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## **THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL**

# DAVID'S GREATEST VICTORY

(2 SAMUEL 1:17-27)

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If someone were to ask you, "What do you think was David's greatest victory?" what would you say? I think the majority of professing Christians would say David's heroic, one stone defeat of the Philistine champion, Goliath. Perhaps a smaller contingent, largely comprised of people who read through the Bible once a year, would argue for David's defeat of the Jebusites at Jerusalem – the moment where he liberated the place that God would declare His dwelling place among His people. Those answers, and others like them, are understandable. Now granted, the Bible doesn't tell us – 'David's greatest victory was [fill in the blank]' but if you were to ask me, 'George, in your opinion, what do you think David's greatest victory was?' I'd first say – I think David's greatest threat came from the former king, Saul. But even Saul's relentless prowess for David's mortal life was not the biggest threat that David faced. In my opinion it would have the potential spiritual bi-product of that prowess – bitterness; that defiling root that all-too-often seems all-too-ready to spring up and produce bitter fruit (cf. Heb .12:14-15).

If you were to put the variables of David's dealing-with-Saul equation into other people's lives I would imagine that the typical result would be anger and rage, undergirded by a quietly growing bitterness, but not for David. Greater was the Spirit of God that was in him than the typical proclivities of his own fallen frame. And by that Spirit David was able, not only to be free from bitterness and a vessel for peace, but he was able to compose and teach a song that set Saul in perhaps his most positive light. You can see why I would lobby for this battle (i.e. David's war against bitterness) to be memorialized as David's greatest victory.

### ***The Prose Before the Poetry***

After the death of the opportunistic Amalekite we are given a short lead-in before reading "the Song of the Bow." This song appears to be broken up into stanzas. The first stanza begins in verse 19, the second begins in verse 25, and the final one concludes the lament in verse 27. But before we sing the poetry we read the prose.

### **Verses 17 and 18**

**17 Then David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, <sup>18</sup> and he told *them* to teach the children of Judah *the Song of the Bow*; indeed *it is* written in the Book of Jasher:**

Startling isn't it? David lamented with this lamentation over Saul. You might have expected David to write a psalm of thanksgiving akin to the song of Moses (cf. Ex. 15:1-18) where Moses celebrated the fact that Pharaoh's chariots and army had been casted into the sea, but no, instead he wrote a funeral dirge to memorialize *both* Saul and Jonathan.

This must have taken David some time to compose. While the earlier outbursts of grief were reflexive and spontaneous, this lament was reflective and premeditated. When you read the words of the song and it's prose-prelude you can see that David was not in a rush to put this tragedy behind him; in fact, *he wanted the memory of this event out in front of him and his men*. He instructed his men to teach the children of Judah this song (2 Sam. 1:18a). He wanted them to know it. He likely wanted them to memorize it. Probably so they would never forget what happened at Gilboa. The song, you might say, is similar to the phrase that Americans have come to associate with the terrorist attacks of 9-11 – "never forget." Both were intended to preserve the memory of events that most would like to forget.

This is instructive for us, many of whom live in a culture that has an allergy to things that are labeled as negative. Some will be quick to change the television channels when a montage of other people's tragedies or illnesses are on the screen. Some will abruptly try to end conversations where one person spends too much time talking about pain and suffering. *We need to remember that we do not only learn by looking on the bright side, but also on the gloomy side*. It will often be at those times that we are driven to pray prayers of restoration and preservation and protection for those whose homes are broken, whose churches are persecuted, whose minds are tormented and so on.

### ***The Song of the Bow (vs.18a)***

Why the "Song of the Bow?" What was the implication or significance of that? Well, we are told numerous times in 1 and 2 Chronicles that the men of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) were men who handled the bow well (cf. 1 Chron. 12:2; 2 Chron. 14:8; 17:17). But more closely related to the context, later on in the lamentation we are reminded that Jonathan handled a bow well (vs.22) — which calls to our remembrance the first meeting between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel. Jonathan actually gave David his bow, along with his robe, armor, belt, and sword (1 Sam. 18:4). The bow, then, not only symbolized Jonathan's military acumen but his spiritual sensitivity. He could take it up against Yahweh's enemies and lay it down before the feet of Yahweh's anointed.

