



Kingdom Principles (2 Samuel 1:1-16)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was not bashful about putting his views on child-rearing into print (e.g. his *Émile*), and he alleged that no one enjoyed playing with children more than himself. Why then did he abandon the five babies he had by his mistress Thérèse?¹ In Rousseau appearance and reality, publication and practice did not mesh.

It was the same with the Amalekite who came panting and heaving into David's outpost at Ziklag. He wore all the signs of genuine grief – clothes torn, dirt on his head (v. 2). He had come from the Philistine-Israelite conflict on Mt. Gilboa, located about eighteen miles southwest of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee (Chinnereth in the Old Testament). The Philistines had carried the day and had trounced Israel. King Saul had been severely wounded and, not wanting the Philistines to have the delight of slowly torturing him to his end, had fallen on his own sword (1 Sam. 31:3-5). It was a dark, dark day for Israel. Jonathan, Saul's son and David's friend, was killed. Life was bleak and dark and bloody and grey in the kingdom of God.

And everything about this Amalekite seemed to reflect Israel's disaster. After all, no one will traipse over eighty miles unless one is in earnest about something.² The trip would

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 21.

2. The fact that the precise location of Ziklag is disputed does not affect this point. Clearly it was in southwest Judah (cf. Josh. 19:1-9) and an outpost of Philistine Gath (cf. 1 Sam. 27).



have taken him several days. But it doesn't take David long to conclude he is a murderer, and it doesn't take the reader long to find out that he is, more accurately, a liar. Not that he wasn't sincere. He was – about getting a government job.

This passage raises the question David faced in 1 Samuel 24–26: How is the kingdom to come into David's hands? Will he wait for it to come as Yahweh's gift or seize it by his own initiative? Apparently the Amalekite held that there were times when Yahweh's promises (if he knew of them) required a slight push (v. 10). Neither David nor the narrator agrees with this position. The story as we have it seems to say that kingdom principles must govern kingdom life, and we see several of those principles operating in this text. We begin with the exposure of falsehood.

THE EXPOSURE OF FALSEHOOD (ESP. 1:6-10)

A casual reader who comes fresh from 1 Samuel 31 into this chapter and now hears the Amalekite's story may say, 'But I thought Saul finished himself off at Gilboa, and here's this Amalekite who claims his friendly act of euthanasia did the honours.' Do we have two accounts? Not really. We have this narrator's description of what happened (1 Sam. 31) and we have the Amalekite's story of what happened (vv. 3-10). The solution is simple: the Amalekite lied. If you ever have a choice between the narrator and an Amalekite, always believe the narrator. Have you ever met an Amalekite you could trust?

Some will object that I am too quick to condemn this Amalekite. If so, perhaps it helps to point out that there's a suspicious hole in the Amalekite's story (and I should think David would have seen it at once). As C. F. Keil pointed out, it is not likely that Saul would have been so isolated in the thick of battle, with no armor-bearer or royal contingent at his side, that he had to depend on an Amalekite who accidentally came by to administer the *coup de grace*.³ Yet if this Amalekite wanted a reward from David, he almost had to 'story' a little. How could he say he slithered around like a coward, waiting

3. C.F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (1875; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 286.

for Saul to fall so that, when the way was clear, he could pounce on the royal insignia? Certainly he had to explain how he obtained the crown and armband, but how much more gallant it sounded if in the thick of battle he kindly and coolly assisted Saul in death with dignity.⁴ A far more rewardable scenario.

The Amalekite received justice (vv. 15-16), but it is justice mixed with irony. He is punished for what he said he did even though (in our view) he didn't do it! He received what he should have received even though it was not based on fact. The judgment of God found him, found him in his lie and repaid him in line with his intent if not his deed.

So on the first page of another biblical book we run straight into the God who exposes us, who delights in truth in the inward parts (Ps. 51:6), who sets our secret sins in the light of his presence (Ps. 90:8). Nor will this be the last episode – there will be 'Amalekites' in the church. Ananias and Sapphira will feel the need to boost their self-esteem within the Jerusalem Church (Acts 5:1-11 in light of 4:32-37) and end up in twin graves for it. Even if we could fool kings and churches Jesus has taught us that no one will escape D-Day (for Disclosure): 'There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs' (Luke 12:2-3, NIV). Yet strangely we find ourselves often cuddling this absurd notion that if we have duped man's eye we have eluded heaven's gaze as well.

There was once a Scottish lad who thought this way. An unresolved misdemeanor had occurred in Dingwall: a boy had entered a garden and stripped the plum trees. Several months had gone by yet the culprit was unknown. Then came

4. The Amalekite graphically describes Saul's predicament in v. 6: 'Why, the chariots and cavalry had zeroed in on him.' There is something almost heroic in the fact that the Amalekite was there in the thick of it (according to his story). However, if he had had genuine interest in Saul, he would have dragged Saul's body from the battlefield to deny it to the Philistine trophy collectors who would soon comb the area (1 Sam. 31:8-10); instead he only swiped Saul's symbols of office (so J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 2, *The Crossing Fates (I Sam. 13-31 & II Sam. 1)* [Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1986], 686).

a Sabbath when there was a children's service at the church, and the pastor, Dr. John Kennedy, was preaching. He spoke from Psalm 11:4 of the One 'whose eyes behold and eyelids try the children of men'. Then he came to his dramatic conclusion: 'The boy is with us this evening who stole the plums! I shall not look in the direction of his seat lest I betray him. But I know him. I saw him from my study-window – saw the wall leaped, the pockets filled – the breathless race home. He thought no one saw, but I saw the whole, and God saw.'⁵

The same principle holds for simple Scottish lads and for conniving Amalekites: in Yahweh's kingdom we have to do with a God who sees, exposes, and judges. We must not think that an episode at Ziklag (or Dingwall) is an unconnected fragment in the accidents of history. Rather, what you see in 2 Samuel 1 in the Amalekite's case is a preview of what will be true for all at the last day. 'There is *nothing* concealed that will not be disclosed.' Jesus should know – he's the one God has authorized to judge the secrets of men (Rom. 2:16).

