

**HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN
IN ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE***

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Stanford Memorial Church
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There's a lot of falling referenced in the gospel reading from the lectionary for todayⁱ and in the reading from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible.ⁱⁱ A woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years falls down before Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ King Saul has fallen, slain on the battlefield. His son Jonathan has fallen slain nearby, after they've battled the Philistines together. And three times in one of the Bible's earliest poems, likely originally intoned by King David,^{iv} we hear the phrase, "How the mighty have fallen!"^v

This saying has worked its way into common parlance now, often used when politicians or business leaders fall from grace.^{vi} Business author, Jim Collins, who wrote a recent book with this title, explains that corporate leaders' downfall is often related to classical vices like pride and covetousness (also called arrogance and greed), as well as to simple denial of risk and peril.^{vii} I'd like to explore with you today the biblical meaning of the phrase "How the mighty have fallen," by reference not only to our lectionary texts but also to a novel by Nigerian Christian author, Chinua Achebe, who South African author Nadine Gordimer has described as "the father of modern African literature," starting with his best-selling *Things Fall Apart*.^{viii} His second book, *No Longer at Ease*, which I'll be discussing, tells the fictional story of how a young man of great promise, European-educated and dedicated to a new Nigeria just before its independence in 1960, ends up falling from grace and being convicted of bribery. I hope this analysis will be helpful to each of you here in the pews today, to accomplished Stanford faculty and staff, and to our students, all of great promise, as they contemplate the development of their careers.

Let's start with King Saul. His successor, King David, describes him as beloved and lovely, swifter than an eagle and stronger than a lion.^{ix} In the ninth chapter of First Samuel, he's portrayed as tall, handsome, earnest, and eminently capable of leading Israel. He proves very effective for his people as their commander on the battlefield.^x However, he soon gets himself in cultic trouble with the prophet Samuel, who has anointed him, because he offers a burnt offering to God before a battle when Samuel doesn't arrive on time to do the ritual,^{xi} and because, after another battle, he spares the best of his enemy's cattle, sheep and lambs for the Israelites, when Samuel had commanded him, in the name of God, to "Attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."^{xii} We might now commend King Saul for being effectively pragmatic in both cases, but the prophet Samuel turns on him: "Now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."^{xiii} Then, Samuel, out of the sight of Saul, anoints the young David as the future king.

Later, David is brought to King Saul to play the lyre for him when he's feeling depressed at night.^{xiv} We're told that, "Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor bearer."^{xv} The youthful David then defeats Goliath, and women begin singing in joy, "Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands."^{xvi} Saul is overcome with envy and begins developing schemes to kill David. Much of the last half of the book of First Samuel recounts King Saul's jealous efforts to eliminate his rival, often by nefarious means like trying to spear him when he's playing the lyre, offering his daughter to him in marriage if he kills a hundred Philistines (hoping David will be killed by the Philistines instead), sending servants and messengers to take him, trying to hunt him down as he flees into the wilderness, and killing priests who are protecting

David. So, by the time he falls to the Philistines on the battlefield, King Saul has already fallen through defects of his own character, primarily what would later be called deadly sins of pride, envy, and covetousness.^{xvii} Even with his own life having been at risk from Saul, however, King David sees enough of his good qualities of character that he's able to intone that beautiful lament of how the mighty one who has fallen was beloved and lovely.

The young man in Achebe's novel,^{xviii} *Obi Okonkwo*, brings these issues of mixed vices and virtues of character closer to hand -- as a modern exchange student in England who returns to his native Nigeria with a farsighted vision of his country's future as an independent nation. His primary concern is the rampant corruption in his society from bribery, which he found occurring at all levels from a policeman on the beat to people at the top of government.

Obi's village of Umuofia had raised money locally to provide him a loan to go to England, and the loan was to be repaid within four years of his return. But then Obi had trouble making ends meet on his salary in the civil service with the Scholarship Board, given various obligations he'd taken on besides loan repayments: paying for his younger brother's elementary school education, helping his elderly parents with a monthly allowance and medical expenses, and maintaining his car payments and rent. Obi had a brilliant career as a student with the top exam score in his province at the end of elementary school; he also passed the Cambridge School Certificate with distinction in all eight subjects at the end of secondary school. After four years at university in the United Kingdom, he returned to work in the capital, Lagos, where "There were many things he could no longer recognize, and others -- like the slums of Lagos -- which he was seeing for the first time."^{xix} He also began an ongoing argument with a friend, Christopher, who had graduated from the London School of Economics and thought that bribery served more of a positive facilitating purpose and was much harder to root out than Obi believed.