### ***The Book of Jashar (vs.18b)***

At the end of verse 18 we are told that this funeral lament was written in the Book of Jashar.<sup>1</sup> The only other time this book is mentioned is in Joshua 10:13. There we see it contained the record of Joshua's invocation that the sun and moon stand still. So, then, what was the book of Jashar? We don't know exactly but when we look at the two references made to it in the Scriptures it appears to be a national record of poetry and history concerning significant events in Israel's history.

### ***The Song Begins [Verses 19-24]***

With the prose complete, the poetry begins. One additional preliminary note before we look into the text: this lamentation doesn't say anything concerning Saul and Jonathan's relationship to God. That's not by accident. The actions of both men spoke loud enough to be heard throughout Israel. There was no need to rehearse the obvious. (Especially when God had appointed the books of 1 and 2 Samuel to be written.) Instead, David wrote a lament from both a national and personal perspective; one that would aid the nation in mourning, closing the door on one of the saddest events in the history of the nation and preparing the way for the new day that was dawning.

### **Verse 19**

**19 "The beauty of Israel is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!"**

The latter portion of verse 19 becomes a kind of refrain in the lament (**How the mighty have fallen!**). This expression of dismay over the death of mighty men like Saul and Jonathan is seen again in verses 25 and 27 where, each time it is repeated, another line is added. The Song of the Bow is the lament of the fallen.

The questions surrounding this verse concern the Hebrew word *zebi*, translated in the NKJV (and NASB) as "**beauty**". There's some debate as to the best translation of that word. The NIV renders this word as *gazelle*, while the ESV translates it as *glory*. You could make a case for all of the aforementioned translations; the word could have each of those meanings. But that's not the only question concerning *zebi*. The other question is: Who is the *zebi* of Israel? And using the language of the NJKV translation: Who is the beauty of Israel slain on its high places? Looking at the opening verse of this lamentation one could argue it refers to all the fallen of Israel. Looking at the first stanza of this lamentation one could argue it refers to Saul and Jonathan specifically. If one looks at the entire lament I think it gets even more specific than that. Let's hold off on our verdict, then, until we see all that the lament has to say.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the Hebrew meaning of Jashar the collection could be understood as "The Book of the Upright" or "The Book of the Righteous".

### Verse 20

<sup>20</sup> Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon— Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.

David knew the disgrace and idolatry that would accompany a Philistine victory of this magnitude. Just as the daughters of Israel sang their songs of celebration after the defeat of Goliath so the daughters of Philistines would take to the streets with their glory-to-Dagon choruses. David not only lamented the fall of Saul and Jonathan, he lamented the false Philistine gospel that would spread through the habitations of Philistia.

In the Hebrew of verse twenty we also see a slight sense of ascendancy. There are three words used in the first statement (**Tell it not in Gath**) and then four words in the second statement (**proclaim it not in Ashkelon**). The idea being - don't let the first thing happen, *but even more so, don't let the second thing happen!* One possibility of why David is saying that is because Ashkelon was not a land-locked city but a city seaport. David did not want there to be gloating in Philistia *or beyond*.

### Verse 21

<sup>21</sup> “O mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew nor rain upon you, nor fields of offerings. For the shield of the mighty is cast away there! The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.

David lifted his eyes to mountains where Saul and Jonathan died and he summoned them to join in the mourning. He in essence called for God to withdraw his blessing from the land where Saul and Jonathan had fallen in battle.<sup>2</sup> It's as though David was saying – let there be no harvest because there is no cause for celebration. Since Saul's shield laid on the ground **not anointed with oil**, the hills were supposed to be likewise without dew.<sup>3</sup>

The mention of the shield flows well into the next line of the lament as David reflected upon Saul and Jonathan's weapons of war.

### Verse 22

<sup>22</sup> From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, and the sword of Saul did not return empty.

