

SAUL'S TRAGIC END

1 Samuel 31:1-13

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Now the Philistines fought against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. (1 Sam. 31:1-2).

In every life, a primary theme can be discerned. The life of my father, a thirty-year career Army officer, was dominated by his commitment to duty. There were, of course, many other things that could be said of him, but the primary factor in his decisions was always his sense of duty. For other men, the dominant theme is personal ambition, so that the deciding factor in their actions is what will best advance their own interests. In the lives of many corporate titans, it seems that a hunger for wealth, or power, or achievement dominate, and, according to the tabloid covers, the main theme in the lives of movies stars and singers is a craving for attention and pleasure. Christians are able to lead lives dominated by themes like righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17), or faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:12). The life of David was dominated by faith, Paul's by a gospel passion, and Peter's by a love for Jesus Christ.

As we come to the end of the Bible's account of Israel's king Saul, and to the end of Saul's life, it is not hard to see that the dominant theme of his life was his chronic impenitence. The prophet Isaiah lists repentance coupled with faith as the key to receiving God's blessing: "let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7). Saul's life, however, was a bitter record of God's way forsaken and

God's pardon forfeited by his refusal to repent. Alexander Maclaren writes of Saul: "there is no sign that he ever sought to cultivate his moral character . . . , and a long course of indulgence in self-will developed cruelty, gloomy suspicion, and passionate anger, and left him the victim and slave of his own causeless hate."¹ There could only be one end for a life like Saul's, an end as tragic as it is unnecessary for those who have witnessed the grace and power of God.

THE END FOR SAUL

The writer of Hebrews has been working himself up to tell the story of Saul's final defeat since chapter 28. However expected it may be, the rout of Israel's army at Mount Gilboa was a national disaster of great proportions, rivaling (and largely mirroring) the terrible loss in the battle of Ebenezer two generations earlier (1 Sam. 4). Israel's armed might was broken, her leadership was slain, her land occupied, and her religion disgraced. Having told us of the Philistine invasion, along with God's promised judgment on Saul in this battle, the writer of 1 Samuel reverts to the story of David in chapters 29 and 30 before returning to Saul's tragic end in chapter 31. David's victory over the Amalekites in the south and Saul's defeat to the Philistines in the north took place virtually simultaneously, and we are intended to note the contrasts between them.

Once the writer focuses back on Saul's defeat, there is little for him to tell. Maneuvering north from their base at Aphek, the Philistines then advanced southeast along the plain of the Valley of Jezreel, their chariots ranging freely on the level ground of this traditional invasion route. According to verse 1, the Israelites "fled before the Philistines," and then sought to make a stand on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. There, the Philistine archers entered the fray and many of the Israelites "fell slain" (1 Sam. 31:1). As the Israelites fell back, the retreat became a rout and their army was broken.

Once God had removed his aid from Saul, this was an inevitable end, given the decay of his regime and the might of the Philistines. This was the end that would have come to Saul many times in the past if God had not intervened. Now that God had decreed the time for

¹ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions on the Whole Bible*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1982), 2:403.

Saul's judgment, spoken the previous night by the disturbed soul of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 28:19), and since his anointed successor David was far removed from the battlefield, there was nothing to stop the Philistines from sweeping over Saul's army. It was time for "Ichabod" to be pronounced over Saul's reign, since the glory of the Lord had long since departed (see 1 Sam. 4:21-22).

Most tragic is the fact that Saul did not die alone in this battle, for "the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul" (1 Sam. 31:2). This proves that the Israelite leaders did not shrink from the fight. We can especially imagine Jonathan, the God-honoring hero of so many battles, rallying Saul's troops and holding the line until finally he was felled by a Philistine arrow or sword. Jonathan's eulogy will be sung by David in the next chapter, but Dale Ralph Davis offers a brief obituary: "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."²

The theme of Jonathan's life was faithfulness, and he shows us that a worthy life does not depend on circumstances. He lived in most dangerous times and suffered from a most thankless obligation to his mad father. Through it all Jonathan's faithfulness to God, to his friends, and to his father allowed him to persevere with integrity, and to smell the roses of his life despite the many thorns. We tend to think that his death, along with his lesser-known brothers, was the great tragedy of this battle, but Davis objects. "What is tragic," he asks, "about remaining faithfully in the calling God has assigned us?"³ In the light of eternity, Jonathan's death was not so much tragic as glorious; through his faith in the Lord, Jonathan escaped from tragedy to enter into glory forever.

