



THE MESSENGER OF DEATH

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

Catalog No. 1015

2 Samuel 1:1-16

First Message

Brian Morgan

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I. Introduction to the David Story

(a) The Importance of the Story

This morning we return once more to the story of David. There are more verses devoted to David's life than any other figure in the Old Testament. His name is mentioned more than 800 times there, and more than 60 times in the New Testament.

In order to understand the story of Jesus, the greater David, we must first understand David's life. The power of this Old Testament king's story draws us into his world and lends significance to our own stories.

(b) The Significance of the Story

A study of the life of David reveals that this king recovered the very thing that Adam lost in the Garden of Eden, and that is, the secrets of how man should live in his full humanity. As king of Israel, David was witness to the sovereign rule of God on earth. The kings of other nations in the Ancient Near East were exempted from real life, because they were considered to be deities. But Israel's king was not exempted from anything. Saul banished David into a wilderness, but it was in that desolate place that he became weak and learned to pray. The psalms which he wrote resulted from this period in his life. Eugene Peterson makes the interesting point that there are no miracles recorded in the story of David. The lesson is clear: we become human by facing our limitations, not by trying to escape from them.

(c) The Context of the Story

Three different periods marked David's rise to power. The first covered the time he spent in King Saul's court, where the shepherd boy was anointed with God's Spirit; the second was in the wilderness, where David lived as an outlaw and fugitive, always on the run from Saul. At the end of that period he lived as an expatriate in the Philistine town of Ziklag, reluctantly serving a Philistine king.

In the book of 2 Samuel, where we take up our studies once more, we come now to the third period, following the death of Saul, when David reestablishes connection with the king and his people after receiving the news of Saul's defeat.

This opening incident in 2 Samuel has three movements. First (verses 1-4), David is given the preliminary report from a messenger about Israel's defeat and Saul's death. In the second movement (verses 5-10), David probes the messenger to uncover how he knows what

he knows. (At the center of this movement (verse 8b) the identity of the messenger is revealed.) In the final movement, David responds to the messenger of death.

II. The Story Proper: The Messenger of Death

(a) The Preliminary Report of Death (1:1-4)

Now it came about after the death of Saul, when David had returned from the slaughter of the Amalekites, that David remained two days in Ziklag. And it happened on the third day, that behold, a man came out of the camp from Saul, with his clothes torn and dust on his head. And it came about when he came to David that he fell to the ground and prostrated himself. Then David said to him, "From where do you come?" And he said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." And David said to him, "How did things go? Please tell me." And he said, "The people have fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead; and Saul and Jonathan his son are dead also." (NASB)

The story opens with the juxtaposition of two battles. Two kings are simultaneously doing battle with two different enemies of Israel. One battle is located in the north of the country, on Mt. Gilboa; the other takes place in the far south, in Ziklag. In the first battle, Saul and the Israelite army suffer a massive defeat at the hands of the Philistines, resulting in the death of Saul and his three sons. In the second battle, David launches a successful rescue and recovery mission against the Amalekites, whose marauding bands had leveled David's city of Ziklag and taken captive their wives and children. The first encounter is a battle of judgment against a rejected king; the second portrays God's redemptive grace bestowed through the person of his chosen king.

Linking these two battles with the destinies of the two kings is a strange, shadowy messenger.¹ This man, who becomes the focal point of the story, deposits in David's lap the royal insignia which he had stripped from Saul's dead body on Mt. Gilboa. This dramatic encounter raises a number of questions. How will David react to the news that Saul and Jonathan are dead? And how will he view this alien messenger of death?

The scene is set in Ziklag. Following a short, two-day rest from battle, a messenger arrives in David's camp. The narrator describes how he appeared in the distance. His torn garments and dust-covered head give the im-

pression that he is an anguished Israelite who has escaped the battle on Mt. Gilboa. The man falls at David's feet and does homage.

Before he interrogates the prostrate man, David pauses to reflect. Then he asks him, "From where do you come?" The messenger replies that he is one of the lucky few to escape from the Israelite camp. David probes further: "How did things go?" he asks. "Please tell me." The messenger relates the terrible news. It was a rout, a disaster: "The people have fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead." Then he makes the climactic announcement, "Saul and Jonathan, his son, are dead also." Saul is dead! David is finally vindicated.

