

Dying 101: Lessons from the Death of Saul

The Rise of David Pt.1
1 Samuel 31:1-10 6-21-2009

Summary: Saul dies a horrible death and his (innocent) sons also die because of Saul's lethal love of sin (loved his sin so much that even when there was nothing to gain he would rather die than repent). God's judgment of Saul should cause us to fear God. The people of Israel are also swept away because of their lethal loyalty to Saul. Saul dies poorly – a worthless life, no hope, nothing to take satisfaction in. Strive to die well.

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1 Samuel 31:1 Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. 2 The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. 3 The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically. 4 Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me." But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. 5 When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. 6 So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. 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. 8 The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. 9 They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. 10 They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

Introduction: What happens to David happens to his men

It is an interesting study in psychology to observe the behavior of David's men in chapter 30. When they lose everything to an unknown enemy they decide the most logical thing to do is to kill David. They came to David in the first place because they had nowhere else to go and since they joined up with David they have known nothing but success. They have never known defeat under David's leadership. Then they are gone for a while, and come home to find their town burned and their wives and children kidnapped. So they assess their situation, and consider the various options, and conclude the best response would be to stone David to death. Just think how much that would improve their situation. If they could just eliminate him, then they would, still have no home, no possessions, no wife, no kids, no money, no place to go, no allies, no idea where the raiders went, but on the other hand, they would also have no leader, and no access to blessing or guidance or strength from God.

What kind of insanity would even make the thought of killing David cross their minds? David is literally their only way out of this mess.

That is the insanity of selfish anger. They were mad, and they thought it would make them feel better if they could just stone someone. But why David? Because it was David they were following when they were

gone. It was David's decision to go where they went when this happened. So there is a very real sense in which David did lead them into this disaster.

The fate of David is the fate of his men. If you hitch your wagon to David, when he is penniless and wifeless, so will you be. David's road is a hard one. God has called him to a rough life, and there are a lot of ups and downs, and the downs are some pretty severe downs. And if you are going to attach yourself to David you are going to find that you are snubbed and insulted by people like Nabal, and hunted down by the king, plundered by the Amalekites, and you just may come home one day to find you have no home – or wife – or children. Just a pile of ashes. On the other hand, when he wins big, you share in the spoils (even if you were just guarding the supplies). If you are one of David's men, what David gets – you get. But on the other hand – the same goes for Saul.

The last two weeks we saw David hunt down the Amalekites and wipe them out. He recovered all they had taken including all the women and children. He brings everyone back home to Ziklag, and they start the rebuilding process. And that is where the book of 2 Samuel picks up the story. David has been back in Ziklag for two full days. And it was a happy couple of days. During all the joy and happiness and laughter of David and his men being re-united with their wives and children, swimming in more riches and plunder than they know what to do with, at that very moment something horrible is happening to Saul and Jonathan and the Israelite army up north.

On the third day, in the middle of the rebuilding process, a guy comes running down from the north with some news from the battle between the Philistines and Saul. And it is not good news. Israel was routed and Saul and Jonathan are dead. Those two battles – David vs. the Amalekites and Saul vs. the Philistines took place at the same time.

The Death of Saul

1 Samuel 31:1 Now the Philistines fought against Israel

Literally it is “The Philistines *were fighting*...” The grammar indicates current, ongoing action. The writer is making a point to let us know that *while* David was fighting the Amalekites the Philistines were fighting against Israel.

1 ... the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. 2 The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. 3 The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

So here we are three verses into the chapter and Israel is already defeated, bodies are littering the mountainside of Gilboa, Saul's sons are dead, and Saul is critically wounded. The writer spares us the agony of a detailed description of Israel's loss and just picks it up at the point of interest for his purposes – the death of Saul.

This drama in the closing chapters is almost like watching two TV programs at the same time. We cut away from Saul the night before the battle to watch David fight the Amalekites so we missed Saul's battle with the Philistines. So the writer begins chapter 31 by saying, “We now join the battle at Jezreel in progress.” Not only is it in progress – it is basically over.

Remember, before the battle Saul had gathered his forces on Mt. Gilboa on the south side of the valley and the Philistines were set up at Shunem on the north side of the valley. So they both come down into the valley and meet for battle. And just as Saul feared – the Philistines easily overpower the Israelites. It quickly becomes obvious that they are being defeated, and so the Israelites turn and run right back toward where they came from. But they cannot outrun the Philistine chariots, and they find themselves getting mowed down from behind as they retreat and the Gilboa hillside becomes a bloodbath. Dead Israelite soldiers carpet the mountain.