The account of Israel's defeat involves not only an inevitable and a tragic end, it climaxes with the bitter end for Saul: "The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly

² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 262.

³ *Ibid.*

wounded by the archers” (1 Sam. 31:3). At this point, Saul realized that the end had indeed come. His sons were fallen and his army scattered. Saul was wounded as the Philistines drew near. He therefore turned to his armor-bearer and gave a final royal command: “Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and mistreat me” (1 Sam. 31:4). Saul’s concern about a drawn-out, tortuous and disgraceful death was well-founded, as this was a common practice among victorious pagans like the Philistines. His armor-bearer, however, refused to slay the king, “for he feared greatly,” that is, like David he feared God and refused to slay the Lord’s anointed. “Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it,” after which his armor-bearer fell on his sword “and died with him” (1 Sam. 31:5).

Saul’s suicide raises some questions. Most commentators consider it a simple act of self-murder. Herman Hoeksema states that “the suicide is not a brave man, but a wicked coward,” who removes himself from this life “to open his eyes in hell.”⁴ We must soften this stance in the case of the mentally ill or those so seriously depressed that their reasoning is impaired, in which case something other than true suicide may have occurred. There are examples of believing Christians who struggled with depression and wrestled with urges to take their own lives, such as the great hymnist William Cowper, who was kept from this dreadful end by the ministry of his close friend, John Newton.

Saul’s suicide, however, was not the result of an irrational impulse but was a calculated decision. From a worldly perspective it was an understandable choice: humanly speaking, Saul had no chance of survival and the prospect of torture was real. This assumes that Saul had no other perspective; his suicide is thus the last nail in the coffin of the faith he once professed. Maclaren comments, “If Saul had had any faith in God, any submission, any repentance, he could not have finished a life of rebellion by a self-inflicted death, which was itself the very desperation of rebellion.”⁵

⁴ Cited by Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 273.

⁵ Maclaren, *Expositions on the Whole Bible*, 2:402.

Perhaps more troubling than what Saul *did* in that hour of despair is what Saul *did not do*. There is no cry to God for help. There is no appeal to heaven for mercy. We read nothing along the lines of the pleas that virtually fill David's psalms. On the night, years earlier, when Saul had sent ruffians to slay David in his house, David prayed, "Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up against me; deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from bloodthirsty men" (Ps. 59:1-2). Now, with the Philistines circling in, Saul has no such prayers in his quiver. Thus he dies as he had lived, in hardened self-will and without faith in God's salvation. "All through his reign no hand had injured him but his own; and, as he lived, so he died, his own undoer and his own murderer."⁶

TRAGIC THEMES CONCLUDED

As we observe the tragic end of Saul, we can also note the calamitous end of the main themes that governed his life and times. Saul's kingship arose from Israel's demand to have "a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:20). What the Israelites saw as a practical solution to their military predicament was denounced by God as idolatry. Israel was created to be unique among the nations in that God was its sovereign. The people wanted to be led into battle by a visibly impressive king, who would "go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:21). The end result of this idolatry was the death of both the king they had desired and the army he led.

Israel's experience shows us what is always the end of idolatry. The greatest example is the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the Babylonian exile that followed. The prophet Jeremiah made clear that this calamity resulted from the peoples' persistent chasing after idols (see Jer. 2:1-13). The end was the peoples' subjection into the hands of an idol-worshipers. If Israel was determined to serve idols, the Lord gave them over to live as slaves in a land of idols.

So it was after Saul's death: "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

⁶ *ibid.*

abandoned their cities and fled. And the Philistines came and lived in them” (1 Sam. 31:7). So great was the disaster of this battle that the Israelites living in the fertile region behind Mt. Gilboa, including the cities along the Jordan River and even on the eastern side, abandoned their land and fled. Therefore the end of idolatry was the domination of their land and cities by the servants of idols.

