

Would I Had Died Instead of You
2 Samuel 18:19-19:8
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Read 2 Samuel 18:19-19:8

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

Some of you have seen the play at the Everett Theatre in downtown Middletown these past two weekends, Monty Python's *Spamalot*. The former pastor of this church, Damon Cinaglia, and his son, Dante, both star in it, and I think were two of the best things about it. Damon plays King Arthur, who is rounding up knights, seeking out the Holy Grail, and attempting to unite all of Britain under his rule. But it's a comedy so not much goes right. It's also a musical, and one of the songs that comes after Arthur is having little success in his quest is called, "I'm All Alone." The first verse is Arthur singing, "I'm all alone, all by myself, there is no one here beside me / No one to comfort me or guide me / If there were someone here with me, how happy I would be, but I'm all alone." The humor is that his servant, Patsy, is standing right next to him the whole time, joining him in a duet, reminding him that she's there as well: "I'm all alone (Oh no you're not), So all alone (So what am I am, chopped liver?)." And then the knights that he's gathered join him later too. So the knights sing, "He's all alone, apart from us, No one to comfort him or guide him."

That song was still bouncing around in my head as I was preparing the sermon because I was going from one isolated, gloomy king to another. This is the passage where King David goes off to sulk, to mourn the loss of his son. He feels all alone, but someone comes in to remind him that he's not alone, that he needs to stop wallowing in self-pity and let his supporters know that he appreciates them. For review, remember that the king's son, Absalom, had secretly built an army over the previous four years and then had himself declared king, marching his troops into Jerusalem. His father had advance warning and evacuated all of the people loyal to him out of the city, and then organized his army for battle. When the two armies fought, David's side was winning handily, but the final stroke was when Absalom was chased down and caught up in a tree dangling by his hair. David had told the leaders of his army to go easy on Absalom, which Joab, his main military commander, defiantly ignored – three spears through the heart does not qualify as going easy.

We'll see the fallout from the war, hear the heart of David as he reacts to the news, and see what was required of him as king. We'll get some insight into why his grief presented real problems on the day of victory, but we'll also delve into how, as believers in the God who grants new life after death, we handle our own grief. The first section records

I. Words of Victory (18:19-32)

19 Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, "Let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies." 20 And Joab said to him, "You are not to carry news today. You may carry news another day, but today you shall carry no news, because the king's son is dead." 21 Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. 22 Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said again to Joab, "Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no reward for the news?" 23 "Come what may," he said, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and outran the Cushite. 24 Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he

saw a man running alone.²⁵ The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, "If he is alone, there is news in his mouth." And he drew nearer and nearer.²⁶ The watchman saw another man running. And the watchman called to the gate and said, "See, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also brings news."²⁷ The watchman said, "I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." And the king said, "He is a good man and comes with good news."²⁸ Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, "All is well." And he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and said, "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king."²⁹ And the king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was."³⁰ And the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.³¹ And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good news for my lord the king! For the Lord has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you."³² The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man."

Ahimaaz has been part of the story recently, as he was one of the links in David's spy network, relaying Absalom's decisions from Jerusalem to where David was hiding out. He has been loyal to the true king throughout Absalom's rebellion, so it is understandable that he now wants to bring the news of victory back to David. It's possible that he hoped there would be a reward for the messenger. Joab, older and wiser, tried to spare him a long run that would result in a cold reception. Joab knew that David would not be happy to hear that his son was dead, so he sent someone else, a nameless foreigner. The text doesn't say this, but I think that Joab suspected that David might be so angry that he would kill the messenger. In fact, I think this whole incident was included in the narrative because it's a reflection on David's state of mind. If he was fine and could emotionally handle the news of the battlefield triumph, then the narrator would have just skipped all these details, and just said, "Joab sent messengers to tell David that they won." But the uncertainty of how David would receive the news necessitates the details.

Ahimaaz insisted on taking the news, so Joab relented. He ended up outrunning the first messenger back to David, who thinks that he is going to hear good news because it's coming from a good, loyal man. After hearing that his side won, David asked him directly if Absalom was dead and Ahimaaz pretended that he did not know, despite the fact that he had clearly been told back in verse 20. For all Ahimaaz's excitement to bring David the news, his nerve failed him when it came down to it. He must have thought back to Joab's not wanting to send him and realized he was in a dangerous spot. It took the Cushite man to arrive and confirm that Absalom was dead.

