David Meiklejohn
12 April 2026

# How the Mighty Have Fallen

## 2 Samuel 1:1 - 2:11

### Introduction

There's a saying that history repeats itself. That was certainly true for an incident that has happened twice in my life so far.

1. It was1977. As a family we had just been into Greenock to watch the first Star Wars film. Walking up the hill from the bus stop, my brother asked for the house key so he could run ahead. When we reached the grassy area between houses, however, we saw him out playing football. "I thought you were going into the house" my mum said. "Oh, I couldn't unlock the door, so I just posted the keys through the letterbox". He seemed quite pleased with his solution. My mother was not pleased. But after several hours and help from a neighbour with fishing line and magnet, we did eventually get into the house.
2. It was 2025, 28 years later. Claire and I were out for a walk, when we met our daughter going down the road to the bus stop. She was on her way back to Dundee to continue her term at university. "I locked the door and put the key through the letterbox", she announced proudly. "But we didn't take a key with us!" I said. "Now we're locked out!" No magnets and fishing line this time, but we did manage to get in with a ladder and an open window.

In both cases the key poster got a different reaction to what they expected - they didn't know the minds of their parents.

Here we find a man coming to bring news to David. I think he expected a different reaction to the one he got. Maybe we expected a different reaction too.

### Background

We are returning to the book of Samuel, because it is one book, split into 2, perhaps because the size of scroll it would take for the whole book would be too large. There are 3 main characters in the book: Samuel the prophet, who reluctantly accedes to the people's wishes for a king; Saul the first king of Israel, who starts well, but quickly takes a nose dive and has the kingdom taken from him; and David, the shepherd boy who would become a king, a man after God's own heart, and a greater king that Saul, though we'll find that he does have his own faults and has a bit of a downfall himself.

But over all the book is about God, who has redeemed his people from Egypt, who led them through the wilderness, who enabled them to conquer the land of Canaan, who punished them and rescued them time and time again in the time of the judges, and who is now showing them the dangers of an imperfect king, while promising the perfect king to come.

### The Amalekite

It's worth revisiting the situation here. David was being hunted by Saul. He and his men went into hiding in Philistia, the land of the enemies of Israel. While there, he carried out campaigns against various peoples, but pretended he had attacked Israelites. When the Philistines went up against Israel at Jezreel, David went too, but the Philistine commanders weren't happy with him being there, so he and his men were sent back to the town they lived in: Ziklag. When they got there, they found the town sacked, and all their women and children taken by the Amalekites. They hunted them down and retrieved them. And it's soon after this that an Amalekite finds his way to David to tell him Saul is dead.

Now, his story is interesting. He says that Saul asked him to kill him. But we read in 1 Samuel 30 that Saul fell on his own sword. It seems like the Amalekite lied to try to curry favour with David, and rather than admit to plundering the dead, he claims to have killed David's enemy.

And this is where he gets a surprise - David's response is far from what he expected. Far from being happy that Saul is dead, he mourns Saul, and condemns the Amalekite for striking the Lord's anointed, which he probably didn't do anyway. Remember that David himself had had two chances to strike Saul down, but held back from touching the one who God had put in place to rule the people.

I wonder how we feel about those who rule over us. The Bible says that authority comes from God. But if a ruler misuses that authority to lift up himself or put down his people, they need to be dealt with. David had a very high view of Saul, even with all his faults, because God had made him king. But Samuel had rebuked him when he failed to follow God's command.

Anyway, David feels so strongly about this that the Amalekite is executed, and David, the great poet and song writer, writes a poem of lament, for Saul and Jonathan.

## The Poem

This isn't a commissioned piece of work, this is from the heart of David.

> *Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places!*
>
> *How the mighty have fallen!*
>
> *Tell it not in Gath,*
>
> *publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon,*
>
> *lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,*
>
> *lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.*
>
> *[2 Samuel 1 v 19-20]*

To David, Saul isn't a poor king, or a failed warrior, he is Israel's glory. The repeated line throughout the poem is "how the mighty have fallen". We could argue David was referring to Saul's moral and mental collapse. He could be forgiven this since Saul had sought his life several times. But I think he is genuinely just shocked and regretful that the mighty king (and his son) have fallen in battle. There's no need to mention David's forgiveness of Saul, he doesn't even give it a thought.

