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Untidy Endings and Unseen Redemption: The Story of Michal for Today

Lauren Calvin Cooke

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, lived a princess. In her father's army was a dashing young soldier who captured the princess's heart. They were both courageous and quick-witted, and they loved fiercely and passionately. But the young soldier was poor and couldn't afford the impossibly high bride price to marry her. Instead, he offered what he did have: strength and bravery. So the king agreed that he could marry the princess for the price of one hundred of his enemies' lives. What the soldier and the princess didn't know is that the king set this dangerous price because he feared the soldier's strength and secretly wanted him dead. And so the young soldier squared his shoulders resolutely and, risking his life, set out to win the hand of his princess. But the king's secret plan was thwarted—he had underestimated the determination of his daughter's suitor. In the cockiness of youth and a reckless display of extravagance, the young man conquered and killed not one hundred, but two hundred of the king's enemies, because the princess was worth everything he had.

It starts like a fairy tale, and I wish I could say that they lived happily ever after, but it's not a fairy tale, and they didn't. It's a story of power and politics, of flawed characters who make mistakes and who seek revenge, of war and violence and jealousy and all the things that remind us we live in a broken world. It's the story of David, the young soldier who eventually became the king of Israel, and the princess Michal, his first wife—but not the one he grew old with and had children and grandchildren with. Not the one he would love forever. Not the one who would live happily ever after.

Michal was uncommonly brave and assertive and quick-witted. But, typical of women in her time, she was considered property—first of her father, until he arranged her marriage, and then to her husband, whom she didn't get to choose. Women had little say in anything that happened to them. But the first time we're introduced to Michal in 1 Samuel 18, we get a hint that this woman can speak for herself. It is mentioned twice that she loves David, and this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where it is said that a woman loves a man. Knowing this, it's heartbreaking that her father King Saul, pretending to give her what she wants, is secretly exploiting her love for David to try to get the young man killed. But just as Saul underestimated David's strength, he underestimates Michal's as well.

Saul tries multiple times to off his son-in-law, finally deciding to surround the young couple's house during the night so that David can be killed in the morning (1 Sam 19.11–17). But when Michal finds out about it, she springs into action. She lowers her husband down through the window, and as he escapes and flees to safety, she places an idol in the bed, covering it with goat's hair and with the bedclothes. When Saul's messengers come to take David, she tries to buy him more time, telling them that he is sick. Yet when they pull back the bedclothes to see for themselves, Saul is furious and demands to know why his daughter has tricked him. Michal tells him that David threatened her, but the truth is Michal was the one who talked him into it. It was her idea, her choice—one that she made out of strength, not weakness. One made out of love, not fear.

This night is a turning point in Michal's life in so many ways. First, because Michal shows what she's made of. I find it ironic—and a delightful twist—that the princess, whose position in life affords her very little agency, ends up risking her own life to rescue her prince. She's clever, resourceful, strong, and incredibly

brave. With Saul in his crazy murderous rage, she must have been terrified of what he would do to her if he found out that she helped David escape. But her love won out over her fear. Second, it's a turning point in that Michal is forced to choose between her father and the man she loves. She realizes now the precarious position that her love for David has put her in: Saul has set her up for heartbreak. She can't be neutral in this political drama. She has to cast her loyalties somewhere and, in choosing David, she sets in motion the downfall of her father's reign and of her own royal status. Third, we see what Michal's love consists of. In the beginning, perhaps she was just enamored by David—as all of Israel was after this young warrior came on the scene and defeated the giant. But this is a turning point in that, through her actions, Michal proves that her love for him is more than admiration, more than desire. She shows sacrificial love of an incredible quality: she loves David enough to let him go, to give up their future together, not knowing if she'll ever see him again. She does, but by then, many years have passed. Michal has been replaced by a new favorite—Abigail—and married off by her father to a man named Palti (1 Sam 25.44). She is no longer referred to as “Michal, David's wife”; she is again called “the daughter of Saul.” But never just Michal. Given and taken, taken and given, Michal is just property exchanging hands, abandoned by one man and given to another.

