

Taken Too Soon

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'll turn over the page now to 2 Samuel chapter 1, I'm going to read from verses 17 to 27.

Before we read that, let me ask God for help again as we look at His Word. Heavenly Father, we know that we can understand nothing without Your help, nor that by nature we are blind both to know You and to understand Your Word.

Lord, we thank You that in Christ You have opened our eyes, You have opened our hearts to know You. So Lord, we now pray that You would be further doing that, that You would help us to behold You for who You truly are, that You would write the truths of Scripture on our hearts.

You give us ears to hear, hearts to understand, and You'd build us all up by Your Word. We pray. In Jesus' name, Amen. So 2 Samuel 1, chapter 1, 17 to 27.

And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan, his son. And he said it should be taught to the people of Judah, behold, it is written in the book of Jasher.

[1 : 13] He said, Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places. How the mighty have fallen, tell it not in gath. Publish it not in the streets of Ascolon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice.

Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exalt. You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, no fields of offerings.

For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul not anointed with oil. From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty.

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.

You daughters of Israel weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

[2 : 13] How the mighty have fallen in the midst of battle. Jonathan lies slain on your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant you have been to me.

Your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen and the weapons of war perished.

Well as I said earlier, this evening we are concluding our series on the life of Jonathan. And the title of this series has been living by faith where life is unfair. And over the past few weeks we have seen so much of Jonathan's life.

How it is a mixture of highs and lows, and how so much of it has been unfair. Jonathan in many ways is a tragic hero, isn't he? His father was Saul, Israel's first king, who looked so promising at first, but then so quickly denied as he turned away from the Lord.

And Jonathan was his heir, and Jonathan looked so promising as well. And Jonathan remained so promising, the problem was as Saul turned away from God, God took the kingdom away from Saul and gave it to David.

[3 : 25] And so Jonathan would no longer be the crown prince. But amazingly Jonathan didn't use that opportunity to also turn against David.

Jonathan remained firm and fast in his friendship with David and rejoiced that David was God's king. And as a result of that covenant agreement that we saw last week, David and Jonathan's friendship is so amazing and striking.

But it also means that it ultimately led to great sorrow as Jonathan is a sliced slain on the field of battle. And David grieves Jonathan as he's killed alongside his father Saul.

And I suspect that the death of Jonathan isn't a passage we'd naturally turn to, I guess it is if you're going through the book. But it does provide a helpful window into this whole topic of grief and death.

And in particular how we respond and how we comfort one another in the face of death when life is snatched away. So suddenly, so in such a raw way before our eyes.

[4 : 33] And we're going to focus some of our time on Jonathan's lament in the way that, see how David models lament for us in this almost this psalm here.

We're also going to see how that fits in more broadly with what the Bible has to teach us on grief and hope in the face of death. So we have two points this evening, very simply true grief and true hope.

So first of all, let's think about true grief as we look at this section. And the main thing I want us to notice is that true grief that that in David's lament is the very real way that David responds to grief. The very honest way in which the Bible deals with grief and death. Now why is this important? I think in some ways this is a breath of fresh air reading these passages for both the narrative that we have in chapter 31 and David's lament.

Because while as individuals we will have experienced death in different ways at different times. On the whole, we live in a society that is far less familiar with death and often deliberately removes itself from death.

[5 : 45] We're less familiar than even a hundred years ago. So death is often far from our minds. I think there's a number of reasons for that.

The wonders of modern medicine have meant that we just see less death. People live longer. Life expectancy has gone up and child and infant mortality has decreased.

And these things that we are wonderfully thankful for. And we also, the other reason we don't see death is that hospitals and hospices take away that those who are declining and dying.

And so we're less familiar with seeing that, with seeing how fragile life can be. We know it, but it's not as in front of us as it were as it might have been in the past.

I think as a result then we're not forced to think about death all that often. But probably more tragically we live in a society that doesn't have a place for death in their thinking.

[6 : 43] And in many ways actually doesn't know how to deal with death when they face it. They're not, people aren't equipped often to face death. And death is simply presented as a fact of life.

I think in contrast the Bible is very realistic. Real life. We see real life in the Bible, don't we, with all of its colours.

We see real suffering. We see real death and we see grief and the response to it. We see a narrative that pauses halfway through just to give, for David to have the chance to teach us his song about the death of Jonathan.

I think David's lament for Jonathan is just one example of this kind of reality that we see in the Bible. Just notice first of all the form. David writes a song of lament.

