

## UNEXPECTED SUMMER: GOD SAVES

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

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I.

On Facebook, there are several options to describe one's relationship status. You can choose single, married, in a relationship, or eight other options. The one I've always found humorous is the option, "It's complicated." I don't know if I've ever seen any of my Facebook friends select that status, but most of us could, at one time or another, if we were honest.

Relationships are often complicated because people are complicated.

If King Saul and the anointed shepherd teen David each had a Facebook profile, their relationship would most certainly be labeled, "It's complicated."

Saul and David had a troubled relationship filled with tension, jealousy, and eventually hatred. David entered Saul's life as a young teen who became famous by defeating the Philistine giant, Goliath, earning him favor in Saul's court. At first, Saul liked David and made him a commander in his army because of his bravery and military skills.

However, as David's popularity grew, Saul became more jealous and suspicious of him. The turning point was when the people praised David's battle successes more than Saul's, making Saul see David as a threat to his throne. Saul's jealousy turned into paranoia, and he tried multiple times to kill David.

Despite Saul's hostility, David remained loyal to him, recognizing Saul as God's anointed king of Israel. Their relationship worsened when David had to flee and live as a fugitive. Saul relentlessly pursued him out of fear and hatred. Even in the wilderness on the run for his life, David showed restraint and respect towards Saul, the Lord's anointed, refusing to harm him when he had the chance, not once but twice.

Their complicated relationship ultimately ends in Saul's tragic death on the battlefield, along with his three sons, including Jonathan, David's dearest friend - news David learns in today's passage as we move from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel.

II.

How would you respond if you learned someone who has made your life miserable was dead? Would you rejoice or breathe a sigh of relief? Would you declare they had it coming?

No one would be surprised if David had rejoiced in Saul's death, finally able to return from life on the run, finally able to take the crown and kingdom he'd long been promised by the prophet Samuel and God. David had every right to rejoice at Saul's death. He would be justified to

separate their legacies - mourning and praising Jonathan, his dearest friend, while speaking ill of or completely ignoring Saul, his enemy. David had every right to have the last word and right the wrong done to him.

He had a right, but that wasn't David's response.

Upon hearing the news, David and his men tore their clothes, wept, and fasted. David wrote a funeral song that Cameron read to us earlier. It is a raw and painful lament for his best friend, Jonathan, and for Saul, the man who tried to kill him, yet also the man who was his mentor and king.

But David doesn't keep his grief to himself. He doesn't cry alone before putting on a brave face for the nation. David commands that all the people of Judah be taught this funeral song so they might learn hard things and mourn together the death of their first king and his sons. In one song and one voice, they sang their grief; they named their losses; they stayed present to their collective pain.

David didn't want anyone to be happy about Saul's death. He felt that creation itself should mourn, cursing the mountains of the place where Saul died. (v. 21)

As the hopeful next king of Israel, David's actions were wise to avoid appearing too eager to succeed Saul. But his grief is also undeniably genuine. Grief is complicated, even when all is well, but especially when relationships are complicated. The author shows David as a compassionate and humble individual, a man who grieves and laments even the death of his enemy, a leader who honors someone with a mixed legacy.

Perhaps you have people in your life with a mixed legacy—a parent, a friend, an authority figure. Maybe their legacy is not all bad. Or maybe there has been so much bad that you can scarcely see the good. Maybe they are still a part of your life, or perhaps they have died, yet some or all the pain remains here with you.<sup>i</sup>

David's lament for Saul didn't erase or excuse Saul's failings. You see, the lament wasn't for Saul. The lament was for David and the people. It was a way for them to forgive, surrender justice and outcomes to the LORD, and prepare the soil of their hearts for the healing and new to come.

Who is a person of mixed legacy whom you might be invited to honor through mourning, grieving, even celebrating them? Not for their benefit, but for your healing and freedom, and to prepare the soil of your heart for what God wants to do next in and through you.

II.

A few days before we left for Kenya, I officiated a funeral. As the officiant, I usually ride along in the lead car to the cemetery for burial. In these processions, the lead vehicle is tasked with slowly entering each intersection, with its flashing purple strobe light atop its roof, signaling to

other cars that we are a motorcade of mourners. The laws of Missouri and civility require pedestrians and drivers to yield the right-of-way to any vehicle that is part of an organized funeral procession accompanying a loved one to their final resting place.

At each intersection on this journey, we had to wait. Cars did not yield. Drivers did not pay their respects. They had places to be and things to do. In one intersection, we inched our way through when a vehicle sped between us and the Patriot Guard motorcyclists right behind us, who were escorting a fellow soldier to his grave. Had they not been paying attention, they would have been hit. I'll confess my thoughts about that driver were less than pastoral.

