

The Loyalty of Love

We have been working our way through the story of the establishment of the monarchy and the drama of Samuel, the priest and prophet of God, Saul, the first king, and David who is appointed to replace Saul when Saul proves to be unequal to the task of leadership. Our passage today is David's song of lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:19. It is the story *...how the mighty have fallen* (as the text tells us 3x)!

As we pick up here in 2 Samuel it talks about the establishment of David as king, first of only Judah (2:4) and then over all the tribes (5:4). Next week we discuss 2 Samuel 5, **David at Thirty**, which is the story of his reign.¹

We have called this series from 1 and 2 Samuel **The Journey of the Heart** because that is how the story itself conceives of what is of central importance in the emergence of God's new order – the state of the heart, the disposition of the heart towards the heart of God.

And how... there were successes and new hearts revived and how loyalties were broken and new hearts turned aside to self-interest.

The "heart" in biblical parlance doesn't refer simply to an *emotional* response to God, rather the orientation of the whole of the human being, including our intellect, memories, emotions, desires and will.²

When Saul is plucked from the baggage room to become king, we are told... **As he turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart...** What this means is that Saul experienced the redemption and renewal of his entire being, intellect, memories, emotions, desires and will.

In the NT we find this idea in the words of 2 Cor 5:17: **So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!**

another heart... What a beautiful shorthand way to express what happens when God restores us to our state before the fall.³

In the Text

The Samuel story is complicated on many levels. We would have to spend many months fully exploring its complexities, human and divine. But let me try to summarize briefly and then I'll talk about the Song of the Bow and then to From the Text.

Saul is a good kid. He is a fine young man. He isn't portrayed as evil so much in the story as unequal to the task of leadership. He is capable military leader and his call to lead Israel as king fated him to a life of war. It's easy to criticize someone from a distance of time, but it was a difficult, tumultuous life to which God called him.

There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul (1 Sam 14:52).

But as the story develops his qualities as a leader are weak:

- impatient, he doesn't wait for Samuel and makes a sacrifice himself before the battle with the Philistines in chapter 13 (emotions),

- he doesn't think things through (intellect), in that same battle he rashly commands the troops to refrain from eating of the spoil and any that do will be put to death, and then of course his beloved son Jonathan does it
- At the command to destroy the entire population of Amalek in 1 Samuel 15, after killing the people Saul greedily preserves spoil that was to have been reserved for God. This is one of the most difficult stories in the Bible and I treat it briefly in a footnote, but I won't deal with it here...⁴
- after Samuel dies he is isolated and adrift and desperately consults the medium at Endor for advice in chapter 28 (desires and will),
- he succumbs to vengeance (memories) in his irrational pursuit of David, his challenger to the throne
- David is the foil of "rightness," he is filled with wonderful zeal and courage for God in the Valley of Elah (let's get ready to rumble!), he responds to Saul's madness with restraint and loyalty.

Our passage today is the *Song of the Bow*, David's lamentation over Saul. It is the place where we get the phrase "how the mighty have fallen." And it occurs three times in our passage (2 Sam 1:19, 25, 27).

Here is the scene... the young man who saw Saul die at the Battle of the Philistines on Mount Gilboa brought Saul's crown and armlet to David as proof of his death. Saul's headless body hangs on the wall at Beth Shean (1 Sam 31:12). David raises a song of lament. Our passage today tells us it was recorded in The Book of Jashar ("just"), a song book lost⁵; David orders the people to learn this song (2 Sam 1:18), which tells us what he wants the people to learn and to remember from this whole drama – in other words, what it all intends to teach the community.

Both Saul and Jonathan have fallen. David sings ***Tell it not in Gath! Or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice!***

This is remarkably poignant because David, betrayed by his own king, was forced to flee to Achish, the leader of the Philistines for a period of time. The Goliath killer, forced to relocate to Gath, the hometown of Goliath (1 Sam 17:4). The only one in the story with God's interests at heart is driven from his homeland into the royal city of Gath. The neighbors weren't too pleased and David asked for his own town in the country and Achish gave him Ziklag. He lived there 16 months 1 Sam 17 tells us.

Even so, he laments...

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely...swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished.

From the Text

Why was this story preserved this way? What were the reasons the first communities of faith (those who were living, and then their children and children's children, and son on) remembered the story *this way*, preserved this story *this way*? What was the guidance and instruction for the journey of the heart that this story plays brings to us?⁶

June 27, 2021 The Loyalty of Love 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; Lamentations 3:23-24; 2 Cor 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

There are so many things to be take away here I could hardly decide what to exclude. Here are a few things for us to consider.

First, speaking of Saul's penchant for vengeance against David, bitterness and vengeance are based on a remembering the past in an unhealthy way. Some years ago we met a couple and before half an hour of acquaintance he was recounting how he had stood up in a faculty meeting and spoken his mind on some issue. When this happened a second and a third time on subsequent meetings Chrissy and I exchanged a look. Have you met people that seem to be trapped by their memories; they can't let go of the past; the relitigate every wrong, over and over.

You have to let the past go. The spiritually whole heart must let the past go. Saul couldn't.

Next, what we see here is the idea that God, in this whole hot mess, stays involved in that human situation with all of its human twists and turns, all of the exercise of human free will, for good and for ill. This whole story, in a way, is about how the exercise of free will changes history and God accommodates his creatures' independence. God stays involved and works with his creation to ultimately bring about the desired end, the establishment of his people and the eventual emergence of the Messiah through the Davidic line. What a patient, purposeful and loving God is he!

God *is* involved in our lives – I mean in our *real* lives. You say, 'Pastor Dave, tell me something new. Of course I believe God is involved in my life.' And I say "Do you?" Because if you do believe it you have said something momentous about how you live each day – that what we think, how we remember, what we feel and our desires and will really is important. The journey of the heart matters!