Lament is something that we need to learn to do better, to give time to grief. In verse 18 we see that David teaches it to the people of Judah.

[7 : 44] Grief is legitimate in other words. Grief is so legitimate that David not only writes this but says that this should be a pattern for other people. People might change the words but David by teaching it to others is helping to put words into their mouths.

And so often we find the Psalms do that for us as well. The other Psalms of David and others that are written lament. That is written down and expressed helps others to give word to the sorrow that's in their heart.

Legitimate sorrow. Just working briefly through these verses. You'll notice in verses 19 to 25 how they're bracketed by that phrase, the mighty have fallen.

David first of all is capturing the national tragedy that has taken place. Israel's king has been cut down by their enemies. And as David knows that right now as the Philistine army goes back to Gath there's going to be rejoicing.

Well as the scattered remnants of Israel go back to their towns and cities there's going to be weeping and mourning. There'll be orphans and widows left behind. And David just can't stand that.

[8 : 51] He can't stand that there will be such, that will be, such will be the responses to the same tragedy that has taken place. And in verse 21 we see he curses the ground that has seen such a thing, that has seen such suffering.

For there the shield of the mighty was defiled. The shield of Saul was not anointed with oil. It's a double tragedy for David.

In verses 22 to 23 David almost flashes back to back to the Saul and Jonathan in their prime. So while Saul tried to kill David he was still a very important figure in his life.

Saul was the father of David's first wife. He was the father of his best friend. David was almost like family to Saul. And grief is difficult.

Grief is difficult to say. Grief can be bewildering at the best of times. So we can only imagine what it was like for David as he experienced this double loss of both his best friend and this person who was like family and yet tried to kill him.

[9 : 59] Verse 23, Saul and Jonathan beloved and lovely in life and in death they were not divided. You can almost feel the stab of pain in verse 23, can't you?

As the word death brings David back to reality. Verse 24, you daughters of Israel weep over Saul who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, you put ornaments of gold in your apparel.

David however David might have felt personally about Saul's death there is only one right response which is to weep. Verse 25 then again repeats that how the mighty have fallen.

It's a bridge now though this time it moves us away from the national tragedy to David's personal tragedy which he briefly gives us in verse 26. As the camera pans across the high places, David mentioned those in 19, as the camera pans across the battlefield it now pauses over the body of Jonathan as David contemplates his loss.

Jonathan lies slain on the high places. I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant you've been to me, your love to me was extraordinary surpassing the love of women.

[11 : 15] So significantly David and Jonathan were best friends, they were bound by this covenant and that was the most significant thing for David and Jonathan wasn't it? That promise of lifelong support.

It was staggering because Jonathan and David should have been at each other's throats trying to kill each other but Jonathan modelled for us that right response to God's choosing king by laying aside the crown and saying David you are the Nord's anointed and putting himself second.

Now that helps us to understand just in passing that David's words in verse 26 aren't meant to be romantic or sexual, David's simply expressing that Jonathan's selfless love for him and putting him first was unlike any other kind of love he had experienced.

How the mighty have fallen and the weapons of war perished. The Bible is very real about grief isn't it? So much so that it pauses this narrative, I love that, it gives time for David's grief and so should we, we should give time for lament.

And as we reflect on this lament the main thing I want us to take away is that grief is the right response to death. And it's worth saying that grieving looks different for different people at different times and grieving we will all grieve differently at different times in our own lives.

[12 : 39] The grief is the right response to death. And perhaps we see that most clearly when we see Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. We read the shortest verse in the Bible there that Jesus wept.

We're told that he approached the tomb, he was snorting with rage quite literally is what the words, what the words mean in the Greek. Jesus, no Jesus knew that Lazarus was going to rise from the dead and yet the way he still approaches death is that he is raging and he is grieving and he is weeping.

Because the Creator of the world knows that death is not natural, he knows that it's an enemy intruder. Death is something that tears apart men and women in a way that we're not meant to be. We were created for life with God, we were created to grow stronger and more beautiful not to weaken and wither.

Death is not part of God's good creation. It's result of the fall that has caused everything to break. Our relationship with God with one another, this whole natural order.

Death is an enemy and so it's right for David to grieve. It's right for Jesus to rage at the tomb of Lazarus. Rage is an appropriate response to death.

[13 : 56] I mean, what would we think if Jesus came to Mary and Martha and just said, chin up, don't worry, these things happen. We'd be outraged. But rage doesn't make sense if you view death from a secular point of view.

