

## **How the Mighty Have Fallen!**

### **2Samuel 1:17-27**

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 5-24-2009

#### **Introduction**

This poem is one of the most poignant laments in all of Scripture. And the bitter sweetness of the lament is so appropriate for the times that we live in. Some people have become utterly cynical about Memorial Day. America has been involved in so much empire building, so much centralization of power, and so many ungodly wars, that some people wonder if we ought to leave behind our honoring of the dead. But this passage tells us not to do that. David honored these soldiers even when some of them had fought against him. I've never preached on Memorial Day before, but I thought that given the times we live in, I should. Our kids need real heroes to look up to.

Memorial Day is a day on which we can say, "How are the Mighty Fallen!" It's a time to honor the dead who gave their lives to defend their country. It's a time to pray for more mighty men in our own day. It's a time to reflect on what has been lost, as well as to commit ourselves to regain our liberties. I'm not going to go through every verse this morning. Instead, I'm going to pull various principles from the passage and apply them.

#### **I. This Memorial Day came during a time of great declension (vv. 1-16,23,24)**

The first thing that I want to point out is that David's Memorial Day came during a time of great spiritual declension much like our own. Saul's forty-year reign began rather well, but toward the end, when David came on the scene, he became more and more paranoid. His paranoia led him to think that David was dangerous to his throne. It led Saul to disarm the people. Soldiers had to turn in their weapons when they went home. It was crazy. It led neighbors to spy on each other in order to curry the king's favor. In fact, this was one of the things that Samuel feared when God told him to anoint David. Samuel feared that (even though the anointing would be done in secret), that Saul would find out and kill him. For Samuel to fear for his life, things had to be pretty bad. The Ziphites and others spied on David in order to gain favor with the king. So there was political corruption among the elite.

But the people put up with it. Why would people tolerate the kind of tyranny that we see in 1Samuel? We have two hints in this chapter. First, Saul was an amazing king and an amazing soldier. During his seven major wars of defense, he had captivated the hearts of the people. It was hard not to admire him. 1Samuel tells us that he had charm, wisdom, valor in battle, and good looks. He was what many people would consider the ideal king. 1Samuel 9:2 tells us about his looks. It says, **“There was not a more handsome person than he among the children of Israel. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.”** He commanded respect. People loved him. And if you doubt it, look at verse 23. It says, **“Saul and Jonathan were beloved and pleasant in their lives.”** And in our own American history we have seen presidents who have gotten away with a lot because of their charm, wit, courage, and heroism. So that’s one of the reasons why the people put up with it. There was a lot to admire, even with his weaknesses.

The second hint is in verse 24 – Saul made everyone wealthy and happy. **“O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with luxury; who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.”** He was a popular king because he made economic decisions that made everyone happy. Apparently there were plenty of bailouts going on from the plunder of the Philistines. Citizens are easily pleased. And yet for all that, David was able to have a Memorial Day to honor what was still worth honoring.

Verses 1-16 give one little glimpse into how everyone was using the system to get what they wanted. The Amalekite made up a story about Saul that he hoped would get him money or honor from David. It seemed to be the way that everything worked up until this point. For example, Doeg the Edomite sure got rich by doing something similar with Saul. But David didn’t play political games. He longed for a country that would be God-centered, law-abiding, and committed to liberty. Part of the purpose of this poem was to lament the disasters that had come precisely because Israel deserved the disasters. It was remembering better days.

And I think we can do the same. It’s hard to remember the past without having a sense of discouragement over the state of affairs today in America. I can hardly do any Memorial Day readings without shaking my head at what is going on in Washington DC. Yet it is precisely a recounting of the history of the past that can help America to wake up to what it is facing, and perhaps bring repentance. If you look at America’s previous wars, you can see that God has used them as a chastening in America’s life, and the wars themselves have sometimes brought mini-revivals into the lives

of many. The revivals connected with the wars are a fascinating story all in their own right.

## II. This Memorial Day looked for hidden honor in Israel's mighty men (v. 17)

The second thing that I see is that David's Memorial Day looked for hidden honor in Israel's mighty men. Verse 17 says, "**Then David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son.**" I can see why David would lament over Jonathan. After all, they were best friends. But to say so many kind things about Saul has often seemed a bit strange to me. He describes Saul and Jonathan in verse 19 as the beauty of Israel. He celebrates the past victories of Saul in verse 22. Saul really did prove to be an amazing defender against external enemies. He had seven major wars in his forty years, and did a marvelous job as a commander. The point is that David didn't disagree with everything that Saul stood for. Verse 23 gives an astonishing tribute to Saul. It says, "**Saul and Jonathan were beloved and pleasant in their lives.**" There must have been something about Saul that was attractive to even David. What David is doing is looking at some of the honor hidden in Saul's life. And we can do the same with heroes of America's past wars. We don't celebrate their lives simply because they were good. Many of them were not good men. But they were willing to lay down their lives to defend our country, and in the defending of the country, many praiseworthy things arose. And that fact deserves thanks and honor. It deserves to be remembered. We can't be so purist that we won't celebrate any heroes who have stains in their lives. Saul had stains, yet David gave him a great tribute. Jesus is the only one who is unstained.

