

Women's Bible Study Fall 2009
What's in the Heart?
October 21, 2009
A Heart of Sorrow and Regret
1 Samuel 31/2 Samuel 1
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In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spelled out the connection between our inner attitudes and our external actions. He explained that what we think and feel on the inside is as important to God as how we act – that being angry with others was like murdering them in our spirits, and that lusting after someone was like committing adultery in our imaginations. Jesus identified the problem: what is in our hearts reveals our true spiritual state.

We have spent several weeks now examining “What’s in the Heart?” through the lens of David’s life in the Old Testament. And so far we have seen that David’s heart is largely noble, because David loves God and longs to follow him. Today we come to a heart attitude that makes a difference in our quality of life, however; an approach that either allows God to bear us up through grief and sorrow or traps us in regret for what cannot be changed. Whether we feel sorrow or regret in loss is determined by our heart attitude of trust in God and the relationship choices we make towards others. Today we will take up David’s story at the end of 1st Samuel, in chapter 31, and we’ll start by looking at:

I. The Background: The deaths of Saul and Jonathan

The books of 1st and 2nd Samuel were originally written as one manuscript, so they continue seamlessly from 1st Sam. 31 to 2nd Samuel chapter 1. At the end of 1st Samuel, David is in the south fighting against the Amalekites (who are enemies of Israel) and King Saul and his three sons, Jonathan, Abinadab and Malkishua, are in the north fighting and losing against the Philistines. While David recovers in Ziklag, Saul is fighting and dying in another part of the country. Just as we would in a good book, we as readers know events before the main character does. So let’s look first at the truth of what happened to Saul in battle. Please turn to 1st Samuel 31:3, where we see

The truth about Saul’s death:

“The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

Saul said to his armor-bearer, ‘Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it.” (1 Samuel 31:3-4)

After Saul’s death , the armor-bearer also killed himself, rather than survive when his king had not.

Now we cut to the first chapter of 2nd Samuel, a page or two away. And because he’s been occupied fighting, David doesn’t yet know that his closest friend, Jonathan, and his king, Saul, have both been killed.

While David is resting from battle a messenger arrives from Saul's camp, dirty and disheveled, and is interrogated by David. The messenger identifies himself as an Amalekite – one of the very people that David has just been engaged in fighting. As a foreigner, he had no real reason to be in the area of Saul's battle unless, perhaps, he was a scavenger looking to profit on the battlefield. The young man tells David that he "happened to be on Mt. Gilboa" and claims that he spoke to the dying king.

Look at 2nd Samuel 1:9, where we read

The lie about Saul's death.

“Then he said to me, ‘Stand over me and kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I’m still alive.’

So I stood over him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive. And I took the crown that was on his head and the band on his arm and have brought them here to my lord.” (2 Samuel 1:9-10)

Then the messenger stands there expectantly, waiting to be rewarded by David. After all, wasn't David the guy next in line for the throne? And here are the very emblems that will mark David as a legitimate king – Saul's crown and armband.

But David has too great a heart to think only of himself. Instead, he's devastated by the news and begins mourning with all his men. So what happens to the messenger? In verse 16 of 2nd Samuel 1 we see:

The consequence of the messenger's lie

“For David had said to him, ‘Your blood be on your own head. Your own mouth testified against you when you said, ‘I killed the LORD’s anointed.’” (2 Samuel 1:16)

David asks one of his men to strike the messenger dead, for the crime of regicide. It's always intrigued me that in ancient times the crime of killing a king was considered so bad that it had its own word (regicide) and the punishment was immediate death. It didn't matter whether or not Saul asked the guy to put him out of his misery...to kill a king was to slay God's anointed representative on earth. So the messenger died for his lie instead of being rewarded for bringing what he thought would be good news to David.