But before David reacts to the news, he probes the messenger further.

(b) The Motives of Death Uncovered (1:5-10)

So David said to the young man who told him, "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?" And the young man who told him said, "By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and behold, Saul was leaning on his spear. And behold, the chariots and the horsemen pursued him closely. And when he looked behind him, he saw me and called to me. And I said, 'Here I am.' And he said to me, 'Who are you?' And I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite.' Then he said to me, 'Please stand beside me and kill me; for agony has seized me, [although all of] my life still lingers in me.' So I stood beside him and killed him, because I knew that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the diadem which was on his head and the bracelet which was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord."

Upon closer examination, "the man" standing before David is found not to be a soldier, but a mere youth.² David again probes him: "How do you know that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?" David is a master at getting beyond appearances to the heart of the matter.

The second (and center) movement of the story is dominated by the messenger's speech. He recounts events that he claims to have seen. The man begins by inferring that by a stroke of luck (or coincidence: "by chance"), he just happened to be at the right place at the right time. There he was, on Mount Gilboa, and behold, there was Israel's king, severely wounded, leaning on his spear. Here is yet another reference to that infamous spear, the symbol of Saul's impotence. The spear that he had hurled at David time after time, but it had never found its mark. The weapon in which Saul had placed all his trust. Now, at the end of his life, this spear is his sole source of support. We are reminded of Jesus' warning to Peter, "all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt 26:52).

According to the messenger, just upon his arrival on Mt. Gilboa, Saul turned around and saw him, and called to him. The messenger was quick to obey: "Here I

am," he said. At your service. Saul told him that he was about to die, but death would not come soon enough for him. He was in the throes of death, but unfortunately, his life was still fully in him. If he lingered much longer, he feared the Philistines would find him and desecrate his body and make sport of him. The thought horrified him. The problem was, how to get someone to kill him when he was "holy," the Lord's anointed?

Saul asked the man his origin: "Who are you?" inquired the king. Saul was actually asking, "Are you the man I now need? Are you prepared and suitable for this emergency?" Quickly the answer was given, "I am an Amalekite." Well! What a coincidence! (Fokkelman). Because the man was a foreigner, he saw himself as exempt from Israel's laws as to what is holy, thus he was able to expedite Saul's orders. (This account is reminiscent of Doeg, the Edomite, 1 Samuel 22.) The messenger's intimates that Saul was relieved at this chance encounter.

If the messenger feared that David would disapprove of his actions, he provides three reasons to justify himself. You will notice that all three have a modern ring to them. First, it was Saul who requested that he kill him. He was merely following orders, in other words. Second, it was a mercy killing. Saul was going to die anyway. Why postpone the inevitable and add to his suffering? And third, "I am an Amalekite; thus I am exempt from Israelite laws of holiness and responsibility."

Unfortunately for the messenger, his final actions reveal his true motives. Once the ghastly deed is done, he wastes no time stripping the body of the dead king. He lifts his royal diadem³ and bracelet and takes them to the new king as a demonstration of his unreserved loyalty (he calls David, "my lord"). Now the truth comes out. This youth has not come to the camp of David to bring news of Saul's death. He is an opportunistic Amalekite who wants to be the new king maker. He wants to be the man to deposit the crown in the opposing camp, all for personal gain.

Where this messenger went wrong is that he had absolutely no clue as to what was driving David's destiny toward the crown, or David's real feelings towards Saul. He wrongly believed David must be like everybody else in that dog eat dog world. David, he reckoned, must be driven by personal ambition. When he was unjustly wronged, surely he would see revenge.

Seen in this light, the messenger is ill prepared for the response which David is about to make.

(c) David's Response to Death (1:11-16)

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. (1:11-12)

David's response is in stark contrast to that of the

messenger. When the news finally sinks in, David cries out in anguish. He rips his clothes, and all his men follow in unison. They sob uncontrollably and continue to weep and fast until evening. David's anguish is deep, his sorrow all-consuming. Saul's death is a national loss, for Israel has lost a king. There is personal loss, for David's closest friend is dead. And there is the unspeakable anguish for the tragedy that implicates Israel's God, who by turning his back on the anointed king is now exposed to the shame of Israel's godless enemies. This is grief in boundless dimension.