A by-product of this disaster shows another tragic result of idolatry among God’s people: the public disgrace of the Lord’s name. The gospel of the Philistines would now be preached far and wide, declaring Dagon’s supremacy over Yahweh. Here was the greater calamity of Israel’s idolatry: the Lord’s disgrace in the lives of his people. The head and armor of the Israelite king became the emblems of the Philistines’ boasting, carrying them as “good news to the house of their idols and to the people” (1 Sam. 31:9).

This example supplies two reasons why Christians should refuse to worship and serve the idols of our day: false gods such as money, power, pride, and pleasure. The first reason is that our service to idols will conclude with the idol’s power over our lives. Those who give themselves to sin in support of their idols find that they become unable to cease the sins, their hearts having been captured and ruled by the idols they foolishly served. Such lives do not bring praise to the Lord but their Christian profession is disgraced by their bondage to sin. Better that we should adopt the attitude of Esther Edwards Burr, the daughter of Jonathan Edwards. In her grief and anxiety over the death of her husband, she wrote: “O, I am afraid I shall conduct myself so as to bring dishonour on my God and the religion I profess! No, rather let me die this moment, than be left to bring dishonour on God’s holy name.”⁷

If Israel’s idolatry led to domination and humiliation, Saul’s death shows the end that awaits every impenitent life. He began with great privileges and blessings but engaged in a self-willed disobedience to God, and when reproved Saul hardened his heart and launched himself on a downward trajectory of pride, hatred and despair. His last years were marked by his mad hatred of faithful David, his murder of God’s holy priests (22:18-19), and the quest for

⁷ Cited from Davis, *1 Samuel*, 264.

aid from a servant of the devil (28:7-8). It is not surprising that this impenitent life ended with Saul thrusting his body upon a sword. Saul had been slaying his soul every time he turned away from God's proffered mercy, so it was only fitting that his last unrepentant act was to murder himself.

Saul's example is not an isolated one. The same end is in store for all who turn from the Lord and refuse to repent. Consider the man who abandons his wife and children for a life of sensual pleasure. Or consider a child who abandons the faith of his or her parents in pursuit of worldly approval or sin. Pastors and spiritually minded friends plead the folly of this self-defeating course, but their flesh has been raised up with pride, rebellion, and desire. They will not listen and will not turn. Yet the end of their course, should they refuse to repent, can only be the same as Saul: death and damnation.

Had Saul ever truly repented we can be sure of his acceptance and blessing with God. The example of even more wicked kings who did call on the Lord and were saved proves this. "Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth!" declares the Lord (Isa. 45:22), but Saul would not turn to seek the Lord. Thus, writes MacLaren, "He who rebels against God mars his own character," a precept proved in Saul's life and death:

The miserable years of Saul, haunted and hunted as by a demon by his own indulged and swollen rebellion and unsleeping suspicion, are an example of the sorrows that ever dog sin; and, as he lies there on Gilboa, the terrible saying recurs to our memory: "He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."⁸

If the theme of Israel was idolatry and the theme of Saul's life was his refusal to repent, then the theme governing God's response was that of judgment. God had long threatened Saul with judgment, starting with his reproofs in 1 Samuel 15:23-28. Had he known Hannah's song, Saul would have taken those threats seriously. Sketching out the themes of this era of history, Hannah concluded: "The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;... The LORD will judge the end of the earth" (1 Sam. 2:10). Saul should also have profited from the

⁸ MacLaren, *Expositions*, 403.

example of Eli and his sons, whose promised death arrived exactly on God's schedule (1 Sam. 3:27-34). But Saul did not profit from the experiences of others, and the judgment threatened on the night before this battle (1 Sam. 28:19-20) came to him with terrible efficiency.

There is likewise a great judgment awaiting everyone. The Bible says "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Paul writes that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10). This judgment is promised on all sinners, and its end is coming swiftly.