But there's an interesting sub-story in here concerning the bodies of the dead: Saul and Jonathan. And it's here we see how important it was to show honor to a king, when we look what happened to:

The bodies

What happened to Saul and Jonathan when they fell on Philistine ground? The enemy came looking for plunder from the dead and recognized these two famous men, despite Saul's missing crown. Look at v. 9 of 1st Samuel 31:

“They cut off his head and stripped off his armor...They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.” (1 Samuel 31:9a; 10)

This was desecration of a royal body – a terribly serious and despicable crime. By mistreating the king's body in death the Philistines were showing their defiance of Israel. So where

is this God of the Israelites? the Philistines mocked. Why isn't he rescuing his earthly representative? But some people from Jabesh Gilead remembered that Saul had once rescued them from the Ammonites (1st Samuel 11) and they returned that good deed in verse 11 of 1st Samuel 31:

“They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. Then they took their bones and buried them...” (1 Samuel 31:12b-13a)

It was very unusual to burn bodies, so this either meant that the bodies had been defiled or were perhaps decomposing. Their bones were buried at Jabesh and their deaths were properly mourned by the grateful people of Jabesh Gilead. This was a debt of honor paid at great risk by these men, who slipped past the Philistine guard at night to claim the bodies.

But we haven't heard the last of these bones. They appear twice more in David's story. In 2 Samuel 4 David graciously thanks the people of Jabesh Gilead for their honorable deed, showing that he, too, wanted to honor the dead king Saul. And much later in 2nd Samuel 21, David sought God's guidance when there was a famine. God told David that there was an unpaid debt of honor between the descendents of Saul and the people of a town called Gibeah. Saul had promised to bless and protect them, and had then broken his solemn oath towards these people. Decades later, they wanted justice. So David allowed the Gibeonites to put to death seven descendents of Saul. Then, as a final end to Saul's house, David buried the bones of all the fallen in Saul's family tomb, bringing an end to the famine.

“David brought the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from there [Jabesh Gilead], and the bones of those who had been killed and exposed were gathered up. They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the tomb of Saul's father Kish...After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land.” (2 Samuel 21:13-14)

So why am I telling you all this?

This is a great example of how the Bible fits together. A prediction or an act in one generation is played out in subsequent ones. In this case, the sinful events that happened almost a generation earlier were still generating bad consequences. God wanted his people to understand that holy things, like sworn oaths, were not to be taken lightly. For that reason it was wrong that the Gibeonites had not received justice. Nor were the people to treat God's anointed priests and kings just like everyone else. Therefore, it was also wrong that King Saul's bones lay under a tamarisk tree far away when they should have been in the family tomb as a sign of honor. So God sent a famine on Israel to get everyone's attention in order to bring these things to light and correct them.

But the story of the bodies also reveals something about David. He understood that what was holy to God had to be treated as holy by his people. We also see him seeking God's guidance in almost every phase of national leadership, which leads us to the next question:

II. What is in David's heart?

The death of Saul was a very revealing incident for David. It showed what truly was in David's heart, because it's almost impossible to conceal one's true reaction in the face of shocking news. But what we see is

Sorrow, not regret (v. 11-12)

Look at verse 11 of 2nd Samuel 1:

“Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted til evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.” (2 Samuel 1:11-13)

You see that they were mourning as much for Israel, and for the dishonor to the Lord’s armies, as they were for Saul and Jonathan. Jonathan was a beloved and brave commander, but Saul had been keeping them on the run for five years. Yet his fortunes were still bound up with Israel’s, and dishonor and defeat for Saul meant dishonor and defeat for Israel. So they mourned and wept in true sorrow, for what had been.

But in addition to sorrow, we see:

Sincerity (v. 17-27)

If you had been anointed king of Israel by the High Priest, and then had spent five years being chased by the existing king, how would you react to the news of Saul’s death? You might think, “At last! God is fulfilling his promise!” Or, “Thank God for that Saul is dead and not me.” But look at verse 17 of chapter 1. David cries, **“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights. How the mighty have fallen!”(2 Samuel 1:19)** And he goes on to sing a beautiful lament for Jonathan and Saul, sometimes called the Song of the Bow.