If you are running for your life and someone is right behind you, as soon as you turn your head to see if they are catching up you have to slow down. And at that moment you are dead. If you do not turn around you just run and wait for an arrow to come shooting through the front of your chest – or a sword to take your feet out from under you – or a spear. If you are not faster than their fastest men, you die. If one of them gets tired,

they can stop and rest for a moment. If you get tired, you die. Your only hope is to split off from some of your comrades and hope the pursuer chases after them instead of you. But that does not work for Saul and his sons.

2 The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons

And so the Gilboa hillside becomes a bloodbath. Dead Israelite soldiers carpet the mountain. The word translated pressed hard is the same word in Genesis 2:24 when it says a man will be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. No matter where Jonathan and company turned those Philistines stuck right on their trail.

The effect of sin on the innocent

And then some of the most painful words in the whole book:

2...and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua.

Every time I read that I think, *No – not Jonathan!* This happened 3000 years ago and it is still hard for me to accept. I love Jonathan. He is such a great guy, and it would have been so cool to see him survive this battle and become David's right hand man.

Why should Jonathan have to die? Abner survives, why not Jonathan? Jonathan had to die because part of Saul's judgment was to see all his hopes of a future name dashed before his eyes. Plus, knowing Jonathan, if the Philistines wanted to kill Saul it would no doubt have to be over his dead body. It is hard to imagine Jonathan surviving a battle where Saul gets overrun. His loyalty is like David's – there is no way he is going to run and leave his father to die.

In Job 4:7 Job's friend Eliphaz asked this question:

Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?

That was part of Job's friends' theology – if you are innocent nothing bad will happen to you. They were wrong. Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Jonathan for one. Jonathan did not die in this battle for his own sin. More likely he died because of his righteousness. God will not allow any *ultimate* injustice to happen to His people, but He very often allows *temporary* injustice. This is the heinousness of sin – it inflicts harm on the innocent.

So Jonathan dies. The writer does not give us any details of his death, because it would detract from the point he is making in the chapter. But I am guessing it was quite a story. I bet he did not go down easy – no doubt he took a lot of Philistines with him. He once defeated an entire Philistine garrison by himself, so I am guessing the Philistines suffered some casualties when they caught up to Jonathan. But not even Jonathan can hold off this onslaught, and he finally goes down.

You can imagine the fear and anguish in Saul's heart as he looks down from his vantage point down below him. His valiant sons are 100 yards below. They have stopped running and are taking a stand to give Saul a chance to escape. What they do not know is several of the Philistine archers' arrows found their mark between the openings of Saul's armor.

Saul looks down at his sons just in time to see Abinadab get surrounded and disappear under the violent hacking of six or eight Philistine soldiers. The same thing happens to Malki-Shua. A moment later, just as Jonathan starts to get the upper hand with the two or three guys he is fighting (or 10 or 20), the archers turn him into a human pincushion, and as he gasps for a breath a Philistine champion appears behind him and with one swing sends Jonathan's head rolling down the side of Gilboa. And just like that Saul's last hope for a heritage and a legacy is gone. His sons are dead.

He struggles to run, but the arrows are tearing up his internal organs, and his legs give out. He collapses to his knees in the midst of the shooting pain in every part of his body.

3 The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

Saul has been in a lot of battles over the past 40 years, and has seen a lot of men die. He has also seen men get wounded and survive. And he knows this is the kind of wound that he will not survive. Through the searing pain he assesses his situation and it is obvious there is no escape. In the time it takes to run the distance from where that arrow was launched, the Philistines will be upon him. And when they figure out it is Saul, they will not just kill him. They will abuse him and humiliate him and torture him and use his body to terrorize and dishearten the people of Israel.

4 Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me."

Killing himself obviously would not prevent them from abusing Saul's body after he was dead. But Saul is afraid they will torture and humiliate him while he is still alive – like they did with Samson. So he would rather commit suicide than face that. His only concern is what happens to him just before he dies. No concern at all about just after he dies. He was the opposite of Jesus, whose focus was on just after He died. He let them abuse and torture him all they wanted, but then He said to God, "Into Your hands I commit My spirit." Jesus' focus was on just after, not just before death. But Saul was the opposite. He was terrified of the Philistines and not one bit afraid of God. And he did all he could to avoid a few minutes or hours of hard treatment of his body but did nothing at all to avoid eternal torment of his soul.

4 ... But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it

What was he afraid of? Death? I don't think so – because a moment later he kills himself. Evidently he was afraid of some consequences a lot worse than death – consequences he would face after death if he raised his hand against God's anointed.

4 ...so Saul took his own sword and fell on it.

