


2 SAMUEL 1:17-27¹

MOURNING OUR FALLEN

“David chanted this lament over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He gave instructions that the people of Judah should be taught “The Bow.” Indeed, it is written down in the Book of Yashar.)

“The beauty of Israel lies slain on your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!
Don’t report it in Gath,
 don’t spread the news in the streets of Ashkelon,
 or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,
 the daughters of the uncircumcised will celebrate!
O mountains of Gilboa,
 may there be no dew or rain on you, nor fields of grain offerings!
For it was there that the shield of warriors was defiled;
 the shield of Saul lies neglected without oil.
From the blood of the slain, from the fat of warriors,
 the bow of Jonathan was not turned away.
The sword of Saul never returned empty.
Saul and Jonathan were greatly loved during their lives,
 and not even in their deaths were they separated.
They were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.
O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
 who clothed you in scarlet as well as jewellery,
 who put gold jewellery on your clothes.
How the warriors have fallen
 in the midst of battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your high places!
I grieve over you, my brother Jonathan!
You were very dear to me.
Your love was more special to me than the love of women.
How the warriors have fallen!
The weapons of war are destroyed!”²

aul and Jonathan had been slain in battle. David and the brave men allied with him were all that stood between the overthrow of the Kingdom by the Philistines and continuation of Israel as a people. The lament that David composed is an example of mourning that honours the memory of those who are fallen. It is appropriate at this Remembrance Day service for us to review this lament, learning how to honour the dead who have given their lives so that we may continue in freedom as a nation.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² **The New English Translation (NET Bible)**, Biblical Studies Press, ©1996-2007

IT IS APPROPRIATE THAT CHRISTIANS HONOUR FALLEN WARRIORS — War is ugly business; it is the result man's fallen nature. Jesus warned that as we approached the end of days we would "hear of wars and rumours of wars" [MATTHEW 24:6]. He also warned that "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom [MATTHEW 24:7]. With war comes death, and with death comes sorrow and mourning.

"War is hell," said General Sherman. The statement was made spontaneously at the conclusion of a technical speech to military cadets at the Ohio State Fair in 1880. The entire quote was, *"Boys, I've been where you are now and I know just how you feel. It's entirely natural that there should beat in the breast of every one of you a hope and desire that some day you can use the skill you have acquired here.*

*"Suppress it! You don't know the horrible aspects of war. I've been through two wars and I know. I've seen cities and homes in ashes. I've seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is hell."*³

A great general on the other side of the last great conflict in which Sherman fought was General Robert E. Lee. In a letter to his wife, Lee wrote, *"What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbours, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world."*⁴

All who are familiar with the history of Israel as recorded in the Word of God will undoubtedly recall the account of the death of Saul. Saul, the first king of the united Jewish Kingdom, had disobeyed God. His disobedience resulted in a prophecy by Samuel that the kingdom would be torn from him [1 SAMUEL 15:28]. The Saulide dynasty would end with the first and only ruler from that family because of his cowardice and wanton disregard of the will of the LORD. God pledged that He would place another king on the throne—one who would prove to be better than Saul, who would obey God and seek Him in all his ways; the one whom God chose was David.

Though Saul ruled as king for over forty years, he moved inexorably toward his date with destiny. A sword hung over his family, and every action of the mad king moved both him and his family closer to death. His disobedience, his wanton disregard of the will of God in order to do what was convenient, brought him into repeated conflict with the Lord and subjected Israel to sorrow that should never have been theirs.

At last, the day he dreaded came, and Saul led the armies of Israel to defeat at the hands of the Philistines. As God had foretold, Saul and his sons were slain. The armies of Israel were scattered before the enemy. The nation was defenceless, and the threat of occupation by a brutal and merciless enemy hung over the land. Saul had been so focused on himself that he had taken his own life when he was wounded in battle. After the battle, the Philistines scavenged the field, and finding Saul and his three sons, beheaded them. They placed their heads and their armour on the walls of Beth-shan in homage to their gods and in order to ridicule the perceived weakness of Israel's God.

David received a report of Saul's death from an Amalekite who sought to ingratiate himself to David. This man, who claimed to have been a part of Saul's camp, assumed that telling David that he had rendered the fatal blow to Saul would earn a reward. Of course, it did not turn out the way he had envisioned. David had him killed, because he had killed the king of Israel, usurping the place of God in punishment.