THE URGENCY OF GRIEF (1:11-12)

Then David grabbed hold of his clothes and tore them – likewise all the men who were with him. And they wailed, wept, and fasted until evening over Saul, over Jonathan his son, over the people of Yahweh, and over the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

It sounds strange to suggest that the urgency of grief should mark life in God's kingdom, but the text insists that this should be the case. We can better appreciate this point – and verses 11-12 – if we step back and see the way the whole story is told.

It may be set forth like this:

Arrival of Amalekite, vv. 1-2

Conversation, vv. 3-10 (3 questions)

Reaction, vv. 11-12

Conversation, vv. 13-14 (2 questions)

Elimination of Amalekite, vv. 15-16

5. Donald Beaton, *Some Noted Ministers of the Northern Highlands* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1985), 276-77.

Note that verses 11-12 are at the structural center of the story. Note also that you would not have told the story in this way. You would prefer, I should think, to continue with verse 13 immediately after verse 10, because (in the story as it is) you get nervous about that Amalekite just standing there while all this grief goes up. You want to clean up the immediate situation with this informer; then you would tell of the reaction of David & Co. But, for our writer, the Amalekite can wait. He thinks the most important item in his story is the grief and wailing of David and his men over Israel – her fallen leaders and troops. The ‘people of Yahweh’ have been crushed. Grief cannot wait.

Now I do not know if our writer has altered the strict chronological sequence of events in the text. Biblical writers are not bound by chronology. But I do think he has stood our literary tendencies on their heads by letting loose this hubbub of wailing immediately after the Amalekite’s report. Nothing else matters, except giving vent to this anguish. Even executions can wait. The writer’s use of structure and sequence is his way of underscoring the importance of this grief over God’s people.

The literary pattern of our text might be akin to a third grade girl who, with her schoolmates, saw a giraffe come striding across the school yard during afternoon play time. When she goes home, she bursts into the kitchen with her giraffe story even though her spelling test and pizza-for-lunch may temporally have preceded the giraffe’s debut. In such cases chronology is thrown to the winds because of something far more impressive.

The grief of David and his men is impressive. The condition of the people of God disturbed them. And the same principle should control our life in the kingdom. Do we not have an obligation to mourn over the unbelief, apostasy and coldness in the visible church? It is not difficult for us (who are sometimes evangelicals) to observe, analyze, or critique the apathy over faithful doctrine, the flirtations with paganism, and the infatuation with a politically correct moral-social agenda which infect bodies of the institutional church. The peril in all this, of course, is that it is so easy to take on a conservative

haughtiness, a sort of humble version of Luke 18:11, a kind of evangelical arrogance (which is itself a contradiction of the gospel). Rather such unbelief or error in the church should drive us to mourning and grief and prayer and sorrow. It calls for intercession more than for pronouncements.

Scripture is so subtle: it begins with the literary technique of the writer and then brings us to our knees.

THE SAFETY OF FEAR (1:13-16)

The Amalekite assumes that David is driven by the same passion for power as he is. So he tells his story and shows his trinkets. David can only take him at his word – he has no way of independently confirming it (though, as noted above, there are holes in his tale). David makes sure the Amalekite is no recent import but has been living in Israel for some time (v. 13). He, therefore, should have known better. Hence David's question: 'Why were you not afraid to stretch out your hand to destroy Yahweh's anointed?' (v. 14)

The sanctity of Yahweh's anointed king had the status of dogma for David. This sacred respect for Saul in his official capacity was the principle that controlled David in 1 Samuel 24 and 26 (see esp. 26:10-11) and kept him from regarding temptation as opportunity.⁶ The Amalekite had assumed that no scruples would stop David from seizing the kingship; David assumed that one fear should have stopped the Amalekite from destroying the king. 'Why were you not afraid?'

David's question expresses a principle that should direct all kingdom ethics and behavior. There is in kingdom living such a thing as healthy, saving fear; a fear that preserves, a godly fear that should control us. There was once a Polish prince who always carried a picture of his father next to his heart. At certain times he used to take it out, look at it, and say, 'Let me do nothing unbecoming so excellent a father.'⁷ That is the way all kingdom servants should live – controlled

6. On the sanctity of Yahweh's anointed, see *Looking on the Heart: Expositions of the Book of 1 Samuel*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 2:105.

7. John Whitecross, *The Shorter Catechism Illustrated from Christian Biography and History* (reprint ed., London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 58.

by fear grounded in love. Only Amalekites would call that pathological.

Time for confession. I admit that this text does not furnish us with the most positive uplifting points: falsehood, grief, and fear. But don't blame me. It's not my fault. It's this lying, conniving Amalekite who puts God's word into the minor key. But even he may help me if he forces me to question myself. Is there truth in the inner person? Do I ever earnestly grieve over the desperate condition of the church? Do I live life fearing only to displease my King?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. 'In Rousseau appearance and reality, publication and practice, did not mesh.' What about you and me?
2. It might seem as if the Amalekite was punished for a sin he did not in fact commit, but is this really so? Think about it.
3. A small child may cover his eyes in the belief that if he cannot see you, you cannot see him. Do we ever try to do something like that with God and is it just as ridiculous?
4. When confronted with the unbelief, apostasy and coldness of the visible church, do you always pray or do you remain content simply to analyse and criticise?
- 5 'Fear grounded in love' – think that through. How does it differ from fear grounded in sin? Which is your fear?