David's description of both Saul and Jonathan in verse 23 is a tribute any soldier would appreciate – "**And in their death they were not divided;** [That speaks of a band of brothers; loyalty, honor; faithfulness; or as our army says, "duty, honor, country." He goes on to say] **they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.**" This is the stuff that heroes are made of. And like General Robert E. Lee, David was able to recognize and honor heroism on both sides of the battlefield. In fact, if you keep reading the next two chapters you will find David honoring another general on the other side of the battlefield - Abner. You see, David on this day is about to secede with the southern tribes to form a country that would honor and respect the law. It's not like he puts up with the tyranny. No. He secedes. He didn't agree with everything that was going on. But he still learned how to respect that which was respectable in even his enemies.

When I used to read histories of the War of Northern Aggression, my heart wanted to paint everyone in the North as black, and everyone in the South as good, because I am a southern sympathizer. Yet I realized that I couldn't do that because there were good men and bad men on both sides, and both sides had sin to answer for. Both sides had heroes. And David was great enough to recognize heroism on both sides. This memorial day I challenge you to have the great-heartedness to recognize valor, courage, honor, love and other virtues in men who laid down their lives in every American war. You need to remember that this battle in which Saul died, was a battle in which David was prepared to fight against Saul. Providentially he was hindered from joining, but like Robert E. Lee, David learned how to honor courage and valor wherever it was found.

### **III. This Memorial Day was a recounting of Israel's Providential history (v. 18)**

The third thing that I see is that David's Memorial Day was a recounting of Israel's Providential history – especially a Providential history of war. Verse 18 says, **“and he told them to teach the children of Judah the Song of the Bow; indeed it is written in the Book of Jasher.”** The book of Jasher is recorded in Joshua 10:13. It is simply a providential history of Israel's wars from its beginning, and up through the time of David. But he breaks this book out and he adds to it. They didn't want to forget about God's providential history of warfare.

Some people hate studying war, and others are too preoccupied by it. But I would challenge you to be a Jasherite – a person who studies the providential history of war. There is much that we can learn from it. We need to get used to seeing history as God's hand directing a nation's affairs. The next few years in Israel's history would see a disastrous civil war, with the south seceding. At least part of the previous 40 years were a disastrous history of tyranny. Yet both periods were preparing people to value the liberties that David would bring. Sometimes it has to get worse before things get better. Looking at history can give us perspective so that we don't give up. It can give us a goal to shoot towards. It can fire up your blood to hate tyranny. It can make us weep over our sins as David did. But I would encourage you to read America's Wars through a providential lens. Make your own book of Jasher. Collect poems that celebrate the good and praiseworthy aspects of Memorial Day. But don't forget our history. It is a part of your God-given heritage. It doesn't have to be sappy and sentimental.

#### **IV. This Memorial Day came during a time of disaster and further pending danger (v. 20)**

The fourth thing I notice is in verse 20 – “**Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon** [those were the big cities of Philistia. And the reason he gives?]- **lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.**” David didn’t want all of Israel’s losses to be used against her by Israel’s enemies. And this is one of the sad things about America’s media – it has been destroying America and compromising America. The media gives all kinds of fodder for the enemies of America to have reason to hate her even more. It makes the internal and external enemies of our country bold, so that even the female gossips are strong enough to topple the nation. I think that’s what he is driving at – “**lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.**” That’s the power of talk – these talkers could triumph in some way. Let’s not hate our country with our speech; let’s restore it.

#### **V. This Memorial Day reflected on (and wept over) what had been lost (vv. 17,24)**

The fifth thing that David’s Memorial Day reflected on was what had been lost to their nation. Three times he says, “**How the mighty have fallen**” and verse 27 adds, “**and the weapons of war perished.**” There were huge losses. Some had fallen through death. Some had fallen through disgrace of fleeing. Some had fallen through discouragement. But there were many mighty men who had fallen. And of course, the nation as a whole had fallen. It would not be the same again for a many a year.