³ <http://www.mi5th.org/warishell.htm>, accessed 7 November 2008

⁴ <http://www.quote garden.com/war.html>, accessed 7 November 2008

However, David, having received the sorrowful report, mourned. As an integral part of his mourning, he composed a lament, and commanded that it was to be taught to the people so that throughout the remainder of time allotted to the Kingdom, people would remember Saul and Jonathan. Reading the dirge that David composed, I observe neglected truths that must be remembered, for we do live in a world in which tears and sorrow will continue until the Master has returned and at last conquered evil.

If character was the basis for mourning, Saul did not deserve the honour of David's lament. Saul's character failed to reflect the righteousness we should have expected from God's anointed. He was self-centred—unable to tolerate praise ascribed to anyone other than himself. He was unreliable—incapable and/or unwilling to obey God's commands when they were inconvenient. He was paranoid—imagining intrigue and collusion in all his loyal subjects. Nevertheless, he was a warrior, and according to the divine text, he fought against Israel's enemies on every side and "wherever he turned he routed them" [1 SAMUEL 14:48b]. The text continues by stating that "he did valiantly ... and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them" [1 SAMUEL 14:48].

David honoured Saul, not because he was an honourable man, but because he had served his nation, risking his life for the benefit of the people. David noted Saul's abilities as a warrior in his lament. He speaks of Saul as the glory of Israel (verse 19). He speaks of the sword of Saul as having repeatedly returned in victory (verse 22). He acknowledges that as king, Saul had brought prosperity to Israel (verse 24). He speaks of Saul and Jonathan as "the mighty" (verses 25, 27). He is not praising him for his character—he could not; David is lamenting the loss of a warrior.

Similarly, we remember that men and women have served and died at the call of the nation. We who now live in this great land are the beneficiaries of their sacrifice, and we honour them for their willingness to risk their lives for our welfare. We do not glorify them, but we do honour their sacrifice and remember they were our warriors.

On Remembrance Day, we must not glorify war or imagine that it is noble to die. Neither dare we allow ourselves to slip into maudlin sentimentality by exalting the virtue of those who served. Rather, we remember the sacrifice of comfort and ease in order to serve the nation; we honour the memory of such deeds. Many were killed, and we say they made the ultimate sacrifice; others were wounded in the battles they fought. However, José Narosky has sagely noted, "*In war, there are no unwounded.*" Thus, we do not err if we contend that all who serve merit our gratitude because they did serve, hazarding their lives and jeopardising their comfort for the benefit of those who remained at home. All who live in this great nation today owe so much to the men and women who have served and who are now serving under the flag of our nation. It is in this spirit that we remember those who gave their lives in service to the nation. In doing this, we are but following the example provided by David when he remembered the death of Saul and Jonathan, together with those who died with them at Mount Gilboa.

A German proverb states, "*A great war leaves the country with three armies—an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves.*"⁵ With war comes the sorrow of wounded men and women who will never fully recover. Mothers will go to the grave mourning for the loss of sons who had too much character to refuse to serve their country. Fathers will silently grieve until the grave dries their tears as they mourn for children who never fulfilled the dreams that blossomed during their youth.

⁵ Ibid.

So, David mourned the death of Saul and Jonathan, and in mourning their death, he honoured them. His lament memorialised their exploits and especially their selfless sacrifice which had repeatedly blessed the nation throughout the previous decades. There are qualities that are forgotten when we fail to remember the sacrifice others have made for us. Commitment, courage, integrity, honour and respect are among the qualities expected of those who serve. Together with qualities such as those just listed, the warriors of the nation are called to lives of sacrifice for the benefit of the nation.

John Stewart Mill spoke a sobering truth when he wrote, ***“War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”***⁶

Our forebears made incredible sacrifice for our sake. Few of us realise the extent of their sacrifice, and today, it is virtually certain that few of us have ever been called upon to make a sacrifice comparable to what they made. Though there is no glory in war, there is the potential for nobility exemplified by those who serve, and among those who choose to embrace sacrifice is found an uncommon degree of precisely such character.

United States Marines are justifiably proud of a statement made by Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz who said, ***“On Iwo Island, uncommon valour was a common virtue.”*** Admiral Nimitz was not glorifying the death and the devastation of war; he was honouring men who had willingly stood with their comrades against a ruthless and merciless foe intent on enslaving the world. There were qualities expressed through the conflict—dependence upon one another, a spirit of sacrifice, courage and valour—that Nimitz witnessed in these warriors. These qualities are admirable in any people and they are worthy of inculcating in any people.

