



Please turn to 1 Samuel 31. The title of today's sermon is ***The Fall of King Saul***. In contrast to a song celebrating "Living Water," 1 Samuel 31 is a chapter saturated with death and disgrace. I found myself misty-eyed as I studied this sad portion of Scripture. I'm sure you didn't come to church to hear a depressing sermon. I can assure you it's not that, but it is a sobering one. The author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time." Since everything in Scripture is written for our instruction, my hope is that we'll leave here wiser than when we walked in. The Holy Spirit can make that happen through our study of 1 Samuel 31.

It's not a long chapter, just 13 verses, so I'll read the narrative all the way through. Then we'll walk through it a second time, bit by bit, to see what lessons the Lord has for us.

<sup>1</sup> Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. <sup>2</sup> And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. <sup>3</sup> The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. <sup>4</sup> Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and mistreat me." But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. <sup>5</sup> And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. <sup>6</sup> Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. <sup>7</sup> And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley and those beyond the Jordan saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned their cities and fled. And the Philistines came and lived in them. <sup>8</sup> The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. <sup>9</sup> So they cut off his head and stripped off his armor and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. <sup>10</sup> They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. <sup>11</sup> But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, <sup>12</sup> all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. <sup>13</sup> And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

- 1 Samuel 31:1-13

Not exactly a pick-me-up kind of passage, is it? The narrator himself doesn't seem too excited to tell us what happened either. After he tells us about Saul's visit to the medium

at En-dor the night before the battle in chapter 28, where the spirit of Samuel confirms the Lord's judgment on Saul and declares that Saul will die in battle the very next day, we would expect him to go on to describe the battle. But he doesn't. Instead, the narrator pushes rewind and shifts our attention to what's happening with David. In chapter 29, the Lord gets David and his men out of a jam so that they don't have to go into battle against their fellow Israelites with the Philistine forces. Then in chapter 30, David and his men return to Ziklag, where they've been living with their families for the last sixteen months, only to discover that their homes have been burned to the ground and their wives and children have been taken captive by Amalekite raiders. David and his men hit rock bottom, but David strengthens himself in the Lord his God, who tells David to pursue the Amalekites and assures him that he and his men will overtake them and rescue their families. That's exactly what happens. David and his men rescue their families and recover all that had been lost and then some.

After taking two chapters – 42 verses – to describe what's been happening with David, the narrator reluctantly returns to Gilboa and sums up the grim battle in just 13 verses. Only a few details are shared. It's a sad, dark, tragic story that culminates in a hard truth: *the king is dead*. And what an ignoble death it was. So different from how his reign began.

### **1. Saul had a royal beginning.**

Saul had reigned over Israel forty years. He had started off so well, as we were reminded in the Scripture reading from 1 Samuel chapters 10 and 11 earlier in our worship service. When the prophet Samuel presented Saul to the people, he stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Samuel said, "Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the people." And all the people shouted, "Long live the king!"

As soon as Saul became king, the Ammonites tested his mettle by besieging the city of Jabesh-Gilead. But the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul, who summoned 300,000 soldiers who came out as one man. Under Saul's leadership, the Israeli troops arrived before dawn, "launched a surprise attack against the Ammonites and slaughtered them the whole morning. The remnant of their army was so badly scattered that no two of them were left together" (1 Sam. 11:11 NLT). After this overwhelming victory, the people of Israel reaffirmed Saul's kingship with a public coronation ceremony. Yes, he most certainly had a *royal beginning*.

### **2. Saul had a rebellious bent.**

Saul's coronation is in chapter 11. Samuel's farewell address is in chapter 12. And during that address, Samuel explicitly stated to all Israel,

If you will fear the Lord and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king.

- 1 Samuel 12:14-15

Yet in the very next chapter Saul disobeys the Lord. Then in the very next chapter he makes a foolish vow that almost gets his son Jonathan killed. Then in the next chapter Saul disobeys God again. So, Saul's initial act of disobedience was followed by many others, thereby establishing a pattern of willful rebellion against the Lord.

Saul persistently rejected the Lord's authority as Israel's supreme King, which resulted in God's tearing the kingdom away from Saul and giving it to David, a man after God's own heart. Instead of accepting the consequences of his sin, Saul continued to buck against God by trying to kill David. On the couple of occasions when David spared Saul's life and confronted him about his unjust treatment of David and Saul seemed to be sorry, even then his professed repentance didn't last. Saul would soon return to his old ways of self-seeking, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency.

Instead of demonstrating "godly grief that produces repentance that leads to salvation," Saul exhibited what Scripture calls a "worldly grief [that] produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10). Despite his *royal beginning*, Saul had a *rebellious bent* that led to a *ruinous battle*, resulting in his death.