Saul gathered up all his strength, pulled himself up to his feet, placed the handle end of his sword on the ground against a rock, and set the sharp point carefully between two ribs, and with one last burst of his remaining strength lunges upward and allows all his weight to come down on that point. And as he lays there on the ground impaled with his own sword, death finally comes.

Alexander Maclaren has a great statement here: "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." Saul had such powerful and dangerous enemies, and yet in all his 70 years of life – all the way up to his very last day there is no record of anyone hurting or harming him in any way. And yet his life was absolutely miserable. It's true that at the end he was hit by the archers, but his killing himself really is emblematic of his whole life of self-destruction. There are a lot of threats out there, but the most dangerous threat of all is you.

5 When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him.

That turns out to have been a dumb move. We find out later that the Philistines did not even find Saul's body until the next morning. So if this guy had just laid low he probably could have escaped during the night. But the judgment on Saul affects everyone around him, and they all die.

6 So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

The dishonoring of Saul's body

Saul dies a horrible death. And even after his death he suffers the worst dishonor.

8 The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

This shows how complete Israel's defeat was. If there was anything left to speak of at all of Israel's army they would have removed Saul's body from the battlefield during the night. But they cannot even do that. So they come back the next day and as they are picking through and stripping all the dead, someone yells out – "Hey, over here! I found Saul!" And after some laughs and celebration and hooting and hollering...

9 They cut off his head

Saul was a head taller than everyone else, so now he is the same size as the rest. Whatever it is that makes you special and distinguishes you from everyone else can easily be taken away if you start trusting in it. Israel trusted in Saul because of his size and strength. They were impressed with his body. But now his body is being mutilated and abused.

9 They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. 10 They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

1 Chronicles 10: 10 They put his armor in the temple of their gods and hung up his head in the temple of Dagon.

The Philistines had evidently glued their god back together after Dagon's run-in with Yahweh back in ch.5 which left Dagon in pieces. A little JB weld and their deity is as good as new.

So now that head that was so impressive is severed from his body and hanging in the temple of Dagon. And the rest of Saul's mutilated bloody corpse is hanging from the wall of Beth Shan at the crossroads where everyone traveled.

Lethal Love

When I read the story of Saul in his final moments, I just want to say to him, "*Saul – turn to the Lord!* You are about to die – just repent and cry out for mercy." Why doesn't he turn to the Lord?

Decades earlier, when God told Saul to wait but Saul thought his timing was better than God's, it seemed to make sense at the time. And when he kept Agag and the animals of the Amalekites alive, it seemed to pay off – at the time. When he sinned in his efforts to keep the throne, there seemed to be a reward in view. All through his life he had these reasons for preferring sin over God's way. If you asked him, back then, why he did not repent his heart would say, "Because of the pleasures and benefits of this sin. I don't want to give that up." But what about now? Why not turn to the Lord now? The pleasure of sin is gone. Death is only moments away and there is clearly no benefit to be gained from holding on to rebellion. His kingdom has been ripped out of his hands, the Philistines have won, his sons are dead, he is mortally wounded, there is no escape, no more pleasure, no glory, no honor, no power, no kingdom, no family – nothing to be gained from keeping his back to God. Saul knows there is only one thing for him now – death. It is at the door – in fact it is most of the way through the door. Saul knows he is for sure locked in the vice grip of death's gnarled hands around his neck and there is no hope for any escape or even delay. So why not turn to the LORD now? Why not cry out to him from this foxhole? There is absolutely nothing to be gained from continuing in sin now.

Look at the options before him. Saul has the choice between the infinite rewards of knowing God on the one hand and the horror of a bad death on the other. What reason could possibly exist for choosing the latter over the former? Why doesn't Saul repent and turn to the Lord?

The answer - love. Saul has cultivated such love for sin that it has extinguished any possibility of love for God. Turn to the Lord now? He would rather die. Repent and seek forgiveness? He would rather jump on his sword and die in agony.

That is the end of loving sin. That is where it takes you. Love for sin is a lethal love – in the end it kills you. Saul can no more turn to the Lord at this moment than a worm can unfurl wings and fly away. A lifetime of loving and preferring sin has imprisoned him, and there is no way out now.

Oh, the blackness of the bitter end of loving sin! Imagine the end of your life ending up like Saul's – especially anyone who is holding on to some sin, big or small. Rebellion against God begins with small things.

It starts with preferring some intense physical pleasure or temporal treasure over nearness to God. “It’s understandable,” your flesh says, “this pleasure is so delightful I can’t resist it.” That is insanity, but, without the eyes of faith, seemingly reasonable.