Canadian warriors have likewise shown courage in battle, demonstrating valour that merits commendation and deserves the admiration of all who hear of their exploits. The account of Canadian courage in combat is long and honourable. At Vimy Ridge Canada was said to have come of age; and at Passchendaele Canada’s fighting men again demonstrated their courage and initiative in combat before the eyes of the watching world. In seaborne landings at Dieppe and on Sicilian beaches Canadian fighting men proved their courage, as they did when capturing Ortona during the Italian campaign. In the hedgerows of Normandy and along Dutch dikes, Canadian fighting men served admirably to deliver nations from tyranny. Again, the courage and dedication of the Canadian citizen soldier was proven at Kap’yong and on Hill 355 in Korea. More recently in Afghanistan, the grandsons and sons of brave Canadians have again demonstrated the courage and resolve that has marked our forces for a hundred years.

Only those who have witnessed combat can know the sacrifice requested of a soldier; but when asked, our warriors have performed admirably, knowing that the sacrifice they make will purchase peace for their families and friends. Likewise, only those who have witnessed the sacrifice of such brave men and women will understand the sorrow they feel because of what their eyes have seen. Men who have witnessed combat never speak glowingly of the fighting—they speak of the camaraderie, of the courage, of the deep respect and love shared by those who stand together to resist evil.

⁶ John Stewart Mill, <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/27169.html>, accessed 8 November 2008

As David lamented, he extolled the courage of Jonathan. Though Jonathan was an older man, he and David had shared so much together, and David recalled his prowess in battle. Though Saul had been crazed in his pursuit of David, yet David recalled his skill in combat and his devotion. The bow of Jonathan had extracted a price of the enemies of Israel; the sword of Saul had caused those who opposed the Lord God to turn back. Small wonder, then, that David speaks of Saul and Jonathan as mighty.

In two days, Canadians will gather before cenotaphs where the names of multiplied warriors are inscribed. In many instances, the bronze has faded, though the lustre of their courage and bravery has not dimmed. Nevertheless, we do well to recall the cost of our freedom and pledge in our hearts that we will not permit their sacrifice to have been to no avail. Each Canadian, and certainly each Christian, should determine that we will not waste the freedom that was purchased by so great a cost. Though I cannot address the nation, I do urge each of you to promise that your freedom to worship and to be men and women of character will honour the memory of our fallen warriors.

I do not wish to take away from the honour that is accorded our fallen soldiers and sailors, but I would be remiss as a minister of the Gospel were I to fail to remind you that we are obligated to also honour those brave men and women who have sacrificed for the cause of Christ the Lord. We Christians are engaged in an ongoing battle. Ours is not a battle fought with the weapons of this fallen world. Paul writes, “Though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience” [2 CORINTHIANS 10:3-6].

That statement should be read together with that which the Apostle concluded the encyclical to the Ephesian congregation. There, he wrote, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” [EPHESIANS 6:10-18].

We Christians are in a battle as we struggle for the souls of lost men and women. We employ weapons that are divinely supplied—prayer, testimony of God’s might and majesty, truth and obedience to the Saviour. We struggle against our own desires, bringing our bodies and our minds under control of the Master. We resist temptation, building ourselves up in this most holy Word. We strengthen and encourage one another through serving each other in love. In all this we are always conscious that we are at war; and the war demands that we sacrifice our comfort for the cause to which we have been appointed. This means that we must be courageous in the face of opposition, dedicated to one another even as we boldly advance the cause of Christ the Saviour.

I do not want to suggest that we have no encouragement, for God is always at work among us giving us rich encouragement. His Spirit intercedes for us and comforts us in our trials. His Word gives us wisdom and understanding as we meditate on what He has caused to be written. His presence among us fills us with hope and strength. Beyond this, He gives us the people of God to minister to us and to encourage us. Standing with us in trials and rejoicing with us in our joys, God's people are evidence of divine grace. As encouragement, God gives us the knowledge of believers who have preceded us, standing firm in the Faith and living lives dedicated to God's glory.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrew Christians memorialised those who had preceded the believers to whom he wrote when he spoke of Abel, of Enoch and of Noah. Then, he spoke of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. He recalled the exploits of Joshua and the faith of Rahab, before he summed up the lives of so many. "What more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

"And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" [HEBREWS 11:32-40].