Jonathan and Saul are not only featured in this lament for the purposes of mourning but also for commendation. Jonathan's bow and Saul's shield did not return empty.<sup>4</sup> They were effectual. Jonathan's arrows hit their targets. Saul's sword was covered with the blood of the slain and the fat of the mighty. They had been valiant in battle in the days before Gilboa.

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Friedrich Keil, Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1866), 290.

<sup>3</sup> Anointing one's shield with oil was a defensive tactic that caused the oppositions' swords to slide off the shield upon contact. It is also believed that the oil would protect the shield from becoming hard and cracking upon being struck.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 32:42; Isaiah 34:6; Jeremiah 46:10.

Remember, Saul slayed his thousands (1 Sam. 18:7) and Jonathan his Philistine garrisons (1 Sam. 14:1-14), and they were valiant in battle on the day they died at Gilboa.

### Verse 23

<sup>23</sup> “Saul and Jonathan *were beloved and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided; They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.*”

Interestingly, the first line of this verse forms the center of this lament. In the Hebrew there are nine verses above it and nine verses below it. And at the center of the lament we find both Saul and Jonathan. David depicted them as being **swifter than eagles** and **stronger than lions**. They bore the courageous qualities of the finest military warriors. And even beyond the battlefield David said they were “**beloved and pleasant in their lives.**” This was accurate of Jonathan and extremely generous towards Saul.

We’re also reminded once more of the uncommon faithfulness that Jonathan exhibited. His fidelity towards David was something that made David marvel and his commitment to his father was resolute, and perhaps, even more stunning. Jonathan stood by his father despite his evil and lunacy. He was faithful to both men and he died, not as a failure, but quite the opposite. It’s just hard to notice that because he didn’t reach his world-defined potential. But he did finish his course. He fought the good fight for David and alongside of Saul. He kept not only the faith but he kept being faithful, to point of death even on Mount Gilboa. It’s a good reminder for disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ that success is not measured by achievement but by faithfulness. In a world filled with fickleness, Jonathan’s life and death is reminder to see the beauty of commitment and to pursue fidelity.

### Verse 24

<sup>24</sup> “O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with luxury; Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.”

While the daughters of the Philistines rejoiced (vs.20) the daughters of Israel were to be lessons in contrast. They were to weep as they recalled the good that came to them from Saul’s reign. Let us not forget the turmoil that was so prevalent in the Book of Judges. Stability and that time frame are not exactly two concepts that go together. That era is contrasted with the *measured prosperity* that came under the reign and military successes of Saul. Again we notice how David focused his attention, and the attention of Israel, on the good that Saul had done for the nation.

### *The Second Stanza [Verses 25-26]*

Here the focus is on Jonathan. Though he and Saul had been together in life, in death and particularly in this funeral dirge they would be separated as David closed the lament by focusing on the great loss he sustained.

## Verse 25

<sup>25</sup> “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan was slain in your high places.

The refrain is not the only familiar language we see in verse twenty-five (“**How the mighty have fallen...**”), we also see another reference to the one (or ones) that were slain on the **high places**. That reminds us of the question we asked in verse 19: Who was the beauty of Israel slain in the high places? The answer: *it looks to be Jonathan*. Compare verse 19 and verse 25:

“The beauty of Israel is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!”  
(vs.19)

“How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan was slain in your high places.” (vs.25)

So not only is the lament/ refrain expanded, the expansion draws our attention to the loss that hurt David most.

## Verse 26

<sup>26</sup> 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.

David greatly lamented the death of his best friend. He didn't just say, "Jonathan loved God so he must be okay right now", he didn't just say, "God is sovereign", he wept (vs.12) and was **distressed** (vs.26). He was not a stoic. He was not a fatalist. He was not empty of the emotions that accompany humanity. He understood that God was God, and that God was good, and he didn't grieve as a man without hope; but he nonetheless grieved.