Fear God

The problem is Ecclesiastes 7:26 says that when you come close to sin “her heart is a snare and hands are chains.” By choosing sin you handcuff yourself to sin. That which you love enough to prefer, the more you choose it the more you will love it. The act of preferring waters and nurtures the soil of love until finally, in the end, when the façade is stripped away and there is no more pleasure, and sin is exposed for the horror that it is – at that moment you find yourself irreversibly chained to it by the love you have cultivated for it, and you cannot let go. The grace of extraction is removed, and you are utterly and finally enslaved. And at that point Satan does not even have to put any bait on the hook any more. He does not even have to offer you pleasure to get you to sin. He can offer you nothing but pain and agony and you will still choose sin over repentance.

OK, now let’s snap out of imagining that. You are not in Saul’s shoes. It was all just a bad dream. You are not in chapter 31 yet. You are still back in chapter 11, where Saul was full of the Holy Spirit. You do not have to end up in chapter 31. For now you are still in the time of God’s patience. That is why you had the strength to come here this morning. For Saul it was too late, but for you it is not. Let the life and death of Saul teach us to fear the Lord our God.

And do not ever willingly plunge yourself into a sin thinking, “I’ll just repent later.” Later might be too late. God may not grant you the grace to repent later. Continue in sin now – continue to resist the Lord now, and you may find that when later arrives your heart is so in love with sin that it is utterly incapable of loving God. And then you will not be able to repent.

You might be sitting there thinking, “This is an uplifting Father’s Day message.” I did not plan it this way – we just arrived at chapter 31 on this day. But how about this for a Father’s Day exhortation – Fathers, teach your sons and daughters to fear God. Tell your children – “Don’t be lulled asleep by God’s incredible mercy. Saul reigned on the throne with mostly success in battle for 40 years. God’s mercy sometimes last a long, long time. But don’t be fooled.” Point your children to the life of Saul so they can learn the easy way instead of the hard way. Tell them this:

Proverbs 5:7 Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. 8 Keep to a path far from (sin), do not go near the door of her house,

Proverbs 3:11 My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, 12 because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

Lethal Loyalty

Well, we have made it through the first six verses of the chapter so far. In the last chapter the first six verses were really dark and ugly too. But then there was a pivot point at verse 6 that changed everything for David. That pivot point does not happen in this chapter. After verse 6 it just keeps getting darker.

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.

When all the people see that the Israelite army has been defeated, they decide they would rather be refugees than casualties and they abandon their homes and towns.

“Come on kids – if you want to grab one item make it something really small because we are going to be running for our lives.”

You grab a jacket – maybe a blanket to keep your family warm hiding out in the woods. And as they run out of the house they turn and take one last look at the home that they will probably never see again.

You see, this was not only a judgment on Saul, but also on disobedient Israel. Samuel warned them about this. Back when they first asked for a king he told them:

1 Samuel 12:25 If you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away.

Saul died of a lethal love; Israel went down with him because of a lethal loyalty. They attached themselves to a sinking ship by trusting in a human king rather than God.

The words in Hosea 13 are talking about a different king in a later time, but they are appropriate for this situation too.

Hosea 13:10 Where is your king, that he may save you? Where are your rulers in all your towns, of whom you said, 'Give me a king and princes'? 11 So in my anger I gave you a king, and in my wrath I took him away.

God says to Israel, “You asked for a king to fight your battles – I gave you one. But then you would not repent of your sin and so now I have taken him away. Now who is going to fight your battles? Now who is going to save you?”

Remember, the main message of 1 Samuel is that God is still the King. The people can put a crown on someone’s head if they want, but if they or their little king disobey the true King they will be punished. Israel crowning a king is like children playing house. One of the kids can pretend to be the father, and that is fine, but if they get confused and think he really is the one with final authority in the house they are going to run into trouble with the real father.

Samuel warned them – if you persist in your sin then both you and your king will be swept away. Saul was swept away, and now the people are swept right out of their homes.

7 ...And the Philistines came and occupied them.

Saul suffers defeat and so do the Israelites. And that brings us full circle back to where we started. David’s followers suffered or enjoyed whatever fate David suffered or enjoyed. And it is the same for Saul. We all suffer the same ups and downs as the one in whom we place our hope. And ultimately your fate is tied to the leader you follow.

