



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Lamenting Death”

ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON

2 Samuel 1:1-4, 11-12, 24-26a

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2 Samuel 1:1-4 David Hears of Saul's Death

¹ After the death of Saul, David returned from defeating the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days. ² On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and with dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor.

³ "Where have you come from?" David asked him.

He answered, "I have escaped from the Israelite camp."

⁴ "What happened?" David asked. "Tell me."

He said, "The men fled from the battle. Many of them fell and died. And Saul and his son Jonathan are dead."

2 Samuel 1:11-12

¹¹ Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. ¹² They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

2 Samuel 1:24-26

[Listen to this passage](#)

²⁴ "O daughters of Israel,
weep for Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.

²⁵ "How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.

²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.

These passages tell us of the sad ending of the lives of Saul and his son Jonathan, who was David's best friend. The army of Israel was fighting against the army of the Philistines, as it had so many times before, but this time the battle went against the Israelites. Their army was in full retreat when Jonathan and his brothers were killed and Saul was mortally wounded. The king asked his armor bearer to draw his sword and finish him off, because he didn't want to suffer the indignity of the Philistines making sport of his body and mocking him in death. But the armor bearer froze and couldn't bring himself to do it, so Saul fell on his own sword.

When David learned of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, the Bible tells us that he didn't react as many people around him anticipated he would. Instead of rejoicing that his enemy Saul had been killed along with his three sons, the men



who would have been David's primary rivals to the throne, David was brokenhearted, and he mourned, wept and fasted. He also wrote a song of lament which is recorded in the last half of the opening chapter of 2 Samuel. In it he expressed his and the nation's grief over the deaths of the king and his son Jonathan. There is not the slightest hint of the breach between David and Saul or a single negative comment cast in the direction of the fallen king. Only sadness and grief fill the lines of this poem. *"How the mighty have fallen in battle!"* (2 Sam. 1:25).

Eugene Peterson writes¹ that David lamented because he cared, and he lamented because he was willing and able to bring his total attention to the fact of death. David, the man who lived to the fullest, also lamented deeply. Life mattered to him, and he experienced the full range of life's emotions. If you study the book of Psalms, you'll discover that fully 70 percent of them are songs of lament. These poems either originated in or were derived from the prayer life of David. He repeatedly faced disappointment and death, but he never side-stepped the reality of pain and loss by seeking to avoid or deny the sting of these things. Rather, he looked them full in the face and wrote from the heart how these realities affected his soul.

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Contrast David's approach with how our contemporary culture tries to deal with death. Denial and distraction seem to be the way most people try to deal with death nowadays. We try to avoid it, and we put off facing it's reality until we absolutely have to. Or we get busy or spend money to try and take our minds off these things. It's amazing how people try to avoid the reality of death and loss at all cost.

Pastor and author Steve Brown tells a story about a time when he got on an airplane in Miami traveling to Los Angeles. It was a 747, and there was a large number of people aboard. All around him was a group that had obviously just taken a cruise together, and they were going back to Los Angeles. The people were joking and laughing with one another, but to his left was a young teenage girl who was obviously quite ill and distressed. As she began to manifest her sickness on the plane, her mother said, "She has been terminally ill for 2 years, and she's had all kinds of struggles with chemotherapy and radiation. I didn't realize she was this sick, though, today, or I would have never gotten on the plane."

They finally found a couple of doctors who rushed to the little girl's side and began to work with her, but she went down hill quickly. Right across the aisle from Steve, she literally died on the airplane. They had to make an emergency landing in Dallas, and they asked all the passengers to get off the plane. A shroud was brought, and the passengers watched out the airport window as they took this teenage girl's body and placed it in an ambulance. Everyone then filed back onto the plane and they resumed their trip to Los Angeles.

Steve went up to one of the flight attendants and said, "I'm a pastor, and if there is any way I can minister to these people, I'd be happy to do it."

The flight attendant replied, "Oh, that won't be necessary. We've already talked about it, and we decided to give everyone free drinks all the way to Los Angeles, so they won't have to think about it."