### **3. Saul died in a *ruinous battle*.**

We have already read the account of this battle in 1 Samuel 31, but I want to go through this chapter a second time to see its significance for our lives. For many people today, like Saul, have a rebellious bent. They use the blessings God has given them to serve themselves, and they deny God's rightful reign over their lives. Scripture says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12 CSB). Three thousand years later, Saul stands out as a tragic example of this truth. If there is one lesson we can learn from Saul's life, it is this:

***Disobedience leads to destruction,  
so trust and obey God instead.***

As we've already noted, the narrator hasn't been in any hurry to get back to Gilboa, but upon returning to the battle scene, the first thing he reports is the overwhelming *defeat*.

#### **Defeat (v. 1)**

"Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel "fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa" (v. 1). They "fled" and they "fell."



Here you can see the slopes of Mount Gilboa descending sharply to the Jezreel Valley below. This picture was taken from an observation point known as Mount Shaul (Saul). Imagine dead bodies strewn everywhere on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. It would have been a heart-wrenching sight – one of the last images Saul beheld before dying.

### **Death (vv. 2-6)**

The death of Saul and his sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchi-shua, are described in verses 2-6. The narrative indicates that Saul's sons were with him when the Philistines overcame them. The fact that Saul's sons were struck down whereas Saul was wounded by the archers seems to suggest that Saul's sons did their best to stave off the enemy in a desperate attempt to protect their father, who presumably is a little further up the slope.

So, Saul most likely beheld not only the dead bodies of Israelite soldiers down the slopes but also the tragic deaths of his own sons even as he became badly wounded by the archers.

We'll come back to Saul in a moment, but first we should pay our respects to Jonathan. Good, faithful, courageous Jonathan. He is the first reported casualty. And what can we say about his character? He never ascended the throne, but he had the heart of a king. Dale Davis in his commentary eulogizes Jonathan, saying,

He remained a true friend to David and a faithful son of Saul. He surrendered his kingship to David (18:1-4); he sacrificed his life for Saul. In this hopeless fiasco Jonathan was nowhere else but in the place Yahweh had assigned to him – at the side of his father. ... Maybe that is not tragic at all. What is tragic about remaining faithfully in the calling God has assigned us? Was it tragic when Jonathan laid aside a kingdom he could not have to enter a kingdom he could not lose?<sup>1</sup>

That rhetorical question reminds me of the missionary-martyr Jim Elliot, who famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Jim Elliot, like Jonathan, saw the emptiness of everything this world offers. He understood the brevity of life and the futility of chasing after and trying to hold on to things that won't last. So he chose to make his life count for Christ and his kingdom – the true treasures that will be enjoyed forever. What about you? Are you a man or woman after God's own heart, or are you living for yourself, like Saul? That's the real tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*. Focus on the Bible Commentary Series (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000, reprinted 2008), p. 326.

Saul died, just like God said he would. After being badly wounded by the archers, Saul tells his armor-bearer to draw his sword and put Saul out of his misery before the enemy comes and makes a game out of killing him. But his armor-bearer, like David before him, would not kill the Lord's anointed. "Since Saul is determined to die on his own terms, he has no alternative but to take his own sword and fall on it."<sup>2</sup>

As tragic as Saul's death is, we can be comforted to know that in the midst of tragedy, God's word remains true. Saul's death is not outside of God's purpose but occurs within the parameters that God himself has pronounced. If God's word of judgment is true, then so are his promises. David clearly saw his deliverance and Saul's death as a fulfillment of God's word. We know this because Psalm 18 is introduced as "A Psalm of David, the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." In verse 30 of this psalm, David says,

This God – his way is perfect;  
the word of the Lord proves true;  
he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.  
- Psalm 18:30

Saul fell on his sword, but God's word will never fall.<sup>3</sup> In both good times and bad, we can always count on God to be true to his word.

Ironically, Saul had been introduced as the man who would "deliver [God's] people from the hand of the Philistines" (9:16), but now Saul dies at the hands of the Philistines. His death leads to *displacement*.

### **Displacement (v. 7)**

"When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them" (1 Sam. 31:7 NIV).

Throughout this chapter the repetition of various words emphasize what a devastating defeat and loss that Israel suffered at the hand of the Philistines. The word "fled" appears three times, the words "fall" or "fallen" four times, the words "dead" or "died" four times. The repeated use of these words plus other words like "pierce" and "stripped" and "slain" tell the macabre tale of this ruinous battle. It was a day of infamy in Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood in *1, 2 Samuel*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 3, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 798. Youngblood goes on to note, "Just as Eli, a failed priest for forty years, died by falling off 'his' (lit., 'the') chair (4:18), so also Saul, a hapless king for forty years (Acts 13:21), dies by fall on 'his' (lit., 'the') sword."

<sup>3</sup> Considering that it was the prophet Samuel who pronounced God's judgment on Saul as well as God's plans for David, we should note the testimony of Scripture recorded in 1 Samuel 3:19-20, which says, "And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD."

