

The Weight of the Crown

Farewell Saul

1 Samuel 31

Mark Vroegop

Now the Philistines were fighting 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. The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. 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. And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. 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 (1 Sam. 31:1-7).

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon made this important and relevant observation: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart" (Ecc. 7:2) I often use this text at funerals because Solomon is saying something we should consider carefully.

"It's better to go to funerals than parties." Why?

Here's my answer: We learn more at funerals. Consider the last memorial service that you attended. Think about the pictures displayed, the memories family and friends shared, the character qualities affirmed, and the overall message of a person's life. Don't get me wrong, it's not that a party is bad. But I've found myself more inspired about how to live based upon a funeral than on a party. While I might be entertained at a party, I'm more exhorted at a funeral.

David Brooks, in his book *The Road to Character*, identifies that there's a difference between what he calls "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues." "The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral . . ."¹ What are the eulogy virtues that are reflected in your life? What are the things that will really count? What will you hope is said about the track record of your life? These are important questions, aren't they?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>

It's providential that I'm asking these questions on Father's Day and as we come to the end of 1 Samuel and the death of Saul. This last chapter recounts the end of Saul's reign as he and his three sons are killed in a battle with the Philistines.

We started 1 Samuel in January, and we'll pick up 2 Samuel in August. By way of reminder, we'll be taking six weeks to review the most important texts that relate to our core values—the biblical principles that shape the history and future and culture of our church. Since almost half of our congregation has only been with us since 2019, we thought it would be good to unpack these important concepts.

Next week, Pastor Nate will lead us with an exposition from Colossians 1 and Psalm 2 about the pre-eminence of Jesus. It's going to be a great series, and I can't wait to sit under their teaching this summer.

Today we come to the final chapter of 1 Samuel. Frankly, the division between 1 and 2 Samuel isn't entirely clear. Some commentators even suggest that the division is based upon something as simple as the length of scrolls. If you flip over to 2 Samuel, you'll see the story continue without a major thematic break. When we start back up in August, we'll read about David's reaction and lament regarding Saul and Jonathan's deaths.

As we come to the end of 1 Samuel at the "funeral" for the first king, it's good to ask: "How did that turn out?" That's an important question to ask, especially in gray-zone moments. Those seasons present so many emotions and challenges, it's helpful to remember that it may take a few years before situations or people's character or the direction of life will be clear enough to evaluate. Sometimes fear and frustration can lead us down a hard path. "Give us a king" in 1 Samuel 8 has led us here. So, how'd that king-thing turn out?

Defeat

1 Samuel 31 takes us back to the battlefield. Last week in chapter 30, we witnessed the deliverance achieved by David and his men with the rescuing of their wives and children. But even more, we learned how David strengthened himself in the Lord his God (v. 6). Remember, David is at least a three-day's journey away from the battlefield.

The scene snaps back to the Jezreel Valley and Mt. Gilboa. The battle was taking place in the valley, and Israel was losing badly. The soldiers began to flee to the higher ground of Mt. Gilboa toward the Jordan River, and many are dying.

It's instructive that this is the same area (near Aphek) where another battle with the Philistines took place (1 Sam. 4). That conflict resulted in the loss of the ark and the death of Eli's sons, and when Eli learns the news, he also dies. Commentator John Woodhouse notes: "This time they will not lose *the*

ark—they will lose their *king*. Once again Israel’s failed leader will fall, with his sons, before the Philistines.”²

As the Israelites scramble up Gilboa, the Philistines kill the three sons of Saul: Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchi-shua. We’re familiar with Jonathan, and his death is especially tragic since he is presented in 1 Samuel as a faithful friend to David. In chapter 23, Jonathan was highlighted with an oath of loyalty to David. The reader would expect Jonathan to serve in David’s court. So, this comes as a shock.³

One of Saul’s sons, Ishbosheth, survives. He either escaped or wasn’t present. We’re not sure. But he’ll emerge in 2 Samuel 2 as he tries to take the throne after his father’s death.

In verse 3, the focus narrows to the fate of Saul. It appears that as Saul was fleeing up Gilboa, the archers identified him. They fired at him, and Saul was “badly wounded.” While he’s wounded, he’s still alive. And he’s afraid. Saul knows that if he’s captured, he’ll be treated terribly, likely tortured and abused before being killed. Therefore, he requests his armor-bearer kill him:

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” (1 Sam, 31:4a).

However, his armor-bearer refuses. He was likely concerned about the prohibition against taking the life of the king. Saul takes matters into his own hands. He takes his own life by falling on his sword. And in another tragic moment, the armor-bearer does the same.

While I don’t want to make too much of this, it’s hard not to see the parallels from 1 Samuel 4 where the battle with the Philistines resulted in Eli falling backwards and dying. And here we have Saul falling on his sword. Samuel was located between two “fallen” leaders.