The words of that author serve as a memorial to the courage and the dedication of those who preceded us. No wonder, then, that the author initiated the next chapter with these words, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" [HEBREWS 12:1, 2].

Thus, even as we approach Remembrance Day, commemorating the sacrifice of Canadian fighting men and women, we who are believers in the Risen Lord of Glory must also recognise the sacrifice of those fellow saints who have stood boldly for the Faith before our time. We have received a rich heritage, and we are honour bound to pass on that glorious heritage to those who will follow us. In years to come, should the Saviour delay His return, may it be said of us that we were faithful, that we were bold in the face of opposition, that we willingly and joyfully sacrifice our personal comfort for the cause of the Saviour and to the praise of His glory.

CHRISTIAN MEMORIALS —I have observed a grave transformation that has occurred in a relatively brief time. In an earlier time, all Canadians shared a common heritage of faith in Christ the Lord. I do not say that all were Christians, but all held Christian values as honourable. This was the memorial to the sacrifice of our forebears.

I fear that day has passed and now an attitude of self-gratification is more frequently found than is the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of future hope. One of the saddest prophecies to be found in the Pentateuch, if not in the entire Word of God, must be that which Moses recorded in **DEUTERONOMY 32:15**.

“Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked;
you grew fat, stout, and sleek;
then he forsook God who made him
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.”

The verse is sad because it foresaw a day when Israel would no longer be willing to sacrifice—the people would conclude that life and liberty were not worth the effort. Amos would later pronounce a woe to those at ease in Zion [**AMOS 6:1**].

The prophecy follows hard on that which was previously prophesied about Israel. “‘Write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant. And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring). For I know what they are inclined to do even today, before I have brought them into the land that I swore to give.’ So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel” [**DEUTERONOMY 31:19-22**].

Nor was this the only time that God had cautioned Israel against growing complacent. Earlier, through Moses, God had said, “Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God” [**DEUTERONOMY 8:11-20**].

Again, though my voice will not be heard by the nation, it is heard by men and women who bear responsibility for their own lives, and whose influence touches the lives of others whom they love and for whom they care. Though we are few in the nation, we are responsible to be lights in the darkness and salt in the midst of a decaying world. As we are light and salt, we are living memorials to the sacrifice of Christ.

Briefly, I must turn aside from the text to note that a day is coming when sorrow will be no more. Whenever I officiate at the interment of a Christian, I read the words John penned near the conclusion of the Apocalypse. John wrote, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away’” [REVELATION 21:1-4].

I want people to lay their loved ones to rest in the hope of the resurrection. I want them to know that God is pledged on His holy honour not to forget His own. Though we now pass through a vale of tears, there awaits a day when tears and mourning and sorrow will be no more. However, for the moment, we mourn our loved ones when they pass out of this present life. It is not that we have no hope, but rather we grieve because we can no longer enjoy their love or enjoy their presence.

When we pass beyond this life we will leave memorials that will last for many years, though they will not be created from marble or bronze. The lasting memorials that we will leave are lives that have been changed through the manner in which we have lived. For good or for evil, we are erecting our own memorials now. Either we are turning others to righteousness through precept and example, or we are confirming them in their rebellion against righteousness. Either we are demonstrating courage in the face of hardship, dedication in the face of opposition, and commitment when others are dropping out of the race, or we are joining the crowd to flee, to quit and to gratify our own desires.

Of this we may be certain, others are watching us to see the reality of our profession. Either our lives demonstrate the reality of Christ with us, or they reveal that our declaration of faith is fraudulent. When life on earth is finished, will the grieving be transient as people pause momentarily and then continue to pursue their own desires, or will they pick up the fallen standard and determine to continue in a cause that is greater than any individual—the cause of bringing glory to the Son of God? The manner in which I live my life, the way in which you conduct your life, determines the living memorial that you will leave.

There is no possibility that your life will long touch the lives of others if that life is not hidden in the Saviour, Christ Jesus the Lord. He died that you might live; and He rose to life that you might be declared right with God. Thus, the promise of God is that, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That same promise cites the Prophet Joel in declaring, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

And that is our prayer for you. Believing the promise of God, receiving the Son of God as Saviour, come to life and begin to erect this lasting memorial that will bless others and which will glorify the Master throughout all eternity. Do it now. Amen.