By contrast, the messenger displays no such emotion. It was this lack that probably aroused David's suspicions. So, after spending his grief, David recalls the youth and reexamines him.

And David said to the young man who told him, "Where are you from?" And he answered, "I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite." Then David said to him, "How is it you were not afraid to stretch out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" And David called one of the young men and said, "Go, cut him down." So he struck him and he died. And David said to him, "Your blood is on your head, for your mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed.'" (1:13-16)

When David asks the man, for the second time, "Where are you from?" he is actually asking the question, "What are your origins?" The youth responds, "I am the son of an alien (*ger*), an Amalekite." Now the whole truth comes out. He is an Amalekite, but his father chose to become an alien, or stranger, in Israel.

There are three different Hebrew words used to denote a stranger. This word which the young man uses is the term *ger*. Elie Wiesel, in his book *Kingdom of Memory*, explains the *ger* as "the stranger who lives among Jews, meaning, on Jewish land, in Jewish surroundings, in a Jewish atmosphere; but he has not adopted the Jewish faith although he has acquired Jewish customs, values, and friends."⁴ Later, the word was used of a gentile convert. This stranger in Israel was to be given special hospitality, care, and concern in Israel. He was entitled to the protection of Israelite laws, and was responsible to obey them.

Responding to David's question about his origins, the youth presents himself as an Amalekite who is a *ger*. But when Saul asked him the same question, he presented himself as a pure Amalekite, one who was outside the camp of Israel and thus exempt from Israel's laws. This messenger wanted all the benefits that came with being considered one who was inside the camp of Israel, but without the responsibilities that came with that standing. He wanted to have his cake and eat it, too.

With his own words, the Amalekite's fate is sealed. David carries out justice with one swift stroke. He reads the charge in the form of a rhetorical question; then he

announces sentence and execution. Notice that the sentence is carried out by one of the young men, a *na'ar*, who is responsible and obedient to the king's will in contrast to the young messenger.

David then shames the messenger with his culpability and guilt following his execution:

"Your blood is on your head, for your mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed.'"

There is no chance for an appeal of the sentence, indicating David's disgust with the Amalekite messenger.

The story ends with an echo from its opening words. At the beginning of the story we witnessed the Amalekite's false mourning. He arrived at the camp of David with "dust on his head." Now, at the end of the story, we witness his just punishment in the words uttered by David, "your blood be on your own head."

What are we to make of this Amalekite? Why is this strange messenger the center of the story? And what does David's reaction to him teach us about being a king?

III. Reflections on the Story: "I am an Amalekite"

The messenger is a liar both in words and in appearance. His dress gives the impression that he is in mourning, but he is actually an opportunistic scavenger, seeking to profit from his prey. His account differs widely from the original story, recorded in 1 Samuel 31. When Saul was mortally wounded by archers, he asked his armor bearer to slay him, but the man refused to kill the Lord's anointed, and Saul committed suicide by falling on his own spear.

Whenever there is a conflict in the Biblical story between what the narrator says and what a character reports, the narrator is always to be considered factually correct. Fokkelman makes a very good case that the youth was quite likely on Mt. Gilboa by chance, and he was an eyewitness to the events that occurred: "The point...is that the innocence attaching to his accidental presence was subsequently polluted and lost when the man decided to take advantage of Saul's death and his position as an eyewitness."⁵ His story rings true right up to the moment of Saul's conversation with the armor-bearer. At that point he inserts himself in the role of the armor bearer and claims that he did what the servant refused to do, i.e. kill the king. The armor bearer was characterized by awe, the Amalekite by the absence of awe. The messenger probably returned that night to strip the dead body of Saul of his royal insignia, thinking that David would reward him handsomely now that he would inherit the royal crown.

The tragedy here is that the purity of youthful innocence was corrupted when the youth sought to use the death of the innocents to make a buck. His position of

being a stranger who was welcomed inside of the community gave him his power.