In the meantime, after Saul's death, David begins to gain power. There is a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David, and David grows stronger and stronger while the house of Saul grows weaker (2 Sam 3.1). When David finally unites the two kingdoms, he sends orders for Michal to be taken from Palti and returned to himself. Poor Palti follows behind her, weeping the whole way. But the reunion between Michal and David is conspicuously absent from the story. Is she excited to see him again, or bitter at the wasted years? Does she see him at all, or is she just ushered unceremoniously into his harem, still waiting? It's a big empty question mark, but Michal's last chapter is not the “happily ever after” for which we might hope.

After David has united the two kingdoms and conquered the city of Jerusalem, making it his capital, he brings the ark of the covenant up to Jerusalem as a tangible reminder of God's presence (2 Sam 6.12–23). As the ark is being carried into Jerusalem, David is dancing and leaping and celebrating wildly in the crowd, wearing only a linen ephod . . . which didn't leave much to the imagination. And while all this is going on, Michal is watching from an upstairs window, disgusted by David's immodest display, and she despises the man she once loved. It seems like years of disappointment and heartbreak and loss have made her bitter and cynical. She is no longer the young idealistic princess who dreamed of the dashing young warrior.

When David comes back to the house, Michal comes out to meet him. She may not have much choice in what happens to her but, oh, she can still hold her own in a battle of wills. Her greeting to David drips with sarcasm and scorn: “Well, how the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in front of the slave girls of his servants, as any vulgar fellow would!” Her spite betrays her pain. She had given herself to him, loved him, and saved his life at her own risk. He had married her, discarded her, then taken her away from a husband who loved her. And now, not only does she have to share him with his other wives, but he has flaunted to the slaves of slaves—the lowest of the low—what he has not given to his queen. Maybe her pain speaks louder here than her love, but the two are close companions, making it even more cringeworthy when David responds with equal spite: “I was dancing before the Lord, who chose me instead of your father to be king. And I'll be even more undignified than this, and those slave girls will hold me in high honor.” In essence, “If you don't like me dancing half-naked, I'll dance all naked, and all the women are gonna love it, and may I remind you that God likes my family better than yours.” Michal isn't even given the opportunity to respond. Whether she was speechless, or removed from David's presence, or whether her words just aren't recorded, we never hear from Michal again.

Her story ends with just one more painful sentence: “And Michal, daughter of Saul, had no children to the day of her death.” Some people read this as a divine judgment on Michal, reading into the narrative that Michal was seriously in the wrong here and God punished her with barrenness. But the text doesn't suggest anything like that. The narrator adds no commentary on her actions, gives no reason for her barrenness. It could be a coincidence, but from what we know of the story, it's also very possible that David refused to give her children—either out of spite after she tried to publicly shame him, or because any child of theirs would be a descendant of Saul and have a possible claim to the throne. Whether her barrenness was coincidental or had

the added disgrace of being intentional, we can guess that the rest of Michal's life was far from fulfilling. And while David's story continues, this is the end of Michal's—the woman who loved and was left, who spoke out and was silenced.

This story is commonly interpreted in David's favor, as a model for total self-abandonment in worship. There's even a camp song about rejoicing in being undignified, and a poem that warns would-be worshippers that "Michal still lurks in the pews,"¹ showing that the mainstream interpretation puts Michal in the wrong as the legalistic passion police. As a woman reading her story, I tend to side with Michal, whose life has been far from happy and who has just been spurned and disgraced by the man she once loved. But it may be fairer still to the characters and more true to the text to say that this story is complicated, and real life is complicated, and that in the end it's not so much about who's right and who's wrong as it is about where God is working in all of this—how God is redeeming the messy and the broken even when we can't tell right from wrong, and even when we're a little of both.

But I still find it so unsatisfying to wrestle with all these loose ends. I'm left with a lot of burning questions about Michal's story. Did she hear about David's battles and wonder why he never came back for her? Whatever happened to Palti, the guy who adored her? Why doesn't she have children? She risked her life for David, but for what? So he could leave her? Does David ever feel remorse for the pain he has caused her? And maybe the most poignant question, the one that resonates with us the most, the one that we've probably asked ourselves before: What was the point of all this?

Maybe the messy bits and pieces of Michal's story remind us of our own. Often instead of feeling like we're in control, we see our lives swept along by a current that we just can't fight. Or we give sacrificially of ourselves only to go unnoticed or unappreciated, or to be rewarded with more hardship. Maybe there are loose ends in our stories that can't be woven in to make a tidy ending. We want closure or resolution, which is something good made-up stories always have and something real-life stories rarely have. And even more than closure, we need to know the point of it all. We desperately need for God to make meaning of our meaninglessness and bring closure to what is unfulfilled and unhealed in us. We desperately need to be reminded of the story that completes our own.