One of the things that always moves me during these processions is seeing cars pull over and wait, for only a few moments out of their days while the procession passes by. I still remember a man years ago on W. Truman Blvd who not only pulled his car over but got out, stood at attention, and saluted as we passed by because he knew from the waving flags upon the hearse that a comrade was being laid to rest.

Friends, yielding to mourners for a few moments out of our day is the very least we can do. And yet, fewer folks seem to do it regardless of age. It reflects a culture that does not know how to lament, a people who do not wish to linger in grief but rather move quickly to distraction and even blame. Our nation's recent responses to a global pandemic, violence against people of color, and mass deaths around the world reveal this undervaluing of grieving and lamenting in our communal life. Most people are reluctant to linger in loss. We are expected to get back to work and back to normal. According to a recent survey, U.S. companies offer, on average, five days of bereavement leave, a remarkably brief amount of time to grapple with a death. For the death of a "close friend/chosen family," the number drops to a single day.<sup>ii</sup> We desperately want closure, to master our grief, find the cure, tie up the loose end, and speed through the intersection on our way to the next thing. It is the American way. But it is not God's way - for blessed are they who mourn.

Who will help us sing songs of lament when we experience loss? Where are the leaders who will teach us to sing hard things rather than stir up hardened hearts? How do we, like David, name our losses and honor others, even people with mixed legacies? How do we share our grief so our pain is named rather than buried deep within or projected wrongly onto others?

III.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the US, we understood this more than we do today. Death happened at home for all to witness and experience. Grieving women generally wore heavy black outfits for a time of mourning. Male and female mourners often used mourning stationery for correspondence. It was unique stationery with black borders. Some had thick borders if the loss was profound, like a child's. Some had thinner borders. Over time, the borders would narrow to show readers that the suffering party was slowly recovering.

According to a recent article titled, "It's Mourning in America," in the nineteen-hundreds, for a variety of reasons, our relationship to grief seemed to change, transforming from a public,

integrated phenomenon to a personal and repressed one.<sup>iii</sup> French historian Philippe Ariès wrote in his 1974 book, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, “The choking back of sorrow, the forbidding of its public manifestation, the obligation to suffer alone and secretly, has aggravated the trauma stemming from the loss of a dear one,” Ariès wrote, citing anthropologist Greg Gorer, “A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty. But one no longer has the right to say so aloud.”<sup>iv</sup>

After my sister died, I was envious of cultures and traditions where mourners wore all black or sackcloth and ashes as ways to let the world know that grief has entered your life and is still fresh, so be gentle with us. The world goes on around us, while our lives feel like they’ve had the very breath knocked out of them. We want to scream, “My loved one just died.” How is everyone going on like normal when someone so dear is no longer among us?

We have very few ways to let people know we are grieving. We have no mourning clothes or black-lined stationery. We have no Facebook status options to select for relationships altered by death. Perhaps “It’s complicated” is the best we can do.

V.

David did many wrong things throughout his life, leaving his own mixed legacy. But what he did here after Saul’s death was among the good. Like the people of Judah, David teaches us some important truths and hard things about grief in today’s song. Like for the people of Judah, David’s song keeps us from moving too quickly to joy and praise after a profound loss. We must make space for our pain before pain can give way to renewed hope.

David teaches us to honor those we’ve lost, even those with mixed legacies. We honor them both as a gift to them and, even more so, as a practice of freedom for us, to release them into the hands of God, to forgive those who trespass against us as God forgives our trespasses.

And David teaches us that we are not meant to grieve alone. The church should be a place where death can be faced realistically and our grief over loss safely expressed and compassionately shared. The church needs to be a community with practices that help us mourn, honor, and celebrate, even those with mixed legacies. The church should mourn and grieve with our neighbors and communities, hearing their cries, listening to their pain, and sitting in the dirt alongside the broken-hearted, for as Psalm 34 declares, that is where God is - sitting in the dirt near the broken-hearted and those crushed in spirit.

In the face of all the horrific injustices, in all the places of deep suffering, pain, and loss, not only far away but right here in our own community, homes, and hearts, God is with us, and God is at work. The Israelites’ defeat and Saul’s death were national disasters. It must have felt like the end when the mighty had fallen on the mountains of Gilboa. But it was not the end. Not even close. But before God could do a new thing out there, God had to do a new thing within here, and it began with singing a song of mourning and lament. It starts in the dirt, naming our losses, surrendering the outcomes, honoring others, even those with mixed legacies, and trusting that God is with us and at work in and through us for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

**BENEDICTION:**

"As you go out into the world, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this as if it's the most important thing in all the world...because it is."

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<sup>i</sup> <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/fresh-text/id1448206465?i=1000660011202>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/its-mourning-in-america>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid