

## **The King is Dead. Long Live the King.**

### **1 Samuel 31**

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Let me just remind you of what we've just sung in verse 3 — “His kingdom cannot fail. He rules o'er earth and heaven.” And that is not what you will see at the end of 1 Samuel. You will be forced to believe that with the eye of faith because what we are about to read will tell a very different story.

We are studying together the book of 1 Samuel and tonight we come to the closing chapter of 1 Samuel. Let me tell you that next week we will be looking at the first chapter of 2 Samuel and then there's a very natural break, because from chapter 2 — 2 Samuel looks at the reign of King David — but in chapter 1 of 2 Samuel there is the lament of David for the death of Saul and the death of his dear friend, Jonathan. And it seems opportune that we should begin that first chapter next week. And then there will be a long break while we do something entirely different over the summer for about twelve weeks on the Gospel-centered life. And Jeremy Smith and myself will be doing that beginning two weeks from tonight. But tonight we're in chapter 31 of 1 Samuel. Now before we read the Scriptures together we need the help of the Holy Spirit. Let's look to God in prayer.

*Lord, we are a needy people and as each week goes by and we come to the beginning of a new one, we find that we need Your grace afresh all over again. And tonight, as we plumb something of the depths of humanity in this dark and difficult chapter, we pray for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Help us again to learn what You would have us learn. Teach us, instruct us, and hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

This is God's holy and inerrant Word:

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. 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.

The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. 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. They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Bethshan. But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 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.

Amen.

Can you see that scene? You might have thought that the author of 1 Samuel might have ended on a better note than that. After all, he's been flipping back and forth between the stories of David and Saul in these last chapters like split-screen cinema. One moment what David is doing with Achish and his men in Ziklag and pursuing the Amalekites and then what Saul is doing with the witch of En-dor. Of course this isn't the end in the Hebrew canon of Samuel. 1 and 2 Samuel is regarded as one book you understand. But still, this is a graphic, sad, sad tale. When David will come to lament Saul and his friend Jonathan in chapter one of the next chapter he'll say those famous words in verse 19 — "How the mighty have fallen." This man, Saul, this young man of Kish that we saw at the beginning of the book of Samuel looking for his father's donkeys, the most handsome man in all the land, and Samuel anointed him and here he is. Jonathan is dead. David's loyal friend is dead. He had, you remember, handed over the kingship to David and did what any loyal son would do and stayed with his father to the bitter end, killed now in battle.

But it's Saul that we focus on in this chapter. And there's a big picture and there's a focused picture. I want to start with the latter, the focused picture. The shame of Saul. We begin in verse 31. Now the Philistines fought — actually the Hebrew suggests a different tense — the Philistines were fighting. It's as though the writer is coming late to the story. The battle is already in progress and things are not going well. Actually, it's a rout. The Israelites are dying and retreating. The Philistines were much better equipped than the Israelites of course. They had chariots and horses and better weapons than the Israelites had. Saul has

retreated to high ground, to Mount Gilboa. The battle had taken place on the Jezreel Valley. Some of you have been there. It is an amphitheatre for a battle. To this day, topographically you see the Valley of Jezreel and it's a perfect setting for a battle. But Saul and his men have retreated up to Mount Gilboa where the chariots cannot follow but the archers can.

And we pick up the story and Saul is wounded. Some of you will remember that scene in the first part of the trilogy of Lord of the Rings when another fighter and soldier is mortally wounded. It's a very graphic moment. Some of you can hear the sound of those arrows as they hit. He's mortally wounded. He has minutes as he sees these archers coming. Now a different story will be told in the first chapter of 2 Samuel by an Amalekite. It's a lie of course. He wants a reward and he will be killed. But this is the true story. This is what actually happened. Saul asks his armor-bearer to finish him off, to kill him, lest the Philistines capture him. I cannot tell you tonight in this mixed audience the things that the Philistines would do, the torture, the emasculation that would inevitably would take place before they would kill him. Before you enter into judgment of Saul at this point, and the commentators judge him harshly, but before you do that you have to enter into exactly what it is that Saul is now facing. And because his armor-bearer feared greatly to do such a thing to the anointed king, Saul falls upon his own sword and kills himself. It is a suicide.

Now not all self-inflicted death is ethically on the same level you understand. A soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save the lives of others, we put that in an entirely different category. When, for example, the Americans in the Second World War sought to capture the code machine from the German u-boats they posed as a German u-boat. And there's a point in that story where the captain of that American submarine is told very clearly that if they are captured he must ensure that all of the men and himself be killed because they know too much because the lives of hundreds of thousands of people will depend upon it. But Saul is different. But Saul is also facing torture of indescribable cruelty. Now the commentators are harsh. Herman Hoeksma for example says of Saul that "he was a coward who opened his eyes in hell." Alexander MacLaren says that "if Saul had had faith, he wouldn't have finished his life in this act of desperation." Well, that's easy to write. That's very easy to write.

Let me say a couple of things here. Suicide is not the unforgivable sin. It is not the unforgivable sin. That's the teaching of the medieval Catholic Church and the Jesuits, because in suicide there is no possibility of immediate repentance. We temper our opinion of this in the case of those who are mentally deranged, emotionally overwrought, unhinged. One thinks of William Cowper, dear William Cowper, whose hymns we sing — "God Moves in a Mysterious Way , His Wonders to Perform" — five times he tried to take his life. True, true believers, for a variety of reasons, can take their lives and we have absolute confidence that they are in heaven, that the blood of Jesus covers every sin, every sin.

But the focus of this passage is not there. The writer doesn't ethically comment on what it is that Saul does here. The book of 1 Chronicles makes a comment in 1 Chronicles 10 and verses 13 and 14. "Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord and also consulted a medium seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord, therefore the Lord put him to death."

Astonishing, isn't it? From the perspective of the Chronicler this was God's doing. Whatever Saul may have done and whatever culpability we may or may not think Saul has in this manner of his death, from Chronicles this is an act of God. God did this. The tragedy here is not the means by which he took his life. The tragedy is his lack of faith. He died just as he had lived for a long time now, with no faith and no trust and no love for the Lord.

The next day, Philistine soldiers are doing what soldiers would do in battle, going through the carnage, the dead, the half-dead, the almost-dead, putting them to death, plundering gold, silver, armor. And they do what Saul had feared they would do. They cut off his head. And word of it — and the Hebrew is ambiguous — they may have sent Saul's head all over Philistia or they sent word about it all over Philistia. But do you see how the writer puts it? "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 then in verses 8 and 9 — "The next day the Philistines come" — verse 9 — "They cut off his head, sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news." This is the gospel of the Philistines. This is the gospel. This is the good news of the Philistines, that Saul is dead, the anointed king of Israel is dead. And they take his headless body and the body of his three sons, including Jonathan, and they nail those bodies to the walls of Beth-Shan.

And you see what the writer is saying? Idolatry has won. Where is the kingdom of God? "His kingdom shall stretch from shore to shore till moons shall wax and wane no more." Where is it? Not here, not in this chapter. Yahweh has lost. That's what the Philistines were saying. This was a catastrophe of national proportion. This is Israel's 9-11. This is Israel's Pearl Harbor. Everything is gone. Even the men and women in the outlying villages and towns, when they saw it, they fled their cities and the Philistines came and occupied the cities. It's over. It is all over. Where is the promise to Abraham? Where is the promise that Hannah — do you remember, it's a year ago now — do you remember the song of Hannah? At the very end of her song in 1 Samuel chapter 2, "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 power of His anointed." Where is that? It's not here.

This is a dark, dark day. You know, we say times are bad. Times are bad. My dear friends, they're not as bad as they are here in 1 Samuel 31 because 1 Samuel 31 almost ends without a ray of light. The whole edifice, the whole

promise, the whole Gospel, the whole of the goal of redemption seems to have been obliterated. Saul is dead and the Philistines have triumphed and his head is being held up in Philistia and Yahweh is a loser. Jehovah is a loser.

God is mocked. That's the emphasis. God's honor, God's integrity, it's all been lost. Do you feel something of the tension here, the trial of faith here? Those who were left, and there weren't many of them who had fled, who believed in the promises of God that He would arise and that an anointed king would come and their enemies would be vanquished and the kingdom of God would be established and it's gone. It's gone. It's over. It's finished. And some would mutter, "What about David?" But David is with the enemies. David is with the Philistines. There's no hope. But that's the focused picture. And there's a big picture. And somehow now you've got to twist that lens and move backwards and upwards and view this picture now within the scene of redemptive history. Because if all you do is focus on 1 Samuel chapter 31, there is no hope and we are undone.

There's death everywhere. There's death everywhere. Saul is dead. His three sons are dead. His armor-bearer is dead. His body guards are dead. It wasn't supposed to be like this. You know when they came out of the wilderness and they were going into the Promised Land and they would cross over the Jordan and there was the tribe from Jericho - there was a land flowing with milk and honey. It wasn't meant to end like this.

But turn back a little to chapter 28 and verse 19. You know, when the witch of En-dor had disturbed the spirit of Samuel and somewhat grumpy Samuel begins to speak, what does he say? "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" — dead that is. The Lord will give the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines. That's what Samuel had said. When Saul had looked for guidance from the witch of En-dor through the spirit of Samuel, the word that God had given was this.

You see, what we see in chapter 31 of 1 Samuel, difficult as it is, horrendous as it is, is exactly, it is exactly what God said would happen.

### **Is God still in control? Absolutely.**

In death and destruction, God is in control. That's the meta-narrative, the big picture. That's so important my friends. It's so important pastorally because when bad things happen and terrible things happen and awful things happen and wretched things happen, we're tempted to say, "Where is God?" And the answer is, "He's right there." He's right there in the midst of it. You know, if I can only get you to learn one thing — don't chase after the ethics of Saul's death -- that's just a side issue. If I can just get you to take home this one truth tonight - that God's will is done no matter what.

You know we tend to say when good things happen, "God is good." But God is good when bad things happen. We need to stop saying, "God is good," when good things happen because the implication is that He's not so good when bad things happen. God is always good. And difficult, it is horrendously difficult what happens here — God's purpose in redemption still stands. Can you hear the Philistines? Can you hear their gospel? Can you hear them shouting? "Yahweh is dead. Yahweh is a loser." - like the world all around us tonight, all around us tonight. You know some of you — I'm going to get into all kinds of trouble for saying this — some of you spend all day listening to radio programs that just drive you to despair. And you listen to the chatter back and for, back and for, and every conspiracy under the sun and the sky is falling down! Do you know what you need to do? You need to turn it off and you need to repeat after me, "God is sovereign. God is sovereign. God is in control." That's the test at the end of 1 Samuel chapter 31. Do you believe that? Do you believe that?

It's more than that. It's not just that God is in control. It's not just like the doctrine of Islam that some force is in control, some blind, immovable power is in control. No, no, no, no, no. Jesus is in control. That's what we believe tonight, that the force that holds the universe together is none other than King Jesus. Who's the most powerful, who is the most powerful one in all the world? It is King Jesus and He sits upon a throne. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Come right down, come right down to this picture here. As this book ends, there's a little brave moment, it's incredibly brave — the valiant men of Jabesh-gilead. Because right at the beginning of Samuel, Saul and his men one night had gone to the help of Jabesh-gilead against Nahash the Ammonite. He was an Ammonite and it was right at the beginning of 1 Samuel. And now they pay him back. They go and rescue the body of Saul and his three sons and they bring them home and they burn the body and they're bones now because the bodies have been terribly mutilated. And they bury the bones.

Do you know where 1 Samuel ends? It ends in a graveyard. It's a graveyard with a tamarisk tree in Jabesh. It's terribly, terribly sad. The first book of Samuel ends in a graveyard.

Now go up. Twist the lens and go up. And ask yourself, "Who's in control here? Who is in control here?" And it is Jesus. It is He who said, "The gates of hell will not prevail against My church." The gates of hell are in 1 Samuel 31 and they are all around us tonight. They are all around us tonight and if all that you listen to is the chatter, it's little wonder that we lose our faith.

And 1 Samuel 31 is saying don't take your eye off the sovereignty of God. What happens in this chapter happens in fulfillment of the word that God gave to Saul. No more, and certainly no less. Do you know how pastorally important that is, when terrible things happen to us? It teaches us to say, "But God is still in control and He knows what He's doing. And what I need to do is trust Him in the darkness when there's no light — to trust Him."

Let's pray together.

*Father, we stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene because He now sits in the place of sovereignty and power and dominion and might. Nothing happens, absolutely nothing happens without Jesus willing it to happen, to happen in the way that it happens. Father, we pray tonight for our own hearts in the face of the opposition of the gates of hell and to be absolutely assured that they will not prevail because Jesus has died and risen again and sits on a throne of glory. So hear us and bless us for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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