killed on the battlefield. His grief is inconsolable. Out of it comes a lament that is breathtakingly beautiful. We learn four truths from David's grief:

1. The greatest grief is in the Fall.

A single heartwrenching cry is repeated three times in David's lament: "How the mighty have fallen!" Israel's king and crown prince have been struck down in battle, and David grieves over their meteoric fall from glory.

The battle in the last chapter of 1 Samuel is a devastating end to Saul's unraveling life. There was a time when he showed so much promise. God plucked him from obscurity and made him the first king of Israel. He was a giant of a man who stood head and shoulders above everyone else. As a warrior, he was without equal. He extended the borders of his nation, making Israel a force to be reckoned with in the volatile Middle East.

God gave him a beautiful family and a grateful nation. His favorite son, crown prince Jonathan, was a righteous warrior and the future hope of Israel. Then God gave Saul his greatest gift of all: a young giant-killer and psalmist from Bethlehem. David was unshakably loyal to the king and led his armies to epic victories. David and Jonathan developed the greatest friendships ever recorded in literature. The giant-killer and the crown prince made a dream team who could have led Israel into a golden age.

Listen again to David's lament: "How the mighty have fallen!" Sadly, Saul was a big man with a small heart. Behind his loud bravado, he was an insecure little puppy who disobeyed God repeatedly. Finally God rejected Saul and his life began to unravel. He became demon-possessed and paranoid. His jealousy caused him to declare David an outlaw, and waste the next decade in an unholy crusade to hunt down and kill the giant-killer.

In the end, he became the prototype of the tragic king in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He spent his days in dark paranoia, obsessing over who might be plotting against him. He alienated his family and disgusted his nation. Then he descended into the dark world of the occult. His last night was spent at a séance in a witch's hut.

Now comes the last chapter of Saul's tragedy. He and his army of farmer soldiers are trapped in the Valley of Jezreel in Northern Israel. Later this spot will be called Armageddon, the place where the final battle in history will be fought. Only today it is Saul's final battlefield. Overwhelmed by superior Philistine cavalry and chariots, Saul and his foot soldiers frantically scramble up to the spine of a limestone ridge known as Mount Gilboa. There they are slaughtered to the last man.

As Saul's army lies in bloody heaps around him, he is shot full of arrows. As his life ebbs away, he sees Jonathan and his other two sons cut down. In that horrifying moment his dreams of a dynasty are dashed. The Philistines

are closing in and he is terrified. When his armor bearer refuses his final command to kill him, he commits suicide by falling on his own sword.

A deathly silence falls on Mount Gilboa. In the valley below, Israeli citizens flee their cities in panic. In one fell swoop the Philistines have cut the country in two. All that is left of Israel's sovereignty are the few hills in Judea controlled by David and his band of outlaws. On this saddest of all days Saul has lost his throne, his family's legacy, his country, and his life. Do you hear David's lament? "How the mighty have fallen!" But the worst is yet to come. As Philistines pick through the corpses, they come upon the mangled bodies of Saul and his sons. We read this in 1 Samuel 31:9&10:

"They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan."

There is diabolical irony in this moment. Ten years earlier, David had toppled the Philistine champion, Goliath. He had cut off the giant's head and brought it back to hang it in Saul's capital city. The daughters of Israel come out dancing and rejoicing. Goliath's sword was put on permanent display in the Jewish tabernacle. It was the Israelite way of declaring that their great God was infinitely superior the idol gods of the Philistines.

A decade later, the shoe is on the other foot. The head of the Israeli champion now hangs in the Philistine capital. The daughters of Philistia have come out dancing and rejoicing. Saul's headless body, and that of his three sons, has been nailed to the wall to be picked apart by carrion-eaters. His armor has been put in the temple of their chief god Dagon, also known as *Beelzebub*—the lord of the flies. It is their way of mocking the God of the Israelis and declaring to the pagan world that their idol gods are superior.

"How the mighty are fallen!" Are you beginning to feel this lament? The tragedy is far greater than the death of Saul and Jonathan. It is the death of a dynasty, the ruin of a nation, and the shame of God's name being ridiculed among the pagans. Listen to the lament of 2 Samuel 1:20: "Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice."

David grieves the loss of his friend Jonathan and the shameful end of a king. But mostly he weeps for the wounded heart of his God. Listen again to another line of the lament in verse twenty-one: "O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, nor fields that yield offerings of grain. For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul—no longer

rubbed of oil." This line is the lament of humanity. When David curses Mount Gilboa where Saul's army perished, we are reminded of an earlier curse. Like Saul, Adam and Eve had started with so much purpose. God chose them to rule in paradise. But pride got the best of them as it did Saul. Just as Saul was defeated by a Philistine god named *Beelzebub*, so our first parents were deceived by an angel who would be a god, who has also been given the name *Beelzebub*. The angels in heaven must have lamented that day, "How the mighty have fallen!" As David cursed the earth of Mount Gilboa to be barren, so did God pronounce a curse on creation.

From that moment, grief entered the world. Listen to God's curse to the woman: "I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing." (Genesis 3:15) Since that day mothers have wept oceans of tears for their children. Listen again to his curse on the man: "Cursed is the ground because of you: through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life." (Genesis 3:1) How many painful tears have flooded the fields of earth since that day?

David weeps for what might have been, but never was: a relationship with Saul that was ruined by sin; years of companionship with his best friend Jonathan that were stolen by sin; parents, widows, and orphans of those dead Israeli soldiers on Mount Gilboa who have been cheated out of sons, husbands and fathers because of sin. Not only Mount Gilboa, but the whole earth is cursed. The day that Adam and Eve fell, bringing the world crashing down with them, did God grieve for what might have been?