He praises Saul’s might (v. 19); his importance (v. 21); his military prowess (v. 22); his grace (v. 23); his strength (v. 23); his kingliness (v. 24). In every sentence David connects Saul’s kingship to God’s glory and his people Israel. David understands theologically what it means to be the Lord’s anointed king and head of the Lord’s armies. And that knowledge will shape much of what he does in his own life.

In chapters two through five of 2nd Samuel there is a back and forth struggle between David and Ish-Bosheth, the remaining son of Saul. David rules Judah, the southern part, and Ish-Bosheth rules Israel, the northern territories, for seven years until he is murdered. In these chapters there is a continued pattern of aggression and retaliation. The consequences of evil perpetuate it over and over again in new lives.

But what we are most concerned with today is the idea of sorrow and regret. Every one of us will lose someone or something that we love, like a relationship. Or an ability. Or a career. And loss is hard. So we need to ask ourselves,

III. What is in our hearts when we lose what we love?

Is it

Regret or sorrow?

The Bible makes a distinction between these two emotions. And yet both of them can easily arise in a time of loss. Paul writes that godly sorrow about our sins, for example, has a useful function in the believer’s life:

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (2 Cor. 7:10).

For the Christian, sorrow has two purposes. Sorrow is the process by which we accept change and loss, and it’s also the process by which we come to repent our sins. So what is the difference between sorrow and regret?

Regret says “If only I had...”

If we regret our sins, we might be sorry for the consequences...or maybe sorry we got caught. Regret second guesses our choices of the past and doesn’t teach us anything about our choices in the future, so it fails to move us to repentance and change.

Regret from lost relationships usually centers around what we should have done and didn’t, or what we did do and shouldn’t have. Instead of being a healthy form of grief that moves us from sadness to acceptance, it keeps us in a whirlpool of self-doubt that eventually drowns us.

Regret says, “if only...”

But Sorrow says “I’m sad, but trusting.”

Last summer John and I hiked along the Seven Sisters, a series of chalk hills near Dover Cliffs in England. The Seven Sisters are covered with green grass where we were walking but their stark white chalky cliffs drop to the sea just beyond the path. As the path went up and down over each hill, we came to a downward path that was strewn with white chalk stones. There were hundreds, in random heaps and lines. As we toiled up the next hill I happened to look back. Suddenly the stones made sense. People had written messages on the green hillside with the white stones. One said, “Marry me”. Another said “Maria, from Budapest 2009”. And so on, from the sublime to the ridiculous. We couldn’t see the pattern when we walked among them...in fact, we didn’t even realize there was a pattern. But once we had passed beyond them, we were able to look back and see the message revealed.

Sorrow often takes us that way. It is crushing while we are in it. We certainly can’t see God’s intentions, especially when we have prayed and prayed that he would spare that person’s life or change those dreadful circumstances. Yet in looking back is like seeing the message written in stones on the hill – not random, but full of meaning. What did he mean to teach us? How was he glorified through our sorrow? If we believe that God is sovereign over all things, and that he loves us, then we will find it easier to understand the purpose in our sorrow. Because if he controls events and if he loves us, then there must be a point to our suffering. And often that point is to glorify God when we move gracefully through sorrow and loss.

Sorrow says, “I’m sad...but I am trusting God to bring good out of all this.”

It is painful but clean, like a washed wound that heals without festering. But regret is not. It can cripple us for years after the fact. So let’s ask ourselves,

How to avoid regret

When we have regret rather than sorrow over sins, nothing productive happens. We don’t change, and we don’t learn from our mistakes. But mostly regret has to do with our relationships with others, and the way that we treat them. Often regret centers around the inability to forgive or

move on, and then the chance is lost forever when the other person dies or moves out of our lives. There are three life attitudes we can practice which will help us avoid regret in relationships.

The first is to

Show grace

By grace, I mean that we extend to others what we would like to receive ourselves. We cut them slack. We don't assume their motives were evil, or that hurt was intended.

