

“Lamenting Death”
Sermon Series on *the Life of David* #7
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
(1 Sam. 31:1-13; 2 Sam. 1:1-4, 11-12, 17-18)
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Last Wednesday I had a wonderful time celebrating the Fourth of July with some dear friends in our church. The food, the fireworks, and the fellowship were absolutely spectacular. But I confess, earlier in the day when I talked with each of my three sons, it was a bittersweet conversation as we reminisced about celebrations of past Fourths of July as a family when my late wife Lorie was still alive. One of the boys remembered that every year on the Fourth of July, Lorie would make a sheet cake and decorate it to look like an American flag. Whip cream, and fresh strawberries and blueberries would make up the red, white and blue. It was always a big hit with our family.

Holidays are a time when you especially miss a loved one who has died, and you feel their absence all the more acutely. It brings back memories of fun times with them in the past, and the hole in your heart seems larger than usual. The empty seat at the dinner table creates an absence that can't be filled. It's a time when you lament death.

David knew something about lamenting death, and we learn about it in the passages we've read together this morning. Perhaps his experience can shed some light on the ways in which we can grieve as people of faith who actually learn how to lament death in hope.

I. The Deaths of Saul and Jonathan.

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 other times before, but this time the battle went heavily 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 he couldn't bring himself to do it, so Saul fell on his own sword.

The scene of the aftermath of the battle was horrible with bodies littered all over the ground. The Philistines came to mop up and finish off the job, and there they found Saul and his sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. What they did with the

bodies of Saul and his boys is a sordid and gruesome story. No doubt the Philistines made light of Saul's death, and they probably also made profane comments about the Israel's God too.

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 the Bible tells us that 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. There isn't the slightest hint of the breach between David and Saul or a single negative comment made about the fallen king. Only sadness and grief fill the lines of this poem. "*How the mighty have fallen in battle!*" (2 Sam. 1:25).

In his book *Leap Over a Wall* Eugene Peterson writes that David lamented because he cared, and he lamented because he was willing to bring his full attention to the fact of death.¹ If you study the book of Psalms, you'll discover that 67 of them are songs of lament, nearly half of all the psalms in the Bible. Many of these poems 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 he wrote from the heart about how these realities affected his soul.

II. The Denial of Death in our Culture.

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 its reality until we absolutely must. Or we get busy or spend money to try and take our minds off these things. It's amazing what people will do to avoid the reality of death and loss.

Pastor and author Steve Brown tells a story about a time when he was flying from Miami to Los Angeles. The plane was a big 747, and there was a large number of people on board. All around him was a group of people that had obviously just taken a cruise together, and they were going back to Los Angeles. They were joking and laughing with one another, but to his left was a young teenage girl who was obviously quite ill. 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 struggle with chemotherapy and radiation. I didn't realize she was this sick today or I would have never gotten on the plane."

They found a couple of doctors on the flight, and they came to the young 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 help 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 that we're mortal after all, and he prepares us for the day of our own deaths as well.

III. Lamenting Death.

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. 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 had been such a rock for all of us. I grieved my father's death, but I really didn't know how to express it.

I had a different experience with I buried my late wife Lorie in 2016. Sitting with my sons and their wives in our church's columbarium when we interred Lorie's ashes, I felt the sting of death and I deeply mourned her passing that day and in the many months since. I could acknowledge how awful it felt, and I remember struggling to get my head around the fact that I would never see Lorie again in this life. I also remember crying to God, "This isn't the way it's supposed to be!"

The word "lament" means "a passionate expression of grief or sorrow." But it can also mean "a protest," which is a form of petition. It's an effort to "take God to court," so to speak, and to make one's case to Him. Both senses of lament appear in the Bible, and although they differ, there is a continuum between the two.

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.

My friend Jerry Sittser 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 he learned that 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 the best and quickest way to meet the sunrise of tomorrow. And it's the best way to deal with grief, too. Face the darkness.

IV. Learning to Lament.

Whenever you're confronted with death, I think 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 you don't, you'll have unfinished business that will be with you for a lifetime, and it will express itself somehow, usually in unhealthy ways.