One practical application that this brings up: We should rush to proclaim that the Lord has delivered us from the hands of our enemies. Romans 10:14-15 – "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" We should be like the two runners and bring the news to those who need to hear it, whether it's well-received or not. Don't be like Ahimaaz and skewer the truth a little bit, omitting the parts that we don't think they'll want to hear - things like hell and the exclusive claims of Jesus to be the only way to salvation. Instead, we should be like the Cushite and just deliver the news of the gospel in all its raw, potentially offensive glory.

His son's death was clearly not what David wanted to hear, so we read in the next five verses his
II. Words of Grief (18:33-19:4)

33 And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" ¹ It was told Joab, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom." ² So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, "The king is grieving for his son." ³ And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. ⁴ The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The cost of the victory over the rebel forces was Absalom's life. Against the blatant instructions of King David, Joab had not spared Absalom's life, he had run Absalom through with spears as he dangled helplessly from a tree. Joab knew, even if the king was not willing to admit, that he could either have his son or the throne, not both. Joab must have reasoned that if Absalom had lived, he would have continued to be a thorn in David's side and a magnet for anyone else who wanted to oppose the king. He needed to be made an example of, discouraging any future rebellions.

A victorious king is expected to celebrate and applaud his returning soldiers. David's grief completely changed the mood of the people – from celebrating their triumph and return to power to mourning and shame, as though they had lost the battle. David was oblivious to this, he was just expressing the deep sorrow of a father losing his son. He had never turned on his son in his heart, even when Absalom brought his army to Jerusalem and ran him out of the palace into hiding. If David had turned on Absalom, he would have had him executed for the murder of his half-brother, Amnon. But he couldn't bring himself to be the cause of the death of a third son. Part of David's grief, I'm sure, had to be rooted in guilt. Nathan's pronouncement back in chapter 12 that "*the sword will not depart from your house*" had gone from the death of his infant son to Tamar's rape to Amnon's murder to finally Absalom's rebellion and death. David's children bore the brunt of his punishment, some as innocent victims and others piling their sins on top. And so David wept.

Someone had to get David to stop grieving long enough to encourage his loyal followers, so in the final four verses we hear

III. Words of Rebuke (19:5-8)

⁵ Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, "You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines, ⁶ because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. ⁷ Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now." ⁸ Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, "Behold, the king is sitting in the gate." And all the people came before the king. Now Israel had fled every man to his own home.

We assume that David did not know at this point that it was Joab who had decided that Absalom had to die. Joab was the man who wasn't afraid to tell his king the blunt truth: you've got big problems because the impression you're giving everyone is that "*you love those who hate you and hate those who love you.*" Your actions are telling everyone who is on your side that you would prefer they were dead to the guy who was actually trying to kill you and steal your throne! You can't even see that the death of your one son has actually saved the lives of the rest of your family; your other sons, daughters, and wives are alive and safe because we won. You need to show your people some gratitude, or you will be celebrating this victory alone.

As Dale Davis commented, “Joab is throwing some bare-fisted punches. He is harsh and sarcastic and doubtless exaggerates. But Joab is desperate. He must awaken David to his own folly: he may win the battle and still lose the kingdom. He can have his pity party later; right now he’d better grab some Kleenex, wipe his eyes, and get out to thank the troops... Joab’s speech is nasty but necessary.”¹ And David listened. He picked himself off the floor, dried his eyes, and headed out to the gate to be among his people. Next week we’ll see what restoration looks like for the great king who had been displaced.

Conclusion

As we think about this passage as whole, a big theme is the death of a child. There’s a saying, “No parent should have to bury their child,” but unfortunately, it happens all of the time. Maybe you’ve had to bury a child or had a miscarriage or a stillbirth. The less visible losses like the miscarriages can be just as painful as the visible loss. I have heard of parents who will talk about the loss of a child to stillbirth decades ago and how old that child would currently be if he had lived. For parents who have lost a child, the pain is indescribable. Even years later, I’ve heard moms say that they cannot wait until they die so they can see their child again; not that they are suicidal but that they long for that reconnection.