Because death then is just a perfectly natural part of the life cycle and everything comes to an end. Our bodies decay, they go into the ground and eventually the atoms that made up our bodies will go into other plants and animals and that's the end of it.

But deep down we know that's not true, don't we? We know that we aren't the same as lawn trimmings that decay but in the corner of the garden.

There's something wrong with death and so we grieve and so we rage and that's right. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, understood this when he wrote, do not go gently into that good night.

Rage rage against the dying of the light. The Greek philosopher Epicurus and many others since him over the centuries have claimed that suffering and death can prove that there's no God or that at least that it proves that God can't be both good and powerful.

[15:12] But honestly, I think death or our response to death is a testimony to the fact that God does exist.

The way we see death and respond is one of the greatest witnesses that there is a God because if we're honest with ourselves we can't help when we see death, we can't help but rage.

When we see it in Ukraine, when we experience personally the loss of a parent or a sibling or a child. We see death and we say this is wrong, this shouldn't be happening.

Now if there's a universe where there isn't any absolute morality or God who makes the rules and enforces them then there's no grounds for us to be outraged by death.

But when we rage against death we are, we're bearing witness to the brokenness of this world.

We're saying that this isn't how the world should be. We're testifying that this is, life shouldn't be like this and that there is a God.

[16:13] Death is unnatural, it's the enemy. And so with David, with Jesus, it's right to weep and rage and grief. Well what does this mean for us?

Well all of those things, that it's right to mourn but also that grief isn't something that we should discourage. It's not in ourselves, not in other people.

The Bible commands us not just to weep but to weep with those who weep, to mourn with those who mourn. We need to take time, we need to learn to lament.

I do think the Psalms are especially helpful with that and giving us words. And I must say that since I've been in Lewis I've been impressed by the dignity that here that is given to those who die and to their families.

I think that I mean Lewis people, there is, people do, you do funerals well. I've been impressed by that. But I think even as we, even recognizing that we need to still be careful in how we offer the hope of the Gospel in the face of death.

[17:19] It's right to say things like he is with the Lord or to say that God works all things together for good. And those are true statements but we must be careful that when we offer the hope of the Gospel we don't do it in any way that pushes out or makes really raw, legitimate biblical grief that pushes that kind of thing out.

Grief is something that is in the Bible that is the right response to death. But there is a place for hope which is why we're going to turn to that now and we're going to see that it's not at odds with grief but it's the right companion for grief.

So let's turn to our second point now, true hope. Well it's definitely right to grieve, the apostle Paul tells us that we must not grieve without hope. In 1 Thessalonians Paul is writing to a church that is feeling discouraged because many of its members have died and they're thinking, well these people then how are they going to be with Christ?

And so in response to that Paul reminds them of the hope in the face of death. So let's turn there in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4.

1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 13. Paul says we do not want you to be uninformed brothers about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

[18:44] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word from our Lord that we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of a trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet with the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

There is so much to be encouraged by in those verses isn't there? I just want to focus on that first verse though. But we do not want you to be uninformed brothers about those who are asleep but that you may not grieve as those who do not have no hope.

As Christians we are to grieve but our grief is as it were to be seasoned with salt, we are to rub salt, we are to rub hope into that grief.

[19 : 56] It is our grief is to be distinct in a way that the world grieves because we have something that none of the world does. An everlasting unbreakable personal relationship with the Lord of all creation, our Saviour and King Jesus Christ.

We are all around us, religions and cultures offer false hopes or no hopes at all. We can encourage one another that our hope is real. Not a fanciful wish or an emotional crutch.

When my grandfather died one person said there is another star in the sky and that is a nice sentiment and it was meant in love but that was not hope.

That is not hope. But the Bible offers us real hope. Even just from these verses let me point out a few things. The hope that Christ offers us is certain or it is assured.

Verse 14 he says, for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

[21 : 01] If you are trusting in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection guarantees your resurrection into the new creation that is a certain hope.

The resurrection is tight to Christ. He has risen. There is nothing that can stop us having new life with him. Grief without that kind of hope is, I just don't know how you manage it.

It would be like darkness with no hope of light, with no hope of a morning. The hope Christ offers is also personal though. Did you notice all the together language that Paul gives?

We will be together with other believers together with the Lord. Death doesn't break relationships for those who trust in Jesus Christ. I think that is such a precious comfort when we lose so many people we love.

