

We're in the 3rd week of a series of 9 OT lessons this summer that center on the life of King David. And this is the 3rd of 6 sermons you'll hear from me during that time about David. I'm preaching 6 sermons about David because he is a wonderful example for us, positively, and negatively. He loves God tremendously. And yet he lives a very human life. Sometimes he does everything right. And sometimes he does everything wrong. Yet he sticks with God throughout his life, throughout the ups and downs.

In our continuing saga, two weeks ago, we began with the prophet Samuel anointing David to be the new king to replace King Saul. Last week, we had the famous story of David and Goliath.

But today we have jumped a huge amount—we've jumped 14 chapters forward in the saga of David.

This week, our OT lesson is a lament that David sings after learning of the death of King Saul and Prince Jonathan. On the surface, you might think David would be excited to have the old king out of the way so that he could assume the throne. After all, we heard 2 weeks ago that David was anointed for just that purpose, to be king. And yet, many years and decades have elapsed since that moment. David has been waiting a long time. Plus, during this time, King Saul has been pursuing and trying to kill David. Thus, you might expect David to be happy at the news of Saul's death.

But instead, David mourns. He composes and sings a lament. Why?

To answer that, we need to spend some time looking at the relationship between David, Saul, and Jonathan. It's a very messy picture at times. And yet it is so wonderfully human. It speaks powerfully about living in the midst of dysfunctional relationships, of dealing with the love/hate relationships with people who are closest to you.

The story doesn't have much to say directly about God. But it has much to say about how God calls us to deal with the people in our lives.

Let's start with the relationship between David and King Saul. That relationship stretches over a full half the book of 1Samuel, from chapter 16 through chapter 31.

In trying to make sense of this relationship, I'd like to give you two handles on it. One, Saul is really like a surrogate father to David. And two, Saul is an abusive father.

Surrogate father. David's real father is Jesse. But in chapters 16 and 17, David enters Saul's service. And Jesse is never mentioned again. The only further references to Jesse come as a title for David as, "son of Jesse." In a very real way, Saul becomes David's father figure. We're told, early on, "Saul loved him greatly."¹

¹ 1Sam 16.21

Later on, David will call Saul, "my king and my lord." But he'll also call him, "my father."² And Saul calls him, "my son."³ On top of that, David has a close relationship with other members of the royal family. He is best friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. And he is married to Saul's daughter, Michal. He really is a member of Saul's family.

But as I said, Saul becomes an abusive surrogate father to David. And that puts a tremendous strain on his and David's relationship. Saul becomes envious and jealous of David's popularity. Saul is insecure and worries about a possible coup. And most likely, Saul suffers from some form of mental illness. Put this all together, and you have an explosive mix.

In fact, Saul makes five attempts on David's life. Each time, David escapes, twice with the help of members of Saul's family. After the last attempt, David decides to leave for good. He becomes something of an exile. He's a little like Robin Hood--people who have fallen on hard times gather around David in the wilderness. They form the nucleus of a small army.

But Saul doesn't leave well enough alone. Three times he takes his own army out to go and capture David. One of these expeditions ends abruptly because Saul has to respond to an attack by the Philistines. But the other two end because of the way David handles the situation.

You would think that if you had someone chasing you trying to kill you, you would want to kill them in return. And yet, David responds differently.

Twice Saul falls into David's hands. The first time is when Saul steps away from his army and enters a cave to find a private spot to use the restroom. It just so happens that David and his army are hiding in that exact same cave.

In the darkness, David's advisors whisper, "Kill Saul." But David refuses.

Instead, David sneaks over while Saul is relieving himself and cuts a piece off of Saul's cloak. Afterward Saul exits the cave. Then David dramatically appears in the cave entrance and shouts down to Saul, showing him the piece of his cloak.

He says, "This very day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not raise my hand against my lord; for he is the LORD'S anointed.'"⁴

Basically, he's saying, 'You may want to kill me, but I'm not going to respond in kind. You're still the king, God's anointed. You have nothing to fear from me.'

And Saul is overwhelmed. He tells David: "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil."⁵ So Saul returns home.

² 1Sam 24.11

³ 1Sam 24.16; 26.17,21,25

⁴ 1Sam 24.10

⁵ 1Sam 24.17

Later on, the dark side takes over again, and Saul again sets out to pursue David. This time, David sneaks into Saul's camp at night, and steals Saul's spear from him while he's sleeping. Again, David reveals what he's done the next morning. Again, Saul is sorry. And this time he asks David to come home with him:

"I have done wrong; come back, my son David, for I will never harm you again, because my life was precious in your sight today; I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake."⁶

Saul even blesses David. But David is smart enough not to return with Saul. Even though Saul is repentant, David will not place himself back in proximity with Saul.

In the face of an abusive father, David does not respond in kind. He doesn't sink to Saul's level. He offers good in return for evil.

And yet, and yet... David doesn't let Saul get away with his abusive behavior. He confronts Saul. And when Saul invites David back, David protects himself. David never goes back. He keeps his distance. He even leaves the country at one point.

David does not abuse the abuser. But he also does not put himself in a position where the abuser can abuse him again. David does what he can to make peace and heal the relationship. But David also realizes that there comes a time when he has to protect himself, and he does so.

Which brings us to our lesson today. Saul is killed in battle, and David composes the song of lament, he reminds everyone of how much Saul did for them and their nation. We heard in our OT lesson this morning:

"O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!"

David probably remembers all the good things that Saul did for him, in spite of all the bad things he did as well. And David is thankful for the good, in spite of the bad.

But David's greatest grief is reserved for Saul's son Jonathan, who dies in the battle, also.

David's words are heartbreaking:

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

It's no poetic exaggeration when David calls Jonathan, "Brother." They became best friends in their youth. And their friendship deepened over the years.

⁶ 1Sam 26.21

Jonathan continually interceded for David with Saul. Twice Jonathan went to David warning him of his father's plots. Once, Jonathan helped David escape.

Later, Jonathan renounced any future claims to the throne so that his friend, David, could become king. Jonathan proved to be David's best friend over and over and over again.

And yet, the great sadness of Jonathan's life is that he was always loyal to his father as well. He refused to leave his father's side. Thus he would never go with David.

So David keeping his distance from Saul, meant that David had to keep his distance from Jonathan as well. That's a tragic thing. Sadly, Jonathan and Saul die the same day on the same battlefield. And David's grief is tremendous.

Later, David will become the protector of Jonathan's handicapped son, Mephibosheth. He will be a fixture in David's royal court. David will care for Mephibosheth out of love and loyalty for Jonathan. David will do for Jonathan's son what he could not do for Jonathan. So in spite of Jonathan's death, David's friendship continues.

It's quite a mix. An abusive surrogate father. Deep friendship. Loyalty of son for father. Loyalty of surrogate son for surrogate father. Protecting oneself from abuse. Doing the right thing, by not sinking to the level of the abuser.

It's quite a mix. And David does the best he can to navigate through such a messy situation. He'll make mistakes later in life. He'll have problems with his own children. But that's a later chapter.

For now, David has done the best he can. He tries to be as loving as he can be. He also has to protect himself when necessary. It's not a fairy tale story. It's an all too human story.

And yet, in the midst of the mess, David tries to do the right thing. David is a man after God's own heart. He tries to do what God would have him do. In his everyday decisions, and in his moments of crisis, he tries to act righteously. Not a bad example for the rest of us to follow.

In the midst of our messy lives, may we also seek to do the right thing.