This love was more wonderful than any love that David had experienced (outside of the love of God). That's the idea behind the latter portion of verse twenty-six: “**Your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women.**” Sadly, many have taken this verse to argue that the Bible condones homosexual relationships. Bill Arnold rightly observes,

“The controversy surrounding verse 26 is more a reflex of our modern society's impulse to defend and justify homosexual activity than it has to do with accurate exegesis of the text.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Jonathan's love was (a) the love of a “**brother**” (vs.26a) and (b) the comparison between Jonathan's love and the love of women is not at the point of sexuality but at the point of fidelity.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan's love for David was marked by unusual faithfulness.

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<sup>5</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), 414.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Christian Focus, Fearn, Ross-shire, 1999), 29.

Matthew Henry writes:

He had reason to say that Jonathan's love to him was wonderful; surely never was the like, for a man to love one who he knew was to take the crown over his head, and to be so faithful to his rival: this far surpassed the highest degree of conjugal affection and constancy.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it would be wrong to see this as a homosexual love because (a) the attitude of the Old Testament (and New Testament alike) is clear concerning the sinfulness of homosexuality (cf. Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:24-26); (b) the text never speaks of there being any kind of sexual interaction between David and Jonathan; and (c) while Jonathan's love for David surpassed any other female love that he had known, it was a filial love; after all, David called Jonathan his "brother."

The key point (within the context of the funeral lament) being: That unique love and great friendship was gone, and David was greatly distressed. That's the difficult side of loving much. There exists the potential this side of eternity of suffering a greater extent of pain because a greater extent of love was felt. Thanks be to God that part of the reason why the love of Christ surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:19) is because it is inescapable, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39).

### ***The Final Stanza [verse 27]***

#### **Verse 27**

***27 "How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"***

One more time we read the refrain, "**How the mighty have fallen...**" This time the addition is in regards to the weapons of war perishing, likely a reference to Jonathan and Saul as esteemed soldiers in Israel's army, but it may well be referring to all those who fell slain on the field of battle. The song leaves us with a picture of desolation that, I think, should stir contemplation. Perhaps a fitting question is: Why have the mighty fallen? What was the impetus for this disaster? I think the answer is - Saul's refusal to be like Jonathan.

Jonathan was the one who told David, "You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you" (1 Sam. 23:17b NIV). Jonathan did not tenaciously hold to what his father thought was his birth rite. He was willing to take the back seat. Saul was not. Saul not only held onto the kingdom that was torn from him but he used his position to orchestrate a sustained campaign to destroy David. Saul lost sight that the kingdom did not belong to him but to Yahweh and to whomever He called to oversee it.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (New York: Revell, n.d.), 2:451. Quoted in Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, 29.

### ***David's Gospel-Mindset***

Finally, this lamentation communicates David's 'Gospel mindset' and it reminds us that it is possible to love our enemies and live free from bitterness. David was a man of like passions; he was made of the same fallen anatomy as you and me; but the Spirit of Christ that was in him was greater than his flesh. Proverbs 19:11 says that it is the glory of a man to overlook a transgression and this entire lament is a testimony to that.

David passed over Saul's great faults. It was inexplicable grace to some degree. Instead, he dwelt on the good things that Saul did and he spoke of his positive traits: he was mighty in battle (vs.22a), his sword did not return empty (vs.22b), he was a man who was pleasant (vs.23) [with others besides, say, David]. He was swift and strong (vs.23b); and he was instrumental in bringing about economic prosperity (vs.24). In the words of William Blaike, David "sought to bury every painful association, and gave full unlimited scope to charity that thinketh no evil."<sup>8</sup> Oh that God would help us to do likewise to those who have wronged us because we live in view of the reality that we have been completely forgiven of far greater transgressions committed against one infinitely greater than us! David's lament passed over Saul's faults, while Jesus' death absorbed the punishment for ours. He who has had all of his transgressions not only overlooked but expiated and propitiated by the blood of Christ, should be, by the grace of God, the quickest to overlook the transgressions of others. That is by no means easy. In fact, in our own flesh it would be impossible; but the same Spirit that filled David indwells us. And what is impossible with men is possible with God.

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<sup>8</sup> Willaim Blaike, *The Expositor's Bible: The Second Book of Samuel* (London; Hodder and Stoughton; 1887-88 ), 12.