Fortunately, the fulfillment of God's Word regarding Saul's judgment reminds us of the confidence we may have in the whole message of the Bible. If God's promise of judgment upon Saul was true, then God's gospel promises of eternal life to those who believe are equally true. "Israel may fall on Gilboa, Saul may fall on his sword, but the word of Yahweh will not fall."⁹ Jesus insisted, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt. 24:35). There being a certainty of judgment on those who will not turn, and also an offer of salvation for all who repent and believe, the great issue in every life is therefore how we stand towards the salvation offered to sinners in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

For all of Saul's outward adherence to Israel and his belief in God, he had never repented and turned to the Lord in a true and living faith. On Mount Gilboa, Israel's idolatry, Saul's impenitence, and God's judgment all came together in a disastrous end that could have averted if only Saul had humbled himself before the Lord, called to the Lord for salvation, and sought the grace of the Lord to turn from his rebellion and sins. Because of this single difference, Saul dies while David lives, just as Saul will spend eternity in the condemnation of hell while David dwells above in the glory of heaven. This is the decisive issue in every life: will we repent and be saved, or will we harden our hearts to God and perish.

⁹ Davis, *1 Samuel*, 262-3.

TRAGEDY COUNTERED BY GRACE

This final chapter of 1 Samuel does not really mark the end of a book in the Bible, since First and Second Samuel join together as a single, whole book. Yet the end of First Samuel does mark an important divide in the life of David and of Israel. The record of Saul's death marks an appropriate end in God's judgment, yet the book concludes with the heroic raid of the men of Jabesh-Gilead, providing a stirring reminder of the grace that provides the hope for Israel's future.

Having won the battle, the Philistines gleefully entered the nearby cities abandoned by the fleeing Israelites. So complete was their victory that the next day the bodies of the Israelite leaders still lay untended on the battlefield. Therefore, "when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa" (1 Sam. 31:8). Saul may have escaped torment alive but he could not avoid the abuse of his remains in death. "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" (1 Sam. 31:9).

After Saul's head had been removed, his body, together with his sons' remains, were "fastened... to the wall of Beth-shan," and his armor housed as a trophy "in the temple of Ashtaroath" (1 Sam. 31:10). Beth-shan was an important walled city at the junction of the Jezreel Valley and the valley of the Jordan River. Beth-shan was the easternmost of the old Canaanite cities that Israel had still failed to capture. Excavations at Beth-shan have discovered the intact remains of a temple that was probably used for the worship of Philistine gods like Dagon and Ashtaroath, and in which Saul's head and armor possibly were housed to boast of their victory over the God of Israel.¹⁰ The battle was over, the victory was won, and now all that remained was for the wicked to enjoy the spoils of the triumph of their gods.

Yet in the morning of the next, or one of the next days, the Philistines awoke to discover that there was yet hope among the beleaguered

¹⁰ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 171.

people of God. The people of Jabesh-gilead, a remaining Israelite fortress ten miles away across the Jordan, “heard what the Philistines had done to Saul,” and “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. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days” (1 Sam. 31:11-13).

Remember Jabesh-Gilead? It was the city to which Saul had boldly sent relief at the beginning of his reign, when Nahash the Ammonite had besieged the city and threatened to remove the right eye from all the men. That was forty years past, and perhaps the finest act in all of Saul’s reign. For forty years, people of Jabesh-Gilead had kept alive the memory of their debt to king Saul. The disgrace of Saul’s remains at Bethshan was too much for their hearts to bear, so they despised the dangers and put their gratitude and love into action. While the Philistines slept, they gathered the remains of Saul and his sons and brought them to Israelite soil for a decent burial.

Isn’t it encouraging that after all of Saul’s hard-hearted sin, despite his descent into murderous tyranny and even occult Satanism, that God nonetheless concludes his account with a remembrance of Saul’s one godly and obedient act? Likewise, it is the selfless acts of goodness and mercy that will form our legacy, sowing seeds of gratitude and love to flourish when we have gone, just as it is our witness to the kingdom of Christ that will provide hope when all else has failed.

That 1 Samuel ends with a courageous act of gratitude towards Saul says more about God than it does about Saul. It reminds us that even the worst of lives has born the image of God and has shared at least sparks of God’s goodness and love. This concluding note also shows how eager God is to bless and reward the least acts of faith and obedience. Even the death of a hardened rebel like Saul provides us with an incentive to repent of our sins, turn to the Lord in true faith, and serve the Lord whole-heartedly in this dark and dangerous world.

