

Let's face it, it's hard to know what to say or not to say at a funeral, especially if you are the preacher conducting the service. On occasion I might have heard a lie or two told at funerals, sometimes by the pastor or priest. It's also possible I have heard lies told about God at a funeral (like “This wasn't God's fault. God had no control over what has happened.”) Usually, comments about the departed tend to exaggerate the good things and deny any bad things. I remember hearing the story of a preacher who was extremely honest at the funeral of a man who was a scoundrel. In the middle of the funeral service, the preacher looked straight at the widow of the man who had died and said something like, “Millie, you know Ralph was a worthless man. Now, if you should marry again, I suggest you pick a better man.” That's brutal honesty.

Even though I have conducted many funerals (and some of them quite difficult), I think one the toughest funerals ever would be King Saul's funeral. For example, what if you acted in line with the old saying, “If you don't have anything good to say about someone, don't say anything at all.” What would you do? Have 30 minutes of silence for King Saul? In our Scripture, it is David who conducts Saul's funeral, or at least its Israelite counterpart. It is certainly not what I would have expected. Since there is not sufficient time or space to carefully review all of David's eulogy (or dirge), let's focus on some overall characteristics.

This poem, or dirge, is a psalm of David, a special labor of his love. A friend of mine, a retired school teacher, has written poems for years. He has written them for friends who were retiring. He has written them for each of his children on their birthdays. Until there were too many grandchildren, he would write a poem for each of them on their birthday. I know what the Hallmark people say about their cards, but a poem from my friend means a lot more than a Hallmark card. It's a labor of love. We know that he has taken the time to think about the person for whom he is composing the poem. I know that it's his way of telling people how much he loves them. That is what David's eulogy is saying as well. He is expressing his love for Saul and Jonathan, in the finest manner available.

David's eulogy is a psalm that mourns the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. David mourns over the defeat of Israel and the death of many Israelites, but this is not the focus of his psalm. His psalm personally expresses David's sorrow over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. The Amalekite messenger (in verses 2-16) thinks the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan will be good news to David. He is wrong. This psalm tells us that David feels a deep sense of loss and sorrow because of their deaths. David genuinely grieves over the news he receives.

David's eulogy says nothing negative about Saul. When David mourns the death of Saul, there is not even a hint of the mention of any of the evil or unkind things Saul did against David or others. How easy it would have been to include some of these details, to have indicated some kind of divine vindication, but David doesn't do that.

David's psalm honors both Saul and Jonathan as fallen heroes. David not only restrains himself from speaking ill of the dead, he honors Saul and Jonathan as war heroes, as men worthy of respect and honor. Because the Bible account we are reading today is a result of the death of King Saul and his oldest son on the battleground of Mount Gilboa, it made me curious about the number of military deaths our country

has recorded through the years. It's a stunning number. Since 1775 there have been a total of 1,354,664 U.S. military deaths.

As Eugene Peterson has written, "All wise families and cultures honor lament. Without lament, a nation is gradually but surely dehumanized into a military force or an economic function. Lament keeps a people in touch with leaders and friends, losses and defeats, limits and suffering—in touch with its humanity." Saul's and Jonathan's deaths definitely put David in touch with his own humanity. It's important to grieve and remember as David did.

David's psalm begins by focusing upon Saul and ends with the focus on Jonathan. While David has good things to say about his king, it is evident in this psalm that David has a deeper love and commitment to Jonathan. What may have been somewhat private while Jonathan was alive, David now makes public. Some in Israel had totally missed that. They seemed to think that Jonathan was David's enemy, not his closest friend.

David's psalm appears to be an expression and consequence of the covenant between David and Jonathan. The covenant made between these two men back in 1 Samuel 18 was implemented and then extended and reaffirmed. By his eulogy, David is already blessing Jonathan and his descendants as he eulogizes him as a hero, whose memory is to be honored. In fact, the word "eulogize" means to *bless*. But David's psalm was written for a much wider audience than David and his 600 loyal men. The psalm is written and recorded in the "Book of Jashar." We see this "book" referred to in the book of Joshua: *Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a human being. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!* (Joshua 10:12-14).

I am not sure we can totally grasp the significance of what David is doing here. In ancient times, and even today, those who rise to the top position of power in a nation normally take all kinds of precautions to prevent any rival from overturning their administration and taking their place of power. This often means the execution of the entire family of the dynasty being ousted from power. It can mean rewriting history, so that this family is disgraced and despised. David does just the opposite. He honors Saul and Jonathan and assures that future generations will look upon these men as national heroes. He honors Saul and Jonathan among the "sons of Judah." The "sons of Judah" are not Saul's relatives; they are the kinsmen of David, the very group he would look to for support as their king. Indeed David does a most remarkable thing by writing and preserving this eulogy.

David's response to the death of Saul is truly remarkable, but is it sincere? Is David simply gilding the lily here? Is he sweeping all of the evils Saul has committed under the rug? Is this hypocrisy on David's part? I think we must conclude that David is *completely sincere*. There is no hypocrisy to be found in what David says or does here. I believe everything David writes is true.

This leads to a very important principle which is frequently violated today: Being honest and truthful does not require telling everything that could be told, or for that matter, everything we know to be true. David is honest and truthful, and godly, while not telling everything he knows to be true of Saul. One principle

of pop psychology holds that we should “get it all out,” that every frustration should be vented, every grievance aired, every thought expressed. The Bible simply does not teach this. The Book of Proverbs, in particular, teaches that the wise person carefully chooses what they will say, and how and when they will say it. Some things ought not to be said at all.

How does David manage to speak so well of Saul, after all the suffering he caused David to endure? There are several ways to answer this question and both answers reflect today’s sermon title: “New King, Same Lord.” **First**, David trusts in the God whom he serves. David knows that his God is a mighty God. The Lord God is in control of all things. Therefore, his God allowed Saul to pursue and persecute him. David trusts that God has allowed his suffering at the hand of Saul in order to instruct him in the way of righteousness. Saul is “used of God” to help prepare David for the leadership role he will assume. His hardships were not in vain. Therefore, he need not feel spitefully toward Saul. As Joseph was able to be grateful for the hand of God in his life through his suffering (see Genesis 50:20), so David is able to do likewise.

**Second**, David seems to have already dealt with Saul’s sins against him by forgiving him. This is what seems to have freed Joseph to deal kindly with his brothers in spite of their wicked intentions toward him. I absolutely believe David forgave Saul, and he had no bitterness to suppress or to vent. It’s a sad thing to harbor bitterness, because once a person is dead, it’s a little too late to forgive them. David does not have to dredge up the past because he keeps short accounts.

The result? “New King, *Different Man*, Same Lord.”

All Glory to God! Amen.