The narrator provides a somber summary in verse 6. Let’s read it slowly: “Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together” (1 Sam. 31:6). The death of Saul and the defeat of the Israelite army sends the cities near the battlefield into a panic. As they saw the retreating army coming over Mt. Gilboa, they abandoned their cities. The Israelites living on either side of the Jordan River east of Gilboa fled. They became refugees. The Philistines took up residence in the abandoned homes. They effectively divided the nation of Israel, cutting off the northern tribes from Benjamin and Judah.⁴

It’s a dark day in Israel. The Philistines have defeated the army of Israel. Saul, his three sons, and his armor-bearer are all dead. Remember the words of Samuel through the witch at Endor.

² John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 546.

³ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 547.

⁴ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 550.

Moreover, the LORD will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The LORD will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines (1 Sam. 28:19).

All of it came to pass, just as Samuel had said only twenty-four hours earlier. The dire prophesy regarding the death of Saul and his sons was fulfilled. The rule of Saul ends in tragic defeat.

But there's more.

Dishonor

The death of Saul and the defeat of the army led to terrible dishonor. The Philistines intend to not only celebrate their victory, but to use it to send a message to the entire nation.

Verse 8 tells us that the Philistines began stripping the dead soldiers on the battlefield. It was common for the victorious army to take their spoils in any way possible. It's interesting that they find Saul this way. He's simply among the slain, as if the Philistines didn't know that he had been killed.

Notice what they did after discovering Saul's body:

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 (1 Sam. 31:9).

There's quite a bit here. It appears that they took his head on a victory tour, announcing his death and the defeat of Israel. It's interesting that the narrator describes this as "good news." I trust you know that in the New Testament this means the "gospel." So, here we have the Philistine gospel / good news about Saul's death being spread throughout the Philistine land. What a tragic twist!

What's more, this Philistine gospel is brought specifically to the "house of their idols." Remember back in 1 Samuel 5 what happened with the ark and their god Dagon? The idol fell over, and its head and hands were broken off. It's a major reversal of that moment and a great day to be a Philistine.

Since earthly battles were viewed as contests between gods, the Philistines believe that their gods have conquered the God of Israel. To commemorate the moment, they take the armor of Saul and put it on display in the temple of Ashteroth, the fertility goddess worshipped alongside Dagon.⁵ It was a trophy.

But they did even more. They took the headless corpse of the king and the bodies of his sons, and they impaled them on the wall at Beth-shan, one of the oldest and largest cities in the occupied region. This display of the corpses was designed to dishonor Saul and make a statement about Philistine supremacy.

The king who was supposed to deliver Israel from the Philistines is now dead, and his naked body is on full display along with his sons. It was all designed to bring shame to the Israelites.

⁵ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 551.

The news about this shameful display traveled beyond the Jordan River (in modern day Jordan) to a city controlled by Israel: Jabesh-Gilead. This was the city in 1 Samuel 11 threatened by the Ammonites in which the only way for them to surrender was for everyone to gouge out their right eye. When Saul learned of this, he marshalled forces, defeated the threat, and delivered the city. Perhaps their gratitude to Saul is in play here.

A group of valiant men (v. 12) engaged in a covert mission inside Philistine territory to remove the bodies of Saul and his sons. They take the bodies back into Israelite territory where Saul is buried under a tamarisk tree, probably as a symbol of respect since Saul is recorded as sitting under a tamarisk tree and conducting royal business (see 1 Sam. 22:6).

That's how the reign of the first king of Israel ends. There's no national funeral. No governmental ceremony. No changing of the guard. The legacy of Saul is defeat, death, dishonor, division, and disorder.

In other words, the answer to the question "How'd the king-thing turn out?" is "Terrible."

Lessons

It's better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting. You learn more at funerals than parties. So, what might we learn not just about Saul, but about the ways of God? First Samuel isn't about Samuel or Saul or David. It's about God.

There are many things we could consider, but let me take you back to Hannah's song in chapter 2. As I studied the last chapter of 1 Samuel, I kept my eye on how this book began. And instead of giving you principles that I've developed, let me just use the actual verses in chapter 2 with a few bolded words. It's remarkable how relevant they are.

*My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. There is **none holy like the LORD**: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God (1 Sam. 2:1-2).*

This book has shown us, over and over, the centrality of God and his glory. The tragedy of King Saul is that the entire reason he became king was because of the people's fear, their desire to be like other nations, and their rejection of trusting in God. The people of Israel didn't believe that God was enough.

What are the emotions that are most likely to push you away from believing that God is sufficient and enough?

*Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. **The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength** (1 Sam. 2:3-4).*

1 Samuel shows us that human assessment of strength and success often run counter to the ways of God. In other words, be careful about where your evaluation of might comes from. Remember that God sees what man doesn't see. What we think is powerful, God often does not. It's often the plan of God to work through surprising ways and means.

The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world (1 Sam. 2:6-8).

God is working his plan. He's sovereign over all of creation, over every human being, over every kingdom and reign, and over earthly power. That means we can embrace humility because any success is because of him. That means we can embrace trust because we can know that God is up to something. What might God be doing here?

He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed (1 Sam. 2:9-10.)

Consistency. Obedience. Trust. Those are the qualities that mark the faithful ones. And when it seems that faithfulness might put you at risk because others are not being faithful, keep this book in the forefront of your mind and heart.

This is how 1 Samuel and the reign of Saul ends. Solomon was right. It's better to go to funerals than parties.

"The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength."

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