What he does think is that the enemy shouldn't know Saul is dead. He can't bear the thought of their glee.

*You mountains of Gilboa,*
*let there be no dew or rain upon you,*
*nor fields of offerings!*
*For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,*
*the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.*
*[2 Samuel 1 v 21]*

It's as if the land itself has let Israel down. How could the high places of Gilboa let such a tragedy happen on their soil? It's unthinkable.

I don't know if you've ever visited the site of a battle. The ground is just the same as any ground, but the knowledge of the battle fought, of lives lost, gives a feeling to it, makes us pause and think.

*From the blood of the slain,*
*from the fat of the mighty,*
*the bow of Jonathan turned not back,*
*and the sword of Saul returned not empty.*
*Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!*
*In life and in death they were not divided;*
*they were swifter than eagles;*
*they were stronger than lions.*
*[2 Samuel 1 v 22-23]*

David doesn't distinguish between Saul and Jonathan here, even though one was his faithful friend and one was his mortal enemy. Instead he brings out their likeness. They fought together, they displayed great courage and strength together, and they died together as they had lived.

*You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,*
*who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,*
*who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.*
*How the mighty have fallen*
*in the midst of the battle!*
*[2 Samuel 1 v 24-25]*

We think of Saul as a king who made mistakes, and effectively lost the kingdom because of his sin. But David says the nation can thank Saul for the prosperity they have. Clothed in

scarlet and adorned in gold imply that Israel has done well under Saul, at least materially. And so it's a great loss that he has fallen in battle.

*Jonathan lies slain on your high places.*

*I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;*

*very pleasant have you been to me;*

*your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women.*

*How the mighty have fallen,*

*and the weapons of war perished!*

*[2 Samuel 1 v 25-27]*

Finally David does single out Jonathan, for his great friendship. Remember, Jonathan was the one who should have been the next king. He knew his father's fears about David taking over, and yet he was like a brother to him, protecting him where he could and warning him when he couldn't.

Some have pointed out that the phrase "surpassing the love of women" may reflect on David's less than ideal experiences with marriage, but I think that's a bit unfair. Jonathan was a true and faithful friend, and David wants to honour that.

## Turmoil

At the start of the second chapter we have a power vacuum. Saul is gone, his heir Jonathan is also gone, along with two other brothers, and there's an opportunity for someone to pick up the reins.

Credit to David, then, for not just rushing in, but for asking the Lord for guidance. "Should I go up" and "which town should I got to". With the Lord's guidance he and his men go to Hebron, and he is crowned there.

But before we wrap up our nice tidy view of the story - Saul was the first king, God anointed David and he became the second king - notice that David was made king only of Judah. And verse 8 begins with "but":

*But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim, and he made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.*

*[2 Samuel 2 v 8-11]*

When God puts his plan in place there is always opposition. David was anointed by Samuel, the man of God; Ish Bosheth was made king by Abner, the man of war and captain of Saul's army. We're going to see some action between the two in coming chapters, and watch out for David's reaction when his enemy is removed. Notice that even at the start of the reign of

David, there is a split between Judah and Israel. And it's the rest of Israel that looks like it doesn't want to go God's way. We'll find out over the next few weeks how David brings the nation together, but that split is going to open up again later on.

## Summary

What did we learn from Saul? In many ways Saul was a picture of fallen humanity. Always trying to do things our own way, not willing to take responsibility when it's needed, letting jealousy and anger run our lives.

In David we have a better king: a man who goes to God for counsel, who treats God's choice as holy and permanent, a man willing to forgive and lift Saul up for his good points despite all the bad ones. We will see soon that David is not perfect either, but he does point in a way to the perfect king to come. Jesus will be from David's line, not from Saul's.

We might wonder at how David could list all the great attributes of Saul, and not mention any of the failings he had, especially those that hurt David directly. And yet, isn't that the picture of Christ. He stands before God and speaks of our righteousness. When our sins are brought up he says they are paid for. He took the punishment for them himself, and they cannot be brought up against us again.

Do we forget that? Do we ever go before God in prayer thinking lightly of our sins and come away surprised by how seriously he takes them? Or do we go broken in our sinfulness and come away amazed at his forgiveness? Maybe we need to know our Father better. Understand more of his holiness. Experience more of his grace.