**Disgrace**  
**(vv. 8-10)**

<sup>8</sup> The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. <sup>9</sup> So they cut off his head and stripped off his armor and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. <sup>10</sup> They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

- 1 Samuel 31:8-10

A few years ago, when I was in Israel, my son Matthew and I walked through the ruins of Beth-shan. First Chronicles 10:10 says, “they put his armor in the temple of their gods and fastened his head in the temple of Dagon.” With respect to the archaeological excavations at Beth-shan, Level V consists of remains from around the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C., There two temples have been uncovered. The field director of the excavations from 1925-1928 “has suggested that these are the temples of Dagon and Ashteroth in which Saul’s head and armour were displayed by the Philistines.”<sup>4</sup>

Just as David had cut off the head of the Philistines’ champion (1 Sam. 17:51), so now the Philistines cut off the head of Israel’s king (31:9). Just as the Israelites sang to celebrate David’s victory, now the Philistines “sent messengers throughout the land ... to carry the good news” of their victory to the temples of their pagan gods. First Chronicles 10:9 also affirms that the Philistines sent messengers throughout the land “to carry the good news” – the gospel – “to their idols and to the people.” They probably hosted Philistine “revival meetings” with multiple nights of “praise and worship” to celebrate their victory.

Israel’s defeat was devastating. But “worse than Israel’s defeat is Yahweh’s disgrace.”<sup>5</sup> That sounds right, but do we really believe it? Do we feel the weight of it with respect to the spiritual battles that we face? Isn’t God’s reputation to be our first priority? Isn’t that how Jesus taught us to pray? “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.” God, may your name be worshiped, honored, adored, revered, exalted. God’s name, his honor, must always be at the top of our agenda in our hearts, in our homes, in our church – until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). God’s reputation is at stake in your life, in my life, in our lives as his people.

As I thought about Saul’s death and the desecration of his body, it occurred to me that King Saul died to avoid disgrace, but King Jesus died to absorb disgrace – our disgrace.

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood;  
Sealed my pardon with His blood;  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

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<sup>4</sup> “Bethshean, Bethshan,” NBD, 2d ed. [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982], p. 36. Cited by Youngblood, *EBC*, 800.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, 326.

The cruel irony of the cross is that the only way Jesus could save others was by not saving himself. Yet the author Hebrews tells us that Jesus, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of God (Heb. 12:2). The joy Jesus saw was the satisfaction of God's justice, the salvation of his people, the celebration that would last for all eternity in the New Heaven and New Earth, where there will be no more sin, death, sickness, sorrow, crying or pain. John Piper says this means that Jesus essentially said,

*Listen to me, Shame, do you see that joy in front of me? Compared to that, you are less than nothing. You are not worth comparing to that! I despise you. ... I won't even look at you. I have a joy set before me. Why would I look at you? You are ugly and despicable. And you are almost finished. ... Your filthy hands fulfill holy prophecy. Farwell, Shame. It is finished.<sup>6</sup>*

And you'll recall that after Jesus died, two men who had come to believe in him – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – took the body of Jesus, wrapped it in linen with spices, and laid it in the tomb. At significant risk to themselves, they showed their loyalty to Jesus by giving him a proper burial. That's what the men of Jabesh-Gilead did for Saul.

### **Derring-Do (vv. 11-13)**

Their heroic, daring action is described in verses 11-13:

<sup>11</sup> But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, <sup>12</sup> all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. <sup>13</sup> And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

- 1 Samuel 31:11-13

This heroic deed is the one glimmer of light in an otherwise dismal chapter. These men had not forgotten how Saul had rescued their city at the start of his reign, which we read about earlier in chapter 11. Saul had traveled all night to rescue Jabesh-Gilead from the Ammonites. Now the men of Jabesh-Gilead traveled all night to "rescue" the bodies of Saul and his sons from the Philistines. This required great stamina, because Jabesh-Gilead was ten miles southeast of Beth-shan and on the other side of the Jordan River.

They brought the bodies to Jabesh and burned them there. The Jews typically did not burn the bodies of the deceased, but the men of Jabesh made an exception – probably to hide the tremendous mistreatment the bodies had suffered and also to prevent the Philistines from taking them again. "It was a debt of gratitude. ... Love offers the kindness it can – it doesn't forget the King even in death."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Piper, "What Does It Mean for Jesus to Despise Shame?" *Desiring God*, 29 March 2013 [online]. Retrieved on 28 January 2023 from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-it-mean-for-jesus-to-despise-shame>; Internet.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, 329.

If they showed such love and gratitude for Saul, how much more should we show our love for Jesus, the holy Son of God – our righteous, risen and reigning King?

*But drops of grief can ne'er repay  
The debt of love I owe.  
Here Lord, I give myself away –  
'Tis all that I can do.*