And that has important implications for us when we remember that David is presented in this book as the prototype of the Messiah. The word “messiah” is just the regular Hebrew word for “anointed.” So the whole concept of a Messiah comes out of the book of Samuel. And it is the great descendent of David who would be the ultimate, final Messiah who would be the Savior of the world. So David is a picture of Christ, which means to some degree David’s followers are a picture of the Church. The people of Israel back then had a choice – suffer the ups and downs of David or suffer the ups and downs of Saul. And from a human standpoint it seems like Saul is the obvious choice. From the time David first appears on the scene in chapter 16 all the way to the end of the book Saul is mostly up and David is mostly down from a natural, temporal perspective. Saul reigns as a successful king while David runs from cave to cave. But the final outcome is what matters. Just compare David and his followers at the end with Saul and his people. Let me just read you the accounts back to back.

31:6 Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. 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.

Compare that with the end of chapter 30.

1 Samuel 30:18 David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken, including his two wives. 19 Nothing was missing: young or old, boy or girl, plunder or anything else they had taken. David brought everything back. 20 He took all the flocks and herds, and his men drove them ahead of the other livestock, saying, "This is David's plunder."

David was at the top of victory and Saul was at the bottom of defeat. And as Saul choked out his last words and drew his final breaths, David stood at the threshold of a bright future of blessing. It is the end for Saul, but it is the beginning for David.

You are ultimately going to suffer the same fate as whoever or whatever you place your hope in. Place your hope in Jesus Christ and in this life you will suffer loss. You will be mocked and despised and persecuted and maybe even killed. Place your hope in this world – in your career or your family or your health or your intelligence or in your insurance or politics or entertainment or recreation or whatever ; and you might have a life that everyone envies. The way of Saul makes so much better sense in the short run than the way of David. You can enjoy so much more comfort and earthly treasure following the way of the world than following Christ.

But what matters is the end. Hitch your wagon to this world and when Judgment Day hits you will suffer the same fate as this doomed, rebellious world. But join yourself to Christ and you will inherit all things.

James 2:5 Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

The final rewards we will enjoy will make any suffering in this life seem like nothing in comparison.

Hebrews 11:25 Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Attach all of your fortunes to Christ. Let everyone know you belong to Him. Then if people hate Him they will hate you. And if they reject Him they will reject you. You will bear in your body the marks of Christ, but in the end you will be at His side at the end when He is exalted above all things.

Revelation 21:7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Conclusion: Die Well!

It is interesting to me to note how often Scripture records deaths – not just the fact that someone died, but a description of how they died. And when I say “how they died” I don’t mean so much the cause of death, but rather how well or how poorly they died. There is a great deal God’s Word has to say about dying well. The great theologian Woody Allen once said, “It’s not that I’m afraid of dying; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” What he means is, “I’ll be fine once I’m dead – I’m just not looking forward to the experience of actually dying.” Now obviously that is an exceedingly foolish statement for an unbeliever, because if you do not have forgiveness of sins on that day then you should be terrified of dying. But what about the experience of dying itself?

There is a huge difference between dying with God’s blessing and without God’s blessing. And dying with God’s blessing, believe it or not, is not so bad. You can see that in the descriptions of the deaths of godly men in Scripture.

Genesis 25:8 [Abraham] took his last breath and died at a ripe old age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people.

Genesis 35:29 [Isaac] took his last breath and died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days.

That word translated “full” is not the normal Hebrew word for “full.” It is the word they used to refer to a full stomach. It is usually translated “satisfied.” When Abraham and Isaac died they died satisfied – with satisfying years under their belts. And the Lord frequently lets us know when someone dies that way.

2 Chronicles 24:15 Jehoiada died when he was old and full (satisfied) of days

Job 42:17 Then Job died, old and full (satisfied) of days.

Psalm 91:16 I will satisfy him with a long life and show him My salvation.

It is that same word each time. You see, it is not so bad being there when you die if God has given you a satisfying life.

That is another contrast between Saul and David. Saul died agitated and in great distress and unhappy and unsatisfied and afraid. But David died satisfied.

1 Chronicles 29:28 He died at a good old age, full (satisfied) of days, riches, and honor, and his son Solomon became king in his place.

Dying like that is a great blessing, and dying like Saul is the worst horror.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 A man may father a hundred children and live many years. No matter how long he lives, if he is not satisfied by good things ... I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

In the moments of his death Saul had no comfort of any kind. He knew his sons were dead. He knew he was dying at the hands of God, who was nothing but angry with him. And as he thought back over his life – what kind of memories did he have. His life was a waste. He had the opportunity to be a great king, but instead he spent his life chasing after an innocent man and making a fool of himself.

And far worse than that – not only had his life been a waste, but he entered into death a guilty man. No matter how pleasant or unpleasant – successful or unsuccessful your life on earth seems, if you arrive at the door of death guilty rather than forgiven, that is the worst imaginable fate.

