

## How the Mighty Have Fallen Draft

<sup>NRS</sup> **2 Samuel 1:1** After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag.

<sup>NRS</sup> **2 Samuel 1:17** David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. <sup>18</sup> (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said: <sup>19</sup> Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! <sup>20</sup> Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult. <sup>21</sup> You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more. <sup>22</sup> From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty. <sup>23</sup> Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. <sup>24</sup> O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. <sup>25</sup> How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. <sup>26</sup> I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. <sup>27</sup> How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

How the mighty have fallen! How the mighty have fallen. What a phrase. Today we use this phrase to talk about anything big and important that comes crashing down to earth. If you google “how the mighty have fallen” you’ll pretty much find a list of stories about financial companies and 401k’s. I even stumbled across a mean spirited picture with this caption where on one side of the frame there was a picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime, and on the other side a picture of him holding a hot dog and a bit of a gut. (Whoever posted that must not have seen the Terminator. 😊)

Today it’s such a popular phrase it’s easy to forget that it from right here at the beginning of Second Samuel.

It’s quite a way to start a book off, isn’t it? King Saul, the first king of Israel ever dies, and the new king, king David mourns his death saying no less than three times “how

the mighty have fallen.” And, if you didn’t know anything about Saul and David- this might sound like a perfectly normal thing. It might sound like a perfectly normal thing for one leader to lament over the death of another. Except, we know too much about Saul and David, don’t we? We know too much about how Saul treated David, and how David must have felt about Saul not to be a little surprised at all this to-do...a little shocked at David’s song.

Do you remember how they started out? David started out as a boy in Saul’s court. David was something of a child prodigy, and he was skilled not only in playing music but in writing music, too. And Saul- well Saul was given to black, jet black moods. We don’t know whether it was the weight of the crown, of having to make all of those decisions, of having to send young men to their deaths- we don’t know whether it was this, or whether Saul suffered from depression or some other mental illness, but what we do know is that Saul’s mood would change in an instant. And just like that he could fly into a rage.

And the only thing that helped, the only thing that would soothe this savage beast, but music. Specifically music from David. There was just something about that boy- the way he played the lyre, or his voice, there was just something about him that would calm Saul down sometimes.

Only ‘sometimes’ was definitely the operative word. Because other times the music wouldn’t cut it, and Saul would take his anger out on the boy. Saul would rage against the young David- one time even throwing his spear at him and missing him by that much.

And this was just when David was a boy. When he grew up, when he became a real threat- Saul only became worse. At one point the crowds started to celebrate all of David's victories- and they compared them to Saul. And they came up with a little ditty: Saul has killed his thousands; David his ten thousands. And they'd just chant it over and over. I mean come on- you don't even need to be a homicidal maniac for THAT to hack you off. And so finally Saul decided that was it- David's time had come to an end. And it was only due to his son Jonathan, David's best friend in the whole world, coming to him in the middle of the night and warning him about his father that saved David's life. David ran off just before Saul's men could get to him, and for years David lived as an outlaw in the hills around Judea.

So, all this, all this violence, all this painful history between the two of them- this is what makes this text this morning so surprising. It's not just two rulers that barely knew each other, and one king giving a nice eulogy at the funeral of another. David and Saul were men who knew each other and hated each other. At the most you'd expect a kind of grudging acknowledgment of the other's accomplishments. At most.

But what we get is this beautiful, achingly beautiful tribute- marked three times by this tragic lament: "How the mighty have fallen." "How the mighty have fallen."

Why? Why does David mourn like this?

Some of this grief is just shock- shock that someone like Saul, someone larger than life, could actually die. Saul was huge man who towered over most everyone else, and was good looking- a natural born leader. And he was king. King! And David has an

enormous respect, a massive respect for the fact that God worked through the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul and raise him up.

When he was on the run, when Saul was chasing after him and he living out of caves and in hiding. Two times David had the opportunity to kill Saul. Two times David had the opportunity, and two times he let Saul go. And both times, out of respect that God had called Saul, had anointed him king, David just cut off a piece of Saul's cloak instead of cutting off his head. And both times David's friends, his fellow warriors, were shocked at him- annoyed at him no doubt. I mean David had the chance to end the fighting, to save lives- with one flick of his wrist. But David wouldn't do it- could not bring himself to do it. Not out of love for Saul- but out of love for the office, out of respect for God's claim on Saul.

And so when David cries out "how the mighty have fallen" I think we hear a genuine shock from David that God allowed Saul, God allowed his king, to be handed over and killed. I think it's almost a cry of disbelief- like how could God allow this to happen?

And we know this cry, too, don't we? Our lives are filled with so many moments, so much noise. But every once in a while something cuts through all that noise. Often it's death. I'll always remember my mom when she answered the phone late one night. My grandfather had been sick- we all knew it wasn't going well. But when he died and my grandmother called. My mom just put the phone down and started to cry and said in this voice I will never forget, "Dad died." And she seemed so surprised.