Obi began to learn that people who wanted government scholarships for themselves or for their relatives to study abroad would try to bribe him as the Secretary to the Scholarship Board – usually with money, but sometimes female students would offer themselves to him sexually. As Obi turned down bribes he felt like a tiger or a great warrior, triumphant in battle. And he thought he was building the future of his country, since it was his “theory that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men [and women] from the universities.”^{xx} But his friend Christopher called him an ass, claiming that “If a girl offers to sleep with you, that is not bribery.” Speaking of a particular girl Obi had turned down, Christopher argued, “This girl was appearing before the board, anyway... And how do you know she did not go to bed with the board members?” Obi answered, “She probably did.” Christopher asked, “Well, then, what good have you done her?” Obi admitted, “Very little, but perhaps she will remember that there was one man at least who did not take advantage of his position.” Christopher’s retort was “She probably thinks you are impotent.”^{xxi}

Late in the story, Obi realizes that he has a problem with pride: by not accepting an offered extension on his loan and by living beyond his means because it seemed necessary given his position as an educated civil service officer. But after losing his beloved girlfriend, he allows himself to have sex with a scholarship candidate who was already on the scholarship short list. He rationalized, with the help of Christopher’s reasoning, that this was neither bribery nor using another person sexually. He begins accepting some money from applicants too, but only those who already possessed “the minimum educational and other requirements. On that he was unshakeable.”^{xxii} He was able to pay off some of his debts and get his financial life back on track. But then one day someone brought him a bribe of twenty pounds. “As the man left, Obi realized that he could stand it no more. People say that one gets used to these things, but he had not found

it like that at all... The money lay on the table...He just sat looking at it, paralyzed by his thoughts.”

Just then there was a knock at the door, and the police who had set up this sting found him with the marked bills. He was arrested, imprisoned, tried, and convicted of bribery. The text states, “Everybody wondered why.”^{xxiii} The judge stated at trial, “I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this.”^{xxiv} Indeed, how? How the mighty have fallen.

The line for many of us between our virtues and our vices is too close for comfort. That’s why we have churches (and synagogues and mosques and temples and shrines) to help us build moral courage. That’s why we have to be particularly vigilant about sins like pride and envy. For once we go over the edge with the little things and start down the slippery ethical slope, our pace can accelerate beyond reversal. How the mighty have fallen, whether they be King Saul, or young hopeful Obi Okonkwo, or even the disciples of Jesus.

Going back to our gospel reading from Mark, remember that Jesus’s disciples began giving him grief when the hemorrhaging woman touched his cloak and Jesus turned around in the crowd asking, “Who touched me?” His disciples then challenged him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”^{xxv} At another point in the gospels, the disciples are indignant with him when a woman anoints Jesus’ head with expensive oil, saying it’s a waste of money that could have been given to the poor.^{xxvi} Is this envy? Three gospels report multiple occasions when the disciples argue among themselves about which one of them is the greatest. Pride and envy. There’s a time when the disciples complain about Jesus’ saying in a synagogue that “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”^{xxvii} The disciples protest, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”^{xxviii} Jesus then notes that

one of them is going to betray him. And of course Judas does, while others like Peter deny him or just start hightailing it out of Jerusalem after his crucifixion. How the mighty have fallen, even if they are disciples of Christ.

So, we need to be especially cautious when pride, envy, and covetousness may be at work in us. No matter how mighty we may have been, or not, “Pride goeth before...a fall,”^{xxxix} as we’re told in the book of Proverbs. And then there’s envy and covetousness. “Above the noise of selfish strife, O Christ, we hear your voice of grace,” as we will sing in our next hymn.^{xxx} “Till all shall learn compassion’s might, and follow where your feet have trod.”^{xxxi} Amen.

BENEDICTION (from founder of Taoism, Lao-Tse)

If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart. Amen.

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 5:25-34.

ⁱⁱ 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 5:33.

^{iv} Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 436.

^v 2 Samuel 1:19,25,27.

^{vi} See, for example, Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Have Fallen* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) and Scared Monkeys, "How the Mighty Have Fallen: John Edwards..." (2012), <http://scaredmonkeys.com/2012/04/17/my-how-the-mighty-have-fallen-john-edwards>

^{vii} Ray Williams, "The Reasons for the Decline of Corporate America," *Wired for Success* (June 12, 2009), <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/200906/how-the-mighty-have-fallen-the-decline-corporate-america>

^{viii} Nadine Gordimer, as quoted in "Chinua Achebe wins 2007 Man Booker International Prize," <http://www.themanbookerprize.com/news/release/1059>

^{ix} 2 Samuel 1:23.

^x Wayne A. Meeks (ed.), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 416.

^{xi} 1 Samuel 13:8-14.

^{xii} 1 Samuel 15:3.

^{xiii} 1 Samuel 13:14; See also 1 Samuel 15:10-11.

^{xiv} 1 Samuel 16:14-23.

^{xv} 1 Samuel 16:21.

^{xvi} 1 Samuel 18: 7.

^{xvii} *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), Vol. II, p. 1046.

^{xviii} Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).

^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 14.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 44.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 193.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 194.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 2.

^{xxv} Mark 5:31.

^{xxvi} Mark 14:3-9.

^{xxvii} John 6:56.

^{xxviii} John 6:60.

^{xxix} Proverbs 16:18.

^{xxx} Frank Mason North, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life" (1903).

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*