I discovered to my shame that it's possible to wound as much through silence as it is through words. I was in the midst of a somewhat painful misunderstanding with an extended family member. During this long distance call there were many points where I could have jumped in and made it easier for them to speak. But I kept silent, because my feelings were hurt, and so increased the awkwardness and misunderstanding. I got off the phone and was ashamed of myself. I should have done better with this person that I love deeply. I ended up writing an apologetic email and backing down from my high horse. It would have been so much easier had I just extended grace at the time instead of worsening an awkward situation by being sullen and unhelpful.

I know that whenever I feel that a conversation has gone badly, I can fret about it for days, or I can extend grace – I can try to see that other person's point of view; I can ask God to help me see that person as Christ would see them. And I almost always try for reconciliation. Usually that means apologizing. If you know you've hurt someone, even if you were "just being honest", then apology needs to be made and the avenue for grace opened again. Honestly, life is too short to remain at odds with people. Why regret what you said when that person may be walking away from you forever?

My friend said goodbye to her husband after lunch one day as he returned to his work as a volunteer fireman. Two hours later she was a young widow with a baby. How glad she was that their last moments were cheerful and ordinary – no regrets, just profound sorrow over the loss. Remember to show grace, day by day, to those around us.

A second way to avoid regrets is to keep

Short accounts

Two of my children are very astute at running their finances. Both of them keep a little notebook with a running tally of what they owe me and what I owe them. If I ask one to go to the store but don't send money, they write it down in the little book. If they owe me, into the book it goes. One child lets the little book run for months before squaring our accounts. Often we find that what we owe each other is the same and little money actually changes hands. The other child keeps shorter accounts, and likes to sort things out on more frequently. This is a lot easier. I mean, what sense can I make of the notation "Walmart – Mom - \$32" when six months have gone by? Shorter accounts are always easier to follow, because they are more immediate. And they're shorter, so they take less time to settle.

Keeping short accounts is desperately important in families and in relationships, especially if the accounts we are keeping are a list of grudges held, wrongs done, insults given, hurts received. I have learned from painful experience that if I have a sleepless night about some interaction, I had better confess it to God and settle up the next day, or it is only going to get worse. By doing this we clear our consciences, ask God to intervene in the situation and also learn from our mistakes. The apostle John writes, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us**

our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” (1 John 1:9-10)

It's that bald. Either we acknowledge we have sinned and accept forgiveness, or we are making God a liar by claiming to be his children when we do not keep the most basic command – to love our brothers and sisters. David knew this, too: **“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long, For day and night, your hand was heavy upon me.” (Psalm 32:3-4).** That's what a bad conscience feels like. We know when we've done wrong. There's an easy remedy. So ask forgiveness or make amends before the accounts get too long and tangled.

It is never sensible to keep account of wrongs. Paul writes, **“[love] is not rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.” (1 Cor. 13:5, NLT).** It keeps no record of wrongs. Now that's the way to have short accounts with our brothers and sisters – don't keep accounts in the first place!

Finally, a third way to avoid regret is to
Stop the cycle

Last summer my family traveled on a small ferry boat to the Inner Hebrides island of Eigg, in Scotland. Now Eigg is a tiny island, about 12 square miles. We had just four hours before the ferry returned, and I wanted to see the famous Singing Sands, which unfortunately were four miles away. My family has always been very patient in humoring my desire to drag them everywhere to see oddities of nature. During our walk we met a little flock of hooligan lambs, with no mothers in sight, who tried to steal our lunches and came up to be petted like dogs. I'm glad we had the distraction of the lambs, because the singing sands weren't exactly vocalizing the Hallelujah Chorus. The quartz crystals make a tiny little noise when you walk on them: squeak, squeak, squeak. So to make up for the anticlimax of the Singing Sands, we made for another historic spot - Massacre Cave. We knew little about it except its name - although you could say that the name should have been a good tipoff. Hannah declined to enter. John glanced inside and left. But Nick and I took a small flashlight and continued deep into the cave. Eventually we turned a corner and realized that we could no longer see the entrance. It was clear that we were standing in a much larger place that either of us could have imagined from the narrow entrance. It was suddenly very creepy as our small flashlight beam was swallowed up in the mist that floated around us. I recalled that this place was probably called “Massacre Cave” because lots of people died there under violent circumstances. So Nick and I found we had an urgent desire to get outside again.