And I remember feeling how could it be possible that one minute my grandfather was alive and with us and not the next. How could it be possible?

How the mighty have fallen!

So David is grieving the falling away of this mighty man. I think this is definitely true. But I think it's more than this, too. Because he's so tender as he remembers Saul. He's *so* generous about this man who caused him so much pain. I wonder if David isn't acknowledging something else mighty falling away as well. I wonder if David himself wasn't surprised that his own anger, his own mighty hatred of Saul has fallen to the ground as well.

It's strange, isn't it- the way we feel about people? Sometimes the way we feel about people makes perfect sense. They are kind to us. We love them for it. They hurt us- we keep our distance. And sometimes when the way we feel about someone doesn't make sense- we can kind of talk ourselves out of it, when the feeling isn't that strong. If you find yourself not liking someone for no good reason, for instance, sometimes you can just tell yourself- hey, they haven't done anything to you. Give 'em a break. And it works.

But oh, most of the time our feelings just aren't this simple, are they? Most of the time they're so much more complicated, so much more conflicted. And the feelings we have towards people- sometimes they come and go, and we don't even know why. Sometimes you just are attracted to someone, or repelled by someone- and there's just no reason for it. It's like something that comes over you and falls away- like the waves in an ocean crashing over you and dissipating.

And here, you can almost feel David's own wonder, David's own amazement that his anger, his hatred for Saul, an enmity built up over a lifetime- that for some reason, now that Saul is dead, for some reason it just isn't as strong. For some reason he's able to see Saul for who he really was- a tragic man, so hungry to be liked, so ravenous to hold on to power he was willing to do anything- even to go and see those witches from Endor to summon Samuel's ghost in a pathetic attempt to figure out what he could do to somehow work his way back into God's blessing. And David, seeing Saul like this, seeing him more like this sad old man and less that angry young king- well it's just harder to be angry at this.

Aric Knuth teaches English at the University of Michigan. When Aric was a young boy his father, a merchant marine, would leave for long, long stretches of time- 6 months at a time, with only a few weeks at home between assignments. And Aric, who loved his dad and missed him fiercely, came up with an ingenious solution- he made these tapes for his father. Aric would make these tapes telling his father about what he was doing in school. About what he was learning. On one tape he even played his clarinet, he had a recital the next day, and he was nervous about, and he wanted to play it for his dad to see what he thought. And the most painful thing- at the end of every tape Aric would ask his dad to flip the tape over to the other side, which he always left blank, and make a tape for him- just so he could hear his voice and just know he was ok. Aric made countless tapes, hours of tape, and at the end of every tape he would ask this, he would beg his father to record something, anything. And do you know- not one tape ever came back. Not one.

At first it was just disappointing, but over the years this disappointment turned into a bitterness...an anger.

Now an adult, a successful adult teaching at one of the finest universities in America, Aric decided to do something he had never done. He decided to confront his dad and ask him why in all those years he had never sent a tape, not even one.

When Aric asked his father why he didn't send back any tapes, and he played some of the tapes for his dad- everything kind of went as well as you could expect. His dad started to cry. And he finally told Aric to stop the tapes, that it was just too painful. And he said he just didn't know why he never made any tapes- that he was just an absolute failure at that. And he felt awful about it, but there wasn't anything to do now. And he seemed genuinely in pain about it.

Aric pretty much got what he wanted- his father was clearly upset and felt bad. But the strange thing is- after confronting his father, that he really didn't need to do it. He said the most interesting thing. He said he realized that the person he is mad at, the person he's angry at, isn't the quiet, older man that was sitting across the table from him, the sad old man he had somehow forged a friendship with now as an adult; no, it was that young man who lived years ago, it was that young man who is utterly and completely gone.

For Aric it wasn't death but just time that let all of that pain and anger go a little.

Do you know what I think is really surprising about this song from David? It's not that he was shocked that Saul died. Death always catches us off guard- even when we think we're prepared for it. And it's not that his anger and pain fell away- I don't

think this is that surprising. Sometimes time really does heal our wounds. What shocks me, what utterly shocks me is that David allows his mighty anger to fall. He allows it to fall to the ground and sing this song about Saul for all to hear.

There's not a person I know who hasn't been hurt by someone- who isn't angry, even if they're not comfortable talking about it, who isn't angry with someone. Even if it doesn't make any rational sense. And it isn't just people but institutions. I've known people angry at the government. Angry at the church. Angry at liberals. Angry at conservatives. You name it. You could almost say we build our identities around our anger, sometimes. The question this text poses to us is if God lifted these feelings, lifted these old hurts from us- would we receive it, like David does? Would we sing about it? Or would we try to hold on- preferring a past hurt, to an uncertain hope?

And friends, this isn't an academic question. We believe that in our baptism God really does raise us to newness of life. We believe the good news of the Gospel is that Christ has already broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us. It's already done. The question for us is are we willing to let these walls, these wounds- are we willing to let them stay fallen? **Amen.**