The essence of the name Amalek is still deeply imbedded in the collective memory of Israel. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of four concentration camps, devotes a chapter in his book *Kingdom of Memory*, to the stranger: "Who is the enemy? He has a name: Amalek—the eternal stranger...The only enemy to inspire unqualified apprehension and anger is...Amalek. Always. We are unmistakably ordered to strike him, to defeat him, to kill him. Why Amalek? Amalek, we said, is the stranger who frightens us most, the stranger who knows our weakness and—perhaps—is our weakness...He attacks women and children, defenseless people. He attacks when we are weak."⁶

After thirty-five years, Elie Wiesel returned to Treblinka, Maidanek, and Buchenwald. The terrible memories come flooding back: "The victims' tears, the sneering of their executioners, the funeral pyres, the dead children, the desperate attempts of the sick prisoners to look 'happy' because the S.S. sergeant loathed unhappy, weak, sick people and sent them off to die." Then, still suffering the memories of these chambers of horror, he traveled to Auschwitz. Here is what he says of that place: "It is a kind of museum, and that is how it is listed on our schedule: Auschwitz, a museum. Clean, well-kept, a real museum."⁷ Then he sees "Auschwitz souvenirs, Auschwitz postcards." He is disgusted and horrified at what has become of the death camp. A buck is being made at the expense of the innocent victims.

Amalek permeates our whole society. Nicole Brown was butchered, but instead of weeping for the innocent, a whole nation of enthusiasts, veiled in the guise of legal experts, witnesses, jurors, media analysts, descended like vultures, stripping their prey of every last vestige of human dignity, all to make a buck. Every week we see her photographs displayed in the supermarket tabloids, proof that someone is making a buck from her slaughter. But if anyone weeps, the cameras turn away. Weeping is not allowed.

So it was with Christ, God's anointed. I wonder if it was this story of the Amalekite messenger, together with a number of the Psalms, that prepared Jesus for his betrayal. Judas, the stranger, was welcomed into the intimate circle of Jesus and his associates. When Jesus was most vulnerable, Judas seized the opportunity to make a buck. He feigned loyalty with a kiss, a long kiss. One kiss for thirty pieces of silver. His execution was as swift as that of the Amalekite.

But the story continues on. This Amalekite is a mirror image of us. No reader of this story can escape the penetrating echo that reverberates from the words, "I am an Amalekite. I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite." And we can't escape the dread indictment from his own

lips: "I killed the Lord's anointed." In the story, the first time these words are uttered, they are spoken casually. They are glanced over, with no emotion. The second time, coming from the lips of David, they are packed with more emotion than one would care to face: "How is it you were not afraid to stretch out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" The third time, in the final words in the scene, they form the self-condemning quote that sealed the Amalekite's fate, "I have killed the Lord's anointed."

The words of David, and his tears, live on today. We cannot escape them. How they probe us and examine us. David's part in this story makes us to see ourselves for who we really are—aliens welcomed in by Israel, strangers who killed the Messiah. It was your sin and my sin that put him to death. Yet, so eager are we to use the death of the King for personal gain, to solve our problems, to make a reputation, even to make a buck, we never stop to weep. At this, David asks, "Have you no fear?" And he weeps. Here we learn how we should respond to the death of the Lord's anointed. David weeps. He does not receive the crown of the kingdom with unadulterated joy, but with deep pathos, "love and sorrow flow mingled down." Joy forged in sorrow.

This text leaves us with the burning question: Whose heart drives us, the heart of the Amalekite or the heart of David? That story remains to be written by each one of us.

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1. This scene evokes memories of another messenger who came from the battlefield to deliver similar bad news about the fate of Israel at the hands of the Philistines, in 1 Sam. 4:12-18.
2. Youth: the last time a youth (Hebrew: *na'ar*) delivered an important message, it was regarding David's fate, in 1 Sam 20:35-42. The result of that encounter also ended in many tears.
3. The diadem...and...the bracelet. "These are the royal insignia. The diadem was given to the king at the time of his investiture. The precise nature is not known. Though often translated, somewhat misleadingly, as 'crown,' it is more likely to have been an emblem worn on the forehead, comparable in some ways to the uraas worn on the forehead by the kings of Egypt." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 60.
4. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of four concentration camps, has an entire chapter on "The Stranger" and how it has affected the Jewish collective memory in his moving book, *The Kingdom of Memory*, (New York: Schocken, 1990), 49-74.
5. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 2, *The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 641.
6. Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 70.
7. Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory*, 114.