While you are living your life it seems so full and rich and complex. But after you die it gets real simple. Someday your entire life will be reduced to a little dash between two dates on a tombstone. And given the whole sweep of human history, representing your life span with a dash is probably about the right size. And yet eternity rides on the tail end of that dash. Your position before God when that second date arrived determines whether you exist for eternity in paradise with God or in torment in hell.

And if you live according to your own wisdom and follow your own way you may have lots of fun for a few years, but after you die that little dash will soon be forgotten and your life will disappear into insignificance. But if you trust in His way – if you prefer nearness to God over the treasures of this world, then that dash will be like a seed that will grow and expand in its impact for all eternity.

“Only one life, twill soon be passed. Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

We commit ourselves, Oh Lord, to You alone. Our fate is Your fate. Where You are mocked or despised let us be mocked and despised.

Oh Lord, keep us. Hold us and preserve our faith. Don't let us be enticed by the allurements of this world. Plant such a fear in our hearts of Your displeasure, and such a horror over the prospect of falling in love with sin that even the smallest, slightest inclinations toward preferring sin strike terror in our hearts and make us run to You.

Benediction: Romans 8:13 If you live according to the flesh, you are about to die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Devotionals

Day 1

At the beginning of chapter 31 we read some of the most painful words in the whole book:

1 Samuel 31:2...and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua.

Every time I read that I think, *No – not Jonathan!* Why should Jonathan have to die? Abner survives, why not Jonathan? Jonathan had to die because part of Saul's judgment was to see all his hopes of a future name dashed before his eyes. Plus, knowing Jonathan, if the Philistines wanted to kill Saul it would no doubt have to be over his dead body. It is hard to imagine Jonathan surviving a battle where Saul gets overrun. His loyalty is like David's – there is no way he is going to run and leave his father to die.

In Job 4:7 Job's friend Eliphaz asked this question:

Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?

That was part of Job's friends' theology – if you are innocent nothing bad will happen to you. They were wrong. Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Jonathan for one. Jonathan did not die in this battle for his own sin. More likely he died because of his righteousness. God will not allow any *ultimate* injustice to happen to His people, but He very often allows *temporary* injustice. This is the heinousness of sin – it inflicts harm on the innocent.

How many, Oh Lord, have received injustice at my hands, because of my sin? How many have suffered because of my unfaithfulness to You? What ripple effects have gone out from my sin creating everything from inconvenience to real suffering for people near and far? But You love setting things right.

Psalm 33:5 The LORD loves righteousness and justice

You make everything beautiful in its time, and You love Your plans to redeem what I have destroyed. And I have been treated unjustly because of other people's sins as well. But Lord, You delight in Your plans to right this injustice. You are a God who loves righteousness and justice! I trust You, Lord. You will do whatever is pleasing to You, and it will be something that is pleasing to a God who loves righteousness and justice. Lord, if You delight in righteousness, above all else You delight in Your Son, who is the radiance of Your perfect righteousness. And if I am in Your Son, and His righteousness is credited to me, I am the object of your infinite delight! Such thoughts are too wonderful for me, Lord. If You love righteousness and justice, Lord, let me love them. Let me see those things in You and love You more as I see them. First give Your servant a heart that delights in righteousness and justice, and then let me see those things in You in a greater way than I do now, so that my heart will take greater delight in You. Please let that happen today.

Day 2

When I read the story of Saul in his final moments, I just want to say to him, “*Saul – turn to the Lord! You’re about to die – just repent and cry out for mercy.*” Why doesn’t he turn to the Lord?

Decades earlier, when God told Saul to wait but Saul thought his timing was better than God’s, it seemed to make sense at the time. And when he kept Agag and the animals of the Amalekites alive, it seemed to pay off – at the time. When he sinned in his efforts to keep the throne, there seemed to be a reward in view. All through his life he had these reasons for preferring sin over God’s way. If you asked him, back then, why he did not repent his heart would say, “Because of the pleasures and benefits of this sin. I don’t want to give that up.” But what about now? Why not turn to the Lord now? The pleasure of sin is gone. Death is only moments away and there is clearly no benefit to be gained from holding on to rebellion. His kingdom has been ripped out of his hands, the Philistines have won, his sons are dead, he is mortally wounded, there is no escape, no more pleasure, no glory, no honor, no power, no kingdom, no family – nothing to be gained from keeping his back to God. Saul knows there is only one thing for him now – death. It is at the door – in fact it is most of the way through the door. Saul knows he is for sure locked in the vice grip of death’s gnarled hands around his neck and there is no hope for any escape or even delay. So why not turn to the LORD now? Why not cry out to him from this foxhole? There is absolutely nothing to be gained from continuing in sin now.