We are all part of a story larger than ourselves. It began long before us, and it will continue long after us. This is why we still tell the creation story; why we still find hope in the story of the Exodus; why we tell the stories of saints and heroes of the faith along the journey; why we still recount the saving acts of God; even why we still tell this story of Michal and David. If this were just the story of Michal, it would be a pretty terrible story with a pretty depressing ending. But it's about so much more. It's a story of the people of God, and every one of those stories is about how much God's people need saving. The hero of the story isn't David or Michal. The hero of the story is God, who alone can slay the dragon, right the wrongs, and rescue both princess and prince. There isn't a perfect climax and resolution in the story of Princess Michal, because it isn't the whole story. Your story may not seem complete by itself—it may have crooked edges and bumps, but that's because it's only one puzzle piece in a grander narrative. The redemption we long for isn't just closure to your story or mine; it's closure to THE story, the whole great drama of creation and fall and exodus and covenant and incarnation and crucifixion and resurrection in which you and I play a small part. And each of our stories is caught up and redeemed in the saving story of God.

Because of that, there's a little more to say about Michal. First, she didn't let herself become a victim of her circumstances. It's true that there were many things she had no control over, but she was never passive. She asserted herself, saved lives, challenged power, and loved fiercely and unashamedly, making the most of what she had been given. And second, none of Michal's story was wasted. In the midst of it all, God was working.

She had no children of her own, so we often miss the significance of her role. But in saving David's life she preserved his line, and in preserving the line of David, Michal was preparing the way for the one who was the true protagonist. The one who would see and hear and affirm the value of women like her. The one who, like Michal, would one day be passed back and forth between rulers in their political games. The one who, like

1. David Steele, "David Danced—Michal Watched," *Theology Today* 38 (1981): 357-359.

her, would be publicly scorned and humiliated. The one who was betrayed and abandoned by those he loved. The one of whom Isaiah prophesied, “Who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the earth.” The one who would understand the pain in every movement of her story. The one would make meaning of her life, and not just bring closure to her story, but open it again, for there are more pages to be written. Michal, along with Rahab and Ruth and so many other women of faith, paved the way for Christ.

In her lifetime, Michal never saw meaning or closure or results. Yet that places her within a great company, a great cloud of witnesses, of those who lived and died without seeing. The author of Hebrews writes of heroes of the faith and martyrs of the church, “They were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. . . . None of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Heb 11.13, 39–40).

There are times when our lives feel like Michal’s. Things didn’t work out the way we expected or hoped. We didn’t get our happily ever after. Like her, sometimes we have questions that need answers, relationships or lost opportunities that never find closure, pain that needs healing. But it’s these unfinished stories that show us how badly we need a better one—one that can make meaning of our lives. And as Christians, the story we hold onto is the story of God. The story that God is at work redeeming the world. That God is making all things new. That there’s a better way to live than striving for power and seeking revenge and being held captive by fear. And that the better way is love.

We know the ending to this story, from Revelation 21–22. And it paints this beautiful picture of the kingdom of God that sounds like the ending of a fairy tale. John describes his vision with imagery of the church as a rags-to-riches bride and Christ as the king who comes back to restore peace to a war-torn land, with the city his bride has loved and wept for being made beautiful again beyond her wildest dreams: walls made of precious stones, and gates made of pearl, and the sidewalks and streets made of pure gold, and a river in the middle of the city from which everyone can drink, and no one will be turned away. And the king issues an edict that the gates will never be shut, because there will be no more war. He finds his princess and changes her rags to a robe of white. With love in his eyes, he wipes away the last of her tears and tells her to take heart, because all of the pain and brokenness has been done away with. I can picture Michal there, and David, and Saul and Jonathan, and Palti, weeping at the things that have been, and then weeping tears of joy because it’s all been made right, because they—and the stories they’ve lived—are finally heard and understood, fully known and fully loved. And there’s no more division between the kingdoms, no more jealousy and revenge, and their lives are being knit back together, old wounds being healed, as they see how God’s story unfolds. And maybe in the end, Michal is the one who is dancing.

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