I saw a chart of the total numbers of Americans who had been killed in America’s 45 wars, and the statistics are astounding. The War Between the States alone claimed 625,000. I didn’t even realize that we have had 45 wars in which there was human loss. There has been much loss of life in America – some for noble causes, and some for shameful causes. But you add to all of that the blood of millions of babies and you have something to weep over. There has been a war of our own nation against its own citizens in the womb. The whole nation was called to weep in verses 17-18. The daughters of Israel were called to weep in verse 24. The poem itself is called a lamentation. And what this means to me is that we need to learn how to weep in a godly way over our losses. Restoration comes through learning to weep.

There have been many liberties lost. Our constitution has practically been lost. And this poem calls us to not only weep, but to do something about it. Weeping by itself accomplishes nothing unless it motivates us. David would get up and start the process of bringing back the liberties that had been lost to Israel. Otherwise, his friends had died in vain. And so, even though this is a call to weep, it should be a kind of weeping that leads to renewed resolve rather than giving up. Let the mighty who have fallen in our nation motivate us to do something.

## **VI. This Memorial Day reflected on how ugly war is (v. 21-22) and how sad it is to lose loved ones (vv. 25-27)**

The sixth thing that I see on David's Memorial Day was that he reflected on how ugly war is and how sad it is to lose loved ones. David was not a man who idealized war. He hated war. He hated death. He longed for peace. To paraphrase one man, "The best soldiers hate war, but the best soldiers are always prepared to fight." David's reflections on how hateful the results of this battle were can be seen in verses 21-22 where he wishes that Gilboa could be turned into a desert rather than to see this needless loss of life. I think it is pretty hard to read about the Second War for Independence, sometimes called the Civil War, without being saddened over it. Let me read David's reflection on the sadness he had at losing loved ones. It's in verses 25-27.

**2Samuel 1:25 "How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!**

**Jonathan was slain in your high places.**

**2Samuel 1:26 I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;**

**You have been very pleasant to me;**

**Your love to me was wonderful,**

**Surpassing the love of women.**

**2Samuel 1:27 "How the mighty have fallen,**

**And the weapons of war perished!"**

And it was because David hated war that he made such a good general and king. He mourned every soldier that died in his army. He didn't just lightly send them out. The difference between this ferocious warrior and the communists who slew millions of people was that David hated death, hated war, and valued life, whereas Pol Pot, Stalin, and other communists idealized war and valued death. One thing that both General Sherman and General Robert E. Lee agreed on was that war is ugly. At the conclusion of a technical speech to military cadets at Ohio State Fair in 1880, Sherman said, Boys, I've been where you are now and I know just how you feel. It's entirely natural that there should beat in the breast of every one of you a hope and desire that some day you can use the skill you have

acquired here. Suppress it! You don't know the horrible aspects of war. I've been through two wars and I know. I've seen cities and homes in ashes. I've seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is hell.

Of course, I would respond, that Sherman made war hell because of his ungodly bypassing of godly principles of war. Sherman's march of total destruction should have qualified him for hanging. But even when those godly principles are followed, we ought not to idealize war. General Robert E. Lee, in a letter to his wife, said,

What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbours, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world.

Memorial day gives us time to reflect on the ugliness of war. And we need that. We can't treat war lightly. It gives us time to sorrow over those lost in war. But it also helps us to realize that the ugliness of war is at times absolutely essential to preserve liberties. John Stewart Mill spoke a sobering truth when he wrote,

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself."

War is ugly, yes. But far more ugly is the stench of apathy we see today that is not willing to resist tyranny, or to at least protest tyranny. This Memorial Day we need to honor those who have been willing to go to war to defend our liberties. We need to be willing to fight and sacrifice for those same liberties.

## **VII. This Memorial Day showed that David did not allow the hatred of the other side make him bitter and hateful himself (vv. 17,19,21,22,23)**

I just have two more points that I want to make. The seventh point is that David's Memorial Day shows that David did not allow the hatred of Saul to make him bitter and hateful himself. And by the way, Jonathan shared that grace. Jonathan and David, even though they were generals on

opposite sides of the battlefield, both possessed the inward grace and character to be forgiving and tender and to not grow bitter. Saul wasn't able to do that. Tribulation by itself does not produce patience; it has to be mixed with grace. Tribulation has produced some of the most bitter of men.

It wasn't just the south that had great examples of forgiveness, chivalry, and tenderness, and it wasn't just the north that produced examples of bitterness. Lest you think that I am a blind Southern Sympathizer, I'm going to give a hero from the north. Think of the difference between the bitterness of Confederate General Jubal Early and the good-heartedness of Yankee Col. Joshua Chamberlain of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine.