Look at the options before him. Saul has the choice between the infinite rewards of knowing God on the one hand and the horror of a bad death on the other. What reason could possibly exist for choosing the latter over the former? Why doesn’t Saul repent and turn to the Lord?

The answer - love. Saul has cultivated such love for sin that it has extinguished any possibility of love for God. Turn to the Lord now? He would rather die. Repent and seek forgiveness? He would rather jump on his sword and die in agony.

That is the end of loving sin. That is where it takes you. Love for sin is a lethal love – in the end it kills you. Saul can no more turn to the Lord at this moment than a worm can unfurl wings and fly away. A lifetime of loving and preferring sin has imprisoned him, and there is no way out now.

Oh, the blackness of the bitter end of loving sin! It begins with preferring some intense physical pleasure or temporal treasure over nearness to God. “It’s understandable,” says the flesh, “this pleasure is so delightful I can’t resist it.” Madness, yet, without the eyes of faith, seemingly reasonable. But “her heart is a snare and hands are chains.” That which I love enough to prefer, the more I prefer it the more I will love it. The act of choosing waters and nurtures the soil of love until finally, in the end, when the façade is stripped away and there is no more pleasure, and sin is exposed for the horror that it is – at that moment I find myself irreversibly handcuffed to it by the love I have cultivated for it, and I cannot let go. The grace of extraction is removed, and I am utterly and finally enslaved.

Day 3

Imagine the end of your life ending up like Saul's – especially anyone who is holding on to some sin, big or small. Rebellion against God begins with small things. It starts with preferring some intense physical pleasure or temporal treasure over nearness to God. But Ecclesiastes 7:26 says that when you come close to sin "her heart is a snare and hands are chains." By choosing sin you handcuff yourself to sin. That which you love enough to prefer, the more you choose it the more you will love it. The act of preferring waters and nurtures the soil of love until finally, in the end, when the façade is stripped away and there is no more pleasure, and sin is exposed for the horror that it is – at that moment you find yourself irreversibly chained to it by the love you have cultivated for it, and you can't let go. The grace of extraction is removed, and you are utterly and finally enslaved. And at that point Satan does not even have to put any bait on the hook any more. He does not even have to offer you pleasure to get you to sin. He can offer you nothing but pain and agony and you will still choose sin over repentance.

OK, now let's snap out of imagining that. You are not in Saul's shoes. It was all just a bad dream. You are not in chapter 31 yet. You are still back in chapter 11, where Saul was full of the Holy Spirit. You do not have to end up in chapter 31. For now you are still in the time of God's patience. That is why you had the strength to come here this morning. For Saul it was too late, but for you it is not. Let the life and death of Saul teach us to fear the Lord our God.

And do not ever willingly plunge yourself into a sin thinking, "I'll just repent later." Later might be too late. God may not grant you the grace to repent later. Continue in sin now – continue to resist the Lord now, and you may find that when later arrives your heart is so in love with sin that it is utterly incapable of loving God. And then you will not be able to repent.

You might be sitting there thinking, "This is an uplifting Father's Day message." I didn't plan it this way – we just arrived at chapter 31 on this day. But how about this for a Father's Day exhortation – Fathers, teach your sons and daughters to fear God. Tell your children – "Don't be lulled asleep by God's incredible mercy. Saul reigned on the throne with mostly success in battle for 40 years. God's mercy sometimes last a long, long time. But don't be fooled." Point your children to the life of Saul so they can learn the easy way instead of the hard way. Tell them this:

Proverbs 5:7 Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. 8 Keep to a path far from (sin), do not go near the door of her house,

Proverbs 3:11 My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, 12 because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

Thank You, dear Lord, that the nightmare of Saul's death does not have to be my future. I am still in the time of Your patience. For Saul it was too late, but for me it is not. Oh Lord, keep me. Hold me and preserve my faith. Don't let me be enticed by the allurements of this world. Plant such a fear in my heart of Your displeasure, and such a horror over the prospect of falling in love with sin that even the smallest, slightest inclinations toward preferring sin strike terror in my heart and make me run to You.

Day 4

1 Samuel 31:7 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.

When all the people see that the Israelite army has been defeated, they decide they would rather be refugees than casualties and they abandon their homes and towns. “Come on kids – if you want to grab one item make it something really small because we are going to be running for our lives.” You grab a jacket – maybe a blanket to keep your family warm hiding out in the woods. And as they run out of the house they turn and take one last look at the home that they will probably never see again.