GLORY IN DARKNESS

At the end of Alan Jay Lerner’s musical *Camelot* there is a heart-warming scene in which King Arthur, unable to sleep before the

battle with Lancelot that marks the end of his reign, is seen warming himself beside a dying fire. A sound is heard in the bushes and Arthur calls out to know who is there. Out steps a young boy into the faint glow. "Who are you?" asks the king. "Tom, sir," he replies. "And why have you come here?" asks Arthur. "To see the fight, sir." Arthur realizes that here amidst the dying embers of his reign, this youth has come with an innocent faith in Arthur's cause. The king's reign had been shattered by sin, betrayal, and senseless passion, but here is a child who believes. So Arthur sends young Tom away from the battle to safety and commissions him with a royal duty, to tell the story of his reign: "Don't let it be forgot / That there once was a spot / For one brief shining moment / Called Camelot."¹¹

The valiant men of Jabesh-Gilead arrive at the end of 1 Samuel in the role of true belief in the midst of disaster, very much like the boy Tom in Lerner's *Camelot*. There is a reason why the exploits of the valiant men of Jabesh-Gilead are still read and celebrated by the people of God, three thousand years after their night-time raid. The reason is not merely that someone wrote it down to preserve the memory. The greater reason is that their side won. The kingdom in which they had believed recovered from defeat. Indeed, within a short time these true and valiant believers would see a newly anointed king, a man after God's own heart, burst forth in conquering might. While Saul was dying, David was gaining a victory by God's power. Soon, what may have seemed a vain gesture of faith was praised by messengers arriving with royal blessings and pledges of reward.

The heroic men of Jabesh-Gilead prove that in dark times, when ungodliness seems to have prevailed in society and the church seems to have succumbed to pagan assaults, the best thing a valiant Christian man or woman can do is simply take a stand for godliness, truth, and holy love. For wherever Jesus Christ is served in true faith and obedience to his Word, there is a new beginning in which the grace of his kingdom may grow.

The men of Jabesh-Gilead remind us of the women who came to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid to rest. Jesus was even more unlike Saul than David was: Saul was in fact the very antithesis of the

¹¹ Cited by Cyril J. Barber, *The Books of Samuel*, 2 vols. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1994), 1:317-18.

holy person of Jesus Christ. Yet, like Saul, Jesus had been beset by pagan soldiers, and just as Saul's remains were left in boastful contempt upon the walls of Beth-shan, Jesus' body was strung up in derision on a cross. Like the Jabesh-Gileadites who came to take Saul's remains, two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus the Pharisee, lovingly removed Christ's lifeless body from the cross and gave it a burial more fitting to his beloved memory. Three days later, the heroic women, two Mary's and Joanna, appeared at Jesus' tomb with spices to anoint his body. They came because for all the proof of defeat, despite the unavoidable reality that Jesus was dead, their hearts still treasured what Jesus had taught and lived. Like the men of Jabesh-Gilead, whose faithful love foretold a new beginning even at Saul's end, the devotion of these women spoke of faith unconquered and hearts unbowed by the reality of sin in the world. Just as the faithful of Jabesh-Gilead were the first to be praised by the newly anointed king David (2 Sam. 2:5), the women's faith was rewarded with the first news of Jesus' resurrection, the angels hailing, "He is not here, for he has risen" (Mt. 28:6).

Do not we also have reasons to stand up for the kingdom of Christ? Can not we look into our own history and see the claims of God's love upon our hearts, along with gospel promises in the Bible? If so, let us be the ones who, like fictional King Arthur's young Tom, keep alive the faith and keep telling the story. Let us, like the bold men Jabesh-Gilead, be disciples who prize the honor of Christ's kingdom and will not shrink back in times of danger. For we serve more than the honored memory of a dead king. We serve a resurrected, living Lord who reigns on heaven's throne, who has promised to return in glory and power to save his people. If David noticed the fidelity of the men of Jabesh-Gilead, then surely Christ will not fail to honor those who stand for him now. "Well done, good and faithful servant," he has promised to say (Mt. 25:23), and such valliant believers will enter into the joy of their triumphant king forever.