The **second** thing you should remember is don't linger too long in your grief. Some people get stuck in their lament, and they 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 a very difficult thing to do, but it's a necessary step in the healing process. Running too quickly from your grief or lingering too long in it are both unhealthy approaches which we should avoid.

The **final thing** we should keep in mind when confronted by death is to remember that death never has the last word. The promise of heaven reminds us that God always has 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*" (2 Sam. 12:23). Easter faith

is what grounds those of us who trust in Jesus Christ, and we who profess faith in Him know that this life is not all there is. It is only a prelude to a greater world to come. So, we lament with hope.

The apostle Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians, *“Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”* (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

The Heidelberg Catechism says it another way, "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 from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him."

One day, all whispers of death will fall silent. As it says in the book of Revelation, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”* (Rev. 21:1-5).

Conclusion.

After Lorie was diagnosed with cancer, a friend gave us a book to read by a young theologian named Todd Billings. He’s a professor at Western Theological Seminary, and he’s a rising star in the academic world. Tragically, Todd developed the same blood cancer, multiple myeloma, as Lorie did, and he writes about it in the book. He’s only 39-years-old, and he’s married and has two young children. The book is titled *Rejoicing in Lament*.²

Lorie read this book, and she said it was one of the most helpful ones she read during her fight with cancer. She wanted me to read the book with her too, but I resisted. I was afraid that if I did I wouldn’t be able to hold things together and I would give into despair. I was barely keeping it together as it was, and I just thought I couldn’t handle any more. I could tell that it hurt Lorie that I didn’t want

to read the book with her, but I just didn't think I could go there. And then she died.

However, *Rejoicing in Lament* was one of the many books I read the year after Lorie's death, and it was one of the most helpful of them all. It gave voice to all I have experienced since Lorie died, and it helped me learn to lament. I'm glad I waited to read the book when I did because I was in a better place to process all that Todd writes, and I also benefited from the fact that I could take in all the underlining and the notes in the margin Lorie had made. It was like reading the book with her after all.

In his book Todd writes that God and the story of His mighty acts and His ongoing work in the world are bigger than any of our individual stories. And yet, God's story doesn't dismiss our stories. Instead, it envelopes and redefines them. Indeed, God folds our stories into the dying and rising of Jesus Christ as one who belongs to Him.

He writes that Jesus is the transcendent incarnate Son of God, the One through whom all things were made, and yet during His earthly ministry He joined the psalmist in lamenting not only sin and suffering, but also death itself. And He acknowledged that things aren't the way they're supposed to be. We live in a fallen world. But Todd also says that God's promises are trustworthy, and the Holy Spirit has united us with Christ, through whom we are now able to cry out to the Father as adopted children whenever we suffer or a loved one dies. We lament. In all of this, our own stories are not preserved in a pristine way. Rather, they are incorporated into a much larger story – God's story in Christ. It's an amazing mystery, and it is because of this mystery that we can actually learn to rejoice in our lament.³

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, because God always has another move to make. We should lament death, as David did, and we should grieve our great losses. We should! But thanks be to God that you and I can grieve in hope.

We grieve, but not as people who have no hope. The promise of the resurrection sustains us and gives us the assurance that one-day God will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more crying or pain or death. The old order of things will be taken away, and God will create a new heaven and a new earth. And all will be as it was meant to be in the beginning.

On Saturday after I completed writing this sermon, I had an amazing experience in which I tried to envision what Lorie is like now in her perfected glorified state in heaven. I closed my eyes and imagined her with Jesus – radiant, glowing, no cancer, no ravages of chemo, and no signs of age. She was perfect and whole and pure. Gone were her doubts and worry, and gone were her character flaws. She

was everything God created her to be in the beginning now in a perfected and redeemed state. It was glorious.

The amazing testimony of David is that in spite of his great hardships and all his trials and the deaths of people he loved, he discovered the transforming power of giving thanks to God in all circumstances and learning to lament in hope. May you and I discover this same truth today as we seek to follow Christ together. Amen.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 115.

² Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

³ Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament*, 169-170.