General Jubal Early of the Confederate Army was an attorney both before and after the war. But from Manassas to Appomattox he was a bitter, hard, and hateful man. The war ruined him. And he remained bitter and hateful all the way to his death in 1894. What a tragedy. That was more of a tragedy than if he had lost his life.

In contrast, Joshua Chamberlain of the 20<sup>th</sup> Main was a godly Christian Calvinist who showed a great balance of being a mighty warrior and still being tender. He had six horses shot out from under him, yet kept going on. And interestingly, he maintained a sweet spirit despite having his life compromised numerous times, despite being seriously wounded six times, despite seeing the dead frozen into grotesque forms all around him, despite seeing his men shot to pieces. He recounts the almost miraculous route that he achieved with his decimated troops. It looked like the Confederates would overrun him on the next charge, so he ordered a bayonet charge. This was his last hope. The last paragraph of his description of this particular battle says,

"Ranks were broken; some retired before us somewhat hastily; some threw their muskets to the ground- even loaded; sunk on their knees, threw up their hands calling out, 'We surrender. Don't kill us!' As if we wanted to do that! We kill only to resist killing. And these were manly men, whom we could befriend and by no means kill, if they came our way in peace and good will.

If Sherman and other northerners had had the same spirit as Chamberlain, the aftermath of the war might have produced reconciliation instead of the hatred that festers to this day. Let me share one more story about Chamberlain – this one from a government document.

After the surrender terms were signed by General Lee on April 9, General Chamberlain was assigned the task of accepting the formal surrender of arms of the *Army of Northern Virginia* scheduled for April 12, 1865. It was a cool, wet day. Their lines formed on the road leading to Appomattox Court House,

Chamberlain's division watched the tattered gray column trudge toward the village. Without hesitation, Chamberlain called his men to attention and saluted the Confederates as they approached. At the head of the Confederate column a despondent General John Gordon heard the shifting of weapons and recognized the honor. He rose in his saddle, reigned in his horse and boldly returned the salute. Former enemies paid their respects to each other in this last act of the war in Virginia.<sup>1</sup>

Despite having every reason to be bitter and angry, he always showed goodwill under tribulation. One author affirmed that he remained tenderhearted, spiritual, unhardened and trusting of God's providence all the way through his life. When you are tempted to get bitter over offenses done to you, remember David; remember Col. Chamberlain. Don't allow war, conflict, and propaganda to make you bitter. Don't allow your losses to make you bitter. Don't allow Memorial Day to make you bitter.

### **VIII. This Memorial Day prepared young men to imitate the best qualities in Saul and Jonathan and to aspire to be mighty men of valor. (vv. 18ff)**

One last point – David's Memorial Day prepared young men to imitate the best qualities in Saul and Jonathan and to aspire to be mighty men of valor. Verse 18 says, **“and he told them to teach the children of Judah the Song of the Bow.”** What would those children learn? Boys would learn that there is a place for toughness. If you want the praise of a David, you better value being Mighty Men. Raise your boys to be tough. Verse 19 would teach them to value what is beautiful in others. It would teach tenderness as well as toughness. Verse 20 would teach them to know who their true enemies are. David did not consider Saul and Jonathan to be his enemies, even though Saul fought against him. David knew that his true enemies were outside the church. We can learn from that. Let me list the character issues that this song would teach the children of Israel. It would teach the character issues of courage, forgiveness, love, loyalty, tactfulness, patience, kindness, self-control, the humility of David (this poem really shows the humility of David), the nature of true friendship, duty, self-sacrifice, confidence, enthusiasm, submission, trust, and selflessness. And most of those qualities could be seen in Jonathan in rich measure. But even Saul showed forth some qualities that make for a mighty man of valor. He could be imitated on at least some things. But the most important thing they can learn is that every hero except for Jesus is stained. Only in Jesus can we

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/archive/gett/getttour/sidebar/chambln.htm>

fall and get up again on resurrection day. We must teach our children how to trust Jesus as David did.

### **Conclusion – Buy the Leaders in Action series edited by George Grant**

Let me conclude by making a recommendation of how you can make good on this sermon. I would encourage you to buy every issue of the biography series edited by George Grant. He's the general editor, but a different author writes each book. Steve Wilkins wrote the biography on Robert E. Lee called, *Call to Duty*. George Grant wrote one on Teddy Roosevelt called *Carry a Big Stick*. Wilkins wrote another one on Stonewall Jackson, called *All Things Good*. And there are other biographies on Patrick Henry, George Washington, Winston Churchill and others. They are wonderfully laid out. The first half of each book gives a brief biography, and the second half gives life lessons we can learn from these Mighty Men who have fallen. May every generation learn from the history of Mighty Men who have fallen and learn how to pass on this faith to our children. Amen.

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