Here is another thing I feel I've learned. This is a cautionary tale about egoism ("a doctrine that individual self-interest is the actual motive of all conscious action").

I hear an echo of Job once again, the Satan says Job just serves God because of self interest, and God says, no, he is righteous and loves me from pure loyalty, no matter what. Saul succumbs to self interest; David retains his loyalty to God's heart.

We see how Saul declined from his pristine state by the relentless pursuit of his own self-interest. When we reduce life to the pursuit of self-interest we will surely see the mighty fall.

For example, the wealthy who pay \$40,000 a month for a condo (Jarod and Ivanka Kushner), or corporations who hand out millions in bonuses to executives while cutting job of low-paid workers for the sake of the balance sheet. Wealthy individuals who pay almost no taxes. Abigail Disney, the granddaughter of Walt's brother Roy, inherited 120 million. She advocates politically for the wealthy to pay their fair share of tax. She says extreme wealth is an addiction.

I think there is something important to be learned about racism and ethnic intolerance from this story. The Israelites hate the Philistines. The philistines hate the Israelites. David can't live in the capital city of Gath. In this day when we are grieving the treatment of First Nations in residential and a Muslim family dies walking down the street in Ontario. May God help us to love one another.

Finally, what we have on full display here is the *loyalty of love*, hence the title of my message today. David's love for God's anointed first king and his closest friend in life remains undimmed. Even in his own exile, even in the face of Saul's betrayal of his love.⁷ The loyalty of love.

June 27, 2021 The Loyalty of Love 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; Lamentations 3:23-24; 2 Cor 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

God remains loyal in his love for his people, even though the people acted “wickedly” by asking for a king...

For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. (1 Sam 12:22)

His love for Israel is **not conditional!**

And Samuel's love is not conditional. He tells the people:

Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you;

I don't think anybody is going to get all the way through life without a few broken, even irreparable relationships. Like the Samuel story, life is a little too long and complex to have a fairy tale ending. But how about this, that we strive to live a journey of the heart that has as few of them as possible. Let us attempt to live up to the noble standard of love unconditional.

To summarize and conclude, this part of Israelite history teaches us...:

- Let the past go
- God *stays* involved in our *real* lives, and this makes all of life and the choices we make matter
- These stories are a cautionary tale about egoism, the doctrine of self-interest as a motive for all conscious action
- Love is, above all, loyal and enduring

As Samuel tells the people,

... I will instruct you in the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve him faithfully with all your heart... (1 Sam 12:23)

¹ As an aside, curiously, we don't know how long Saul reigned. In 1 Samuel 13:1 the numbers are missing. Strange textual lacuna. Estimates range from 2 years to the 40 years mentioned by Paul in Acts 13. But it was probably about 20 years.

² When we, as a community, align all the aspects of our God-given nature, this produces right-ness, that is, ethical behaviour in every part of our shared life. It produces tolerance and love among us.

³ He doesn't mean that he changes us (He made us in his image – that doesn't change). He *redeems* us, he *restores* us to full spiritual health. “Back to the garden” is actually a great phrase to use.

June 27, 2021 The Loyalty of Love 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; Lamentations 3:23-24; 2 Cor 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

⁴ One of the things we try to practice on our rereading of the lectionary texts is declining to avoid the hard passages. Nothing is more problematic and disturbing in the History of Israel than the actions of Yahweh and his people in the conquest of the land of Canaan.

The battle with the Amalekites in chapter 15 is where, through Samuel, God commands Saul to exterminate the entire population of Amalek, man, woman and child. The Amalekites were historical enemies of Israel. When Moses and Joshua fought the Amalekites in Exodus 17:8-16, before they entered Canaan you might remember that when Moses held up his arm with his staff Israel would be winning and when he dropped it the Amalekites would gain the upper hand. So they held up his hand and Israel prevailed (Ex 17:12 ff). The point is the Amalekites were long and old foes of Israel and it was time to settle the score.

It is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. To our modern sensibilities the slaughter is abhorrent. To displace indigenous peoples for the sake of national expansion is morally reprehensible. If the last 500 years have taught us anything at all, it would be the tragedies associated with the entrance of Europeans to the Americas. Mayans, Aztecs, American and Canadian indigenous peoples have been egregiously displaced from their land and way of life by the nationalist expansions of Europeans. It's not just political correctness or faddish wokeness that makes us regret the past 500 years of colonialism. In recent weeks we ache with regret at the tragedy of what occurred at residential schools in our own land.

The conquest of Canaan is particularly painful because of the plight of the Palestinians and how they, once again, have lost the land of their forefathers.

But if there was ever to be a nation of Israel this was the path. It was in the context of that necessity that Israel invaded and scattered and extinguished the local populations of Canaan. Considering the threat of assimilation to Canaanite culture and religion, it was a policy that preserved the nation from disappearing. As Israel arose from the conquest it abandoned this policy and by the time of the classical prophets the national consciousness had evolved morally to the heights that are expressed there.

⁵ Joshua 10:13; 1 Kings 8:53

⁶ This is a very important principle for us and it defines why we, as Christians, study the Bible together. Why do we study these ancient texts? We study them to understand what they have to teach *us*. We don't study them to find things we want to believe – just the opposite, we study them because they tell us 'how shall we then live.'

That the Bible tells this story with all of its warts tells me that this is a genuine memory of the community, one that wants to learn from the past. So very practical and very useful to us to learn how to live a journey of the heart, with a heart aligned with the Lord's.

⁷ When David flees from Saul to the Philistines, he becomes a ward of King Achish in Gath (1 Sam 27).