God does grieve. When God the Father saw man's sins in Noah's day, Genesis 6:6 says, "God grieved that he had made them." Mark 3:5 says of God the Son, "He grieved at the hardness of their hearts." Ephesians 4:30 says of God the Spirit, "And grieve not the Spirit of God..." In every case where God grieves, it is over our sin or the misery it causes. The shortest verse in the Bible says, "Jesus wept." He cried like a baby at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Like David, was he grieving over what might have been, if only Adam and Eve hadn't sinned and brought death into the world?

In *Paradise Lost*, the Puritan poet John Milton says that all humans feel a sense of sorrow over a paradise lost and a sense of impatience for a paradise yet to come. Every death, divorce, dashed dream, disillusionment with others and disappointment with ourselves is only a reflection of a far deeper and more primal grief: a faint memory of paradise lost and incessant sadness for things that could have been—if only the mighty had not fallen.

2. The greatest scandal is in our response to the Fall.

There is a strange prelude to David's lament. The messenger who brought the news of Saul's defeat is an Amalekite. He claims in verses 8&9

that he had come upon the carnage and found Saul writhing in the painful death throes of his botched suicide attempt. In an act of compassion, he ended Saul's misery with a mercy killing.

Obviously, he expects a reward for his efforts. Instead David asks him in verse fourteen, "Why were not you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" The messenger is speechless. David turns to one of his men in verse 15 and orders him to kill the Amalekite. On the surface, it seems cruel and unjust. Saul was already in his death throes. Why punish a man who showed him compassion by mercifully ending his pain? The man could have just taken Saul's crown and pawned it to the highest bidder. He might have even taken it to the Philistines. Instead, he raced some ninety miles to David. And the thanks he gets is a sword in the gut.

There must be something deeper. Remember, David possesses God's heart, and he sees this thing from his perspective. Perhaps the key is in the phrase "the Lord's anointed." Saul's life and death belongs to God alone. It was not Saul's place to decide when to end his own life, nor was it the place of this Amalekite to play God. Mercy killings are always immoral.

But there is something even deeper. Saul's demise and death is an event of awful significance. Even the angels catch their breath when a holy God executes his justice and the mighty fall. This Amalekite should stand in silent awe before this once-mighty king who now writhes in the death agonies of a botched suicide attempt. He should grieve that the sons of God's people lie butchered on a mountain because of the stupidity of a king gone mad. Instead, he profanes this secret moment by using it to advance his own career, and to ingratiate himself with the future king of Israel by bringing to David the news of his rival's death and the crown jewels.

I believe that this is what offends David. And it offends a holy God that we play the Amalekite, going about the business of advancing our own lives, careers, and pleasures while mothers weep for their sons, wives grieve for husbands who aren't coming home, children cry for dads missing in action, and nations grieve over kings who lead them into ruin. Like the Amalekite, we don't grieve for our own sins, let alone the sins of others, or the misery of a world gone mad. Instead, we run from grief in a frantic effort to make ourselves happy, forgetting that Jesus was called "A man of sorrows." Our lack of lamentation is another proof that we lack the heart of God.

3. The greatest healing is in good grief.

There is that moment of frantic Middle Eastern grief that we stoic Westerners, with our stiff upper lips, find so hard to express. Verses 11&12 say, "Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and

tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening..." Almost every postmodern sermon on this passage will give a *Dr. Phil* or *Oprah* self-help list on all that we can learn here about dealing with grief. It wouldn't be illegitimate to give some therapeutic help on grief. But we are in greater need of the *greatest* healing.

What is the greatest grief of all? It is in the fact that the mighty have fallen. Our first parents fell into sin. The world was cursed by sin. We were born sinners. The wages of sin is death. Every defeat, disappointment, divorce, disunity, disillusionment, depravity, devastation, and death in this world has sin at its root. Hear again the chief lament of David: "How the mighty have fallen!" The results of the fall are in every molecule of this universe. They are inescapable.

But there is an answer. You see it foreshadowed on the walls of a Philistine city. The three sons of King Saul hang nailed by the gates of Beth Shan. There the people gather to mock our God. Do you see another city where the people gather to mock the Son of God? Three sons of the Heavenly King are nailed outside the walls. The two on either side are sinners. But the one nailed between them is the Crown Prince of heaven. He bears the curse of sin and all the sins of the Father's children. He endures the mocking of sinners and the wrath of a holy God. Like Saul, and all of us, he writhes in pain and shame. At Mount Calvary every Mount Gilboa is atoned for. How will we receive so great a salvation and healing for our souls? We must see ourselves, our sins, and the wretchedness of this fallen world through the eyes of God. That's what David saw, but the Amalekite couldn't see. We must grieve and moan, and wail for our sins. The Bible calls it repentance. Without it, there can be no salvation for us, or the world.

4. There is a table that turns tears into thanksgiving.

If you look at verse 12, you will see that "fasting" was part of their mourning. Grief steals hunger. We innately know that eating and grieving at the same time is unnatural. Feasting is always associated with joy. Fasting belongs to grief. Today there is set before us a Table. There we celebrate the Lord's Supper. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we do two things: 1) We proclaim his death. We remember that he came to share our grief, to experience the raw horror of our worst nightmares, and to bind up our wounds. 2) We declare his death *until he comes again*. We remember that there there is a paradise yet to come. One day all the tears will be wiped away, and we will never again grieve in the new order of things. This meal is called the Eucharist from the Greek word *eucharistia* which means thanksgiving. Here our tears are finally turned to joy.