Other religions might say we are absorbed back into some kind of divine essence but the hope Christ offers us is personal. It is tangible. It is relational and perfect.

[22 : 02] Third, the hope Christ offers is physical, verse 16 we are told the dead in Christ will rise first. Death ruptures apart body and spirit.

It literally tears through God's good design. The resurrection hope that we are offered though in Christ isn't one of spirits floating around or fat babies playing harps.

It is one of a real physical resurrection. When Christ returns he will dress as people in new creation bodies. That is a wonderful encouragement if and when we are feeling our bodies failing us.

And complete restoration is everything that must happen if anything less than Satan would have won. Eden would not be restored.

Resurrection is a physical resurrection. I have never been more struck by that contrast between the certain hope that we have from God's Word and the no hope that there is outside Christ.

[23 : 02] When I was walking through the graveyard in San Andrews Cathedral a few years ago it was sobering first of all. They were, well for one thing there were so many graves but so many of them began with the names of infants and children and then moved on to the parents underneath.

It just, it was really sobering. You could feel the pain that death brought. But as tragic perhaps was the graves that had no hope at all.

There was one gravestone with a long list of military promotions, the things that this person had given to the poor, their character virtues, but then it just ended because that's where any hope in this life ends.

It ends at death. There are two graves though that I felt express the hope that Paul speaks of.

There was John and Jane Suggat which and the inscription read, not dead but fell asleep in the Lord.

That just language of her sleep. Just a moment. Death has really just passed. They wrote, Jesus the first and the last whose spirit shall guide us safe home.

[24 : 11] There's another one, John Gray fell asleep through Jesus with Christ which is far better. We don't know these people but the hope of the gospel tells us that we will meet them in heaven.

I mean we've got a whole eternity to shake hands with every single person who's out there. And we'll meet all of these people. There's a certain hope that they had.

Now can I just pause and take a chance to ask those of you whether online or in person, for those of you who wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus, what hope do you have in the face of death? Unless Christ comes again we will all die and as we get older we face more and more death. My mum was saying the other day that she now goes to more funerals than weddings. Well what happens? How do we deal with death? Do we push it out of our minds the moment we're out of a funeral? Are we are we a stoic that death is just a fact of life and we just try to get on with life with that?

[25 : 15] Are we angry with death? I don't know about you but I haven't found anyone more realistic about suffering and death in grief than Jesus is.

I haven't found anyone who offers a greater, more certain hope either than Christ. I don't know how much hope David had when Jonathan died and David faced a lot of death in his life.

He faced the death of Jonathan. He had one of his sons murder another and then was killed in battle and another time David's newborn son died. There's perhaps a glint of hope though when David does respond to the death of his child later on in 2 Samuel when he says these harrowing words, I shall go to him but he will not return to me.

I wish I could have told David that he was right, that that wasn't wishful thinking, that that was a real hope that David would go to be with his son.

That one day that hope would be secured by another son of David, his greater son about a thousand years later. Because on the cross Jesus Christ removed that sting of death.

[26 : 24] The sting of death remains embedded in the cross for all who trust in Jesus. As the veil of death, as the shroud of death that has rolled out over humanity for thousands of years, the cross pokes up like a needle tearing a gap in that veil of death.

As Christ and all who are in him, all who trust in him are freed from that curse of death. Because for all who are in Christ death is now just, well it's just a door to more life.

Christ gives hope. True grief and true hope are not incompatible, they're made possible you might say in Christ.

As we close we grieve with rage when we look back to Eden and we see that this is not how it's meant to be and we grieve death.

But in Christ we also hope because we look forward to the new creation that he will bring to all that he will restore and we will rejoice that even though we might arrive, even though we might arrive at that new creation with tears still from our eyes, Christ will wipe them all away as he promises in Revelation 21 and then there will be tears and there will be death no more.

[27 : 40] Let's come to God in prayer. Heavenly Father we thank you that your word helps us to understand life more.

Life in all its complexity, life in all its rawness. Well we know that there are so many other competing claims about this world and what is true.

Lord we thank you that only your word makes sense. Lord we thank you that more than that only Christ gives hope in the face of death. Let's Lord we pray that you would help us to truly grieve and truly hope as we face these things.

We pray that you'd comfort us and build us up in Christ and may that we be those who comfort one another. Let me pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well it's only appropriate really that we close now singing Psalm 16 that great resurrection Psalm and so we're going to do that. Psalm 16 verses 7 to 11 in sing Psalms.

[28 : 45] Let's stand and sing. P