Trying to escape, denying the reality of things, and avoiding the truth is no way to deal with death. In this passage, David shows us another way, a better way. He teaches us what it means to lament. He shows us how to acknowledge we are mortal after all, and he prepares us for the day of our own deaths as well.

No matter how many times I stand at the foot of an open grave for a committal service, I am struck by how awful death feels. I remember the first time this happened to me. I was twenty-two-years old, and I had just graduated from college. My father died of a massive heart attack. He was only 55, one year younger than I am today. I didn't quite know how to act at the funeral, because I had never been to one before. But I do remember feeling numb and confused and so very sad. I wondered what my mother would do now that she was a widow, and I wondered how my family would carry on. Dad was such a rock to all of us. I lamented my father's death, but I did not know how to express it.

David's song of lament grew out of a heart that loved deeply. He grieved the loss, and his words gave voice to the ache in his soul. But he also looked to God to give him the strength to carry on, and he found comfort in the song he sang. Lamenting death is an important step to living one's life to the full. It can actually give us a greater appreciation for and sensitivity to the gift of life we enjoy each day we live.

Jerry Sittser, who is a professor at Whitworth University, knows something about lament. He lost his wife, his mother, and his youngest daughter in a fatal car accident back in 1991, and Jerry's book *A Grace Disguised* chronicles his journey through grief and the lament of his soul as he tried to make sense of this great loss. In the book he writes of a darkness that comes upon you whenever a loved one dies. Many people try to run away from the darkness thinking they can escape it, but no one ever does. It's like trying to outrun the darkness at sunset. It can't be done. Sittser says the better way to deal with the darkness is not to try and outrun it but to actually turn east toward the darkness and enter into it. The shortest journey through the night is actually to travel east through it. That's how you can meet the sunrise of tomorrow sooner. So it is with grief.

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Whenever you and I are confronted with death, there are three things we should always keep in mind. **First**, don't run too quickly away from your grief. Feel the pain; lament the loss. If we don't, we'll have unfinished business that will be with us for a lifetime, and it will express itself somehow, usually in unhealthy ways. The **second** thing we should remember is don't linger too long in our grief. Some people get stuck in their lament and never get on with living. They remain so focused on death, they forget they are still alive. Having lamented, be ready to move on and make your way through life putting one foot in front of the other. Your loved one who has passed away would want that for you. Sometimes this is very difficult to do, but it is a necessary step in the healing process. Running too quickly from your grief or lingering too long in it are both unhealthy approaches which should be avoided.

The **final** thing we should keep in mind when confronted by death is to remember that death never has the last word, only the next to the last word. The promise of heaven reminds us that God always have the final word when it comes to death, and we who follow Christ should live in the light of the resurrection. Later



on, this same David would lose an infant son just after he was born. David lamented that great loss, too, but he also voiced his hope in the afterlife. When his son died, David said, *"My son won't come back to me, but one day I will go to him."* Easter faith is what grounds those of us who trust in Jesus Christ, and we who profess faith in the Lord know that this life is not all there is. It is only a prelude to a greater world to come.

The Heidelberg Catechism puts it so well, "What is your only comfort in life and in death? My only comfort in life and death is that I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely set me free...." My friend, one day, all whispers of death will fall silent. That is the promise of the resurrection.

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D.L. Moody, the famous evangelist of the 19th century, once said to a group of friends, "Some morning you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody is dead, but don't believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I was born in the flesh in 1837, but I was born in the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die, but that which is born of the Spirit will live forever!"

D.L. Moody was right. Death cannot ultimately rob the person who is united by faith with Jesus Christ of our hope of heaven, and death does not have the final word, for God always has another move to make. We should lament death, as did David, and we should grieve our great losses; we should! But thanks be to God that like David long ago you and I can still give thanks for all that God has done for us, no matter what our loss may be. There are so many things for which we should be thankful, even in the face of great loss.

The amazing testimony of David is that in spite of his great hardship and all the trials by fire he experienced, he discovered the transforming power of giving thanks to God in all circumstances. May you and I discover this same truth tonight this Ash Wednesday and always. Amen.

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, p. 115.