As it did with David, grief can often alienate us from those around us. We often don’t want to be around others, and many friends and acquaintances find it easier to avoid grieving parents, in part because they don’t know what to say and don’t want to upset them further. The death of a child can also lead to great marital stress. Arguments and past hurts combine with the deep wounds of grieving to intensify the stress of marriages and add to the isolation. Unfortunately, many marriages end in the years following the death of a child. And the last area of relational strain can be with God. Even strong believers can be thrown into times of discouragement, disappointment with God, and doubting their faith. Many people hold their loved ones’ deaths against God, evidence that He either doesn’t exist or that He doesn’t care. I know a couple whose oldest daughter died of cancer at the age of 10, and they have been angry at God for the past 45 years. Their pain does not allow them to see anything else about our loving heavenly Father, and the hope of healing and resurrection offered in the Gospel.

They grieve as those who have no hope, but 1 Thessalonians 4:13 urges believers to understand what happens after death so that “*you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*” We’re not told to avoid grief, we still go through all of the same stages of doubt, denial, anger, despair, acceptance that everyone else does. Our hearts feel broken, our sadness comes in waves, and we feel that there is a hole in our lives that will always be missing. But the story of our existence is not confined to our years on this earth. The second date on a headstone marks the end of our time on earth, but also the time that we join eternity, the beginning of the new and glorious chapter. It feels like we have said goodbye for good to someone who has died, but for those in Christ, their story is not over and we will be reunited in heaven.²

John Piper said this: “There is a paradox in the way God is honored through hope-filled grief. One might think that the only way He could be honored would be to cry less or get over the ache more quickly... But there is another way God is honored in our grieving. When we taste the loss so deeply because we loved so deeply and treasured God’s gift — and God in His gift — so passionately that

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (England: Christian Focus, 2013, p. 231.

² <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/for-the-grieving-parent-with-the-loss-of-a-child/>

the loss cuts the deeper and the longer, and yet in and through the depths and the lengths of sorrow we never let go of God, and feel Him never letting go of us — in that longer sorrow He is also greatly honored... at every moment of the lengthening grief, we turn to him, not away from him. And therefore, the length of it is a way of showing Him to be ever present, enduringly sufficient.”³

I want us to think about verse 33 again, David lamenting, *“would I had died instead of you.”* That’s very common for a parent to say after a child’s death - “it should have been me.” Our love for our children would compel us to take their place if we could have kept them alive. “I’ll take your pain, I’ll take your disease; I would rather suffer than you.” That is a beautiful, God-given feeling, but most of the time we cannot make them avoid suffering by suffering ourselves. The Apostle Paul didn’t have children that we know of, but he considered his fellow Jews his family, his children in a sense. In Romans 9:1-3, he said that *“I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”* In other words, if it were possible, he would have been cursed and sent to hell if it meant that he could save his Jewish brothers and sisters who had rejected Christ. That’s a beautiful sentiment, and fueled Paul’s evangelistic passion, but that’s not actually possible – to take someone else’s place in spiritual punishment. Everyone has to accept or reject the good news of salvation on their own.

Of course, there’s one exception to that, one Person who offered Himself in death in the place of others. One Person actually took the spiritual punishment of others, experienced the torment of hell and death, to save others, even those who had positioned themselves as His enemies (which is the natural state of all humanity). Romans 5:7-8, 10 – *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us... while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.”* The good news is that Jesus said in essence, *“I will die and experience the wrath of God for your sins in your place.”* He did what David and Paul and every loving parent can’t do: we cannot be the substitute to die in place of our child, but He was. His death enabled His people, His followers throughout all human history to escape the curse of death. They will still die physically, but they will not die spiritually because His death paid the penalty of their sins. They will live forever in glory with God the Father because He accepts those who are saved in Jesus as perfect and righteous in His sight. They are no longer rebels to His will, enemies who reject Him; they are now adopted sons and daughters in His eternal, heavenly family. Amen, let’s pray.

Benediction

Ephesians 6:23-24 - *“Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.”*

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/letter-to-a-parent-grieving-the-loss-of-a-child>