But curiosity drove me to read up on what happened. In the 16th century Scotland was a mass of warring clans who hated each other only slightly less than they hated the English. In 1577, the island was occupied by the MacDonald clan, who irritated the MacLeods on the next island by flirting with the MacLeod women. One winter day the MacLeods landed on the island bent on murder, but the MacDonalds had warning and fled to a long, narrow sea cave. This cave had a very small opening covered by a waterfall and bushes, and after a tight squeeze it opened out into a 260 foot crevice which was about 8 feet wide by 26 feet high. It was winter, and snow began to fall. For three days the families huddled in silence in the freezing cave while the MacLeods tramped the length and breadth of the island. Eventually they gave up and left. One eager islander slipped out of the cave to see and was spotted by the MacLeods in their boats. They returned, and followed his footsteps through the snow to the cave's entrance. Then they blocked the waterfall, piled up hay and brush, and lit a fire that burned or smothered everyone in the cave...395 men, women and children.

Two centuries later their bones still lay unburied next to their possessions on the cave floor. No wonder Massacre Cave felt so foreboding to us.

But that wasn't the end of the story. One family managed to escape, and they alerted MacDonald clan members on a neighboring island. One year later the MacDonalds caught the MacLeods worshipping in Trumpan church on the Isle of Skye, set it on fire and burned it to the ground. A ten year old girl escaped and raised the alarm, and the remaining MacLeods ambushed the MacDonalds as they were leaving. After a bloody battle the marauders lay dead. Their bodies were thrown on the ground and an earthen dike pushed over them, in a skirmish known as The Battle of the Spoiled Dike. So the bloodshed and the sin went on, with consequences affecting people far beyond the original players. You see, it's only by breaking the pattern of sin, retaliation, sin, retaliation that we can stop the cycle.

Do you see the pattern? It's the same as we see in 1st and 2nd Samuel, where revenge is expected for successive family members until everyone is dead. What does it take to break a pattern of generational evil and sin? In chapters 2 through 5 of 2nd Samuel there is a constant back and forth between the armies of David and the armies of Saul's son as they contend for the nation. Bloodshed takes place in each chapter. But for evil to stop, it requires that one person absorb the wrong done and say, "This stops here. I will take no revenge." David absorbed the evil done towards him by Saul in 1st Samuel. Christ absorbed and did not retaliate for the wrongs done to him. It takes one man or woman accepting being sinned against and forgoing the natural desire for retaliation to stop the cycle.

So what do showing grace, keeping short accounts, and stopping the cycle have to do with regret and sorrow? If we are careful in our relationships each day, we will have no reason for regret should those we love suddenly disappear. Of course we will have sorrow – it is the natural response of a thinking, feeling human to true loss. But sorrow, which is appropriate and necessary and healing, will result in recovery. Regret, which makes us berate ourselves for what we have not done (or, perhaps, what we did wrong!) will fester. David had a clear conscience towards Saul, whom he never stopped loving despite the ill treatment Saul gave David. And that allowed him to experience Saul's death with the healthy grief of sorrow rather than the festering pain of regret, which cannot change one scrap of the past.

I called this lesson "A Heart of Sorrow and Regret", but it doesn't appear that David had regret in his heart. That's true, in chapter 1 of 2nd Samuel. But by chapter 18, when his son Absalom rebels and is killed, David makes a classic "if only" statement of regret: **"O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you..." (2 Samuel 18:33)** By chapter 18 David had failed to extend grace; was not keeping short accounts; and was living out the consequences of a cycle of sin. Later in life he experienced much regret as sorrow. I pray that we will not make David's mistakes; his life is here to teach us.

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