You see, this was not only a judgment on Saul, but also on disobedient Israel. Samuel warned them about this. Back when they first asked for a king he told them:

1 Samuel 12:25 If you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away.

Saul died of a lethal love; Israel went down with him because of a lethal loyalty. They attached themselves to a sinking ship by trusting in a human king rather than God.

The words in Hosea 13 are talking about a different king in a later time, but they are appropriate for this situation too.

Hosea 13:10 Where is your king, that he may save you? Where are your rulers in all your towns, of whom you said, 'Give me a king and princes'? 11 So in my anger I gave you a king, and in my wrath I took him away.

God says to Israel, “You asked for a king to fight your battles – I gave you one. But then you would not repent of your sin and so now I have taken him away. Now who is going to fight your battles? Now who is going to save you?”

Remember, the main message of 1 Samuel is that God is still the King. The people can put a crown on someone’s head if they want, but if they or their little king disobey the true King they will be punished. Israel crowning a king is like children playing house. One of the kids can pretend to be the father, and that’s fine, but if they get confused and think he really is the one with final authority in the house they are going to run into trouble with the real father.

Samuel warned them – if you persist in your sin then both you and your king will be swept away. Saul was swept away, and now the people are swept right out of their homes.

7 ...And the Philistines came and occupied them.

Saul suffers defeat and so do the Israelites.

David and his men came home to find their town burned and their wives and children kidnapped. So the men assess their situation, and consider the various options, and conclude the best response would be to stone David to death. Why David? Because it was David they were following when they were gone. It was David’s decision to go where they went when this happened. So there is a very real sense in which David did lead them into this disaster.

The fate of David is the fate of his men. If you hitch your wagon to David, when he is penniless and wifeless, so will you be. David’s road is a hard one. God has called him to a rough life, and there are a lot of ups and downs, and the downs are some pretty severe downs. And if you are going to attach yourself to David you are going to find that you are snubbed and insulted by people like Nabal, and hunted down by the king, plundered by the Amalekites, and you just may come home one day to find you have no home – or wife – or children. Just a pile of ashes. On the other hand, when he wins big, you share in the spoils (even if you were just guarding the supplies). If you are one of David’s men, what David gets – you get.

David's followers suffered or enjoyed whatever fate David suffered or enjoyed. And it is the same for Saul. We all suffer the same ups and downs as the one in whom we place our hope. And ultimately your fate is tied to the leader you follow.

And that has important implications for us when we remember that David is presented in this book as the prototype of the Messiah. The word "messiah" is just the regular Hebrew word for "anointed." So the whole concept of a Messiah comes out of the book of Samuel. And it is the great descendent of David who would be the ultimate, final Messiah who would be the Savior of the world. So David is a picture of Christ, which means to some degree David's followers are a picture of the Church. The people of Israel back then had a choice – suffer the ups and downs of David or suffer the ups and downs of Saul. And from a human standpoint it seems like Saul is the obvious choice. From the time David first appears on the scene in chapter 16 all the way to the end of the book Saul is mostly up and David is mostly down from a natural, temporal perspective. Saul reigns as a successful king while David runs from cave to cave. But the final outcome is what matters. Just compare David and his followers at the end with Saul and his people. Let me just read you the accounts back to back.

31:6 Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. 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.

Compare that with the end of chapter 30

1 Samuel 30:18 David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken, including his two wives. 19 Nothing was missing: young or old, boy or girl, plunder or anything else they had taken. David brought everything back. 20 He took all the flocks and herds, and his men drove them ahead of the other livestock, saying, "This is David's plunder."

David was at the top of victory and Saul was at the bottom of defeat. And as Saul choked out his last words and drew his final breaths, David stood at the threshold of a bright future of blessing. It is the end for Saul, but it is the beginning for David.

You are ultimately going to suffer the same fate as whoever or whatever you place your hope in. Place your hope in Jesus Christ and in this life you will suffer loss. You will be mocked and despised and persecuted and maybe even killed. Place your hope in this world – in your career or your family or your health or your intelligence or in your insurance or politics or entertainment or recreation or whatever ; and you might have a life that everyone envies. The way of Saul makes so much better sense in the short run than the way of David. You can enjoy so much more comfort and earthly treasure following the way of the world than following Christ.

But what matters is the end. Hitch your wagon to this world and when Judgment Day hits you will suffer the same fate as this doomed, rebellious world. But join yourself to Christ and you will inherit all things.

James 2:5 Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

The final rewards we will enjoy will make any suffering in this life seem like nothing in comparison.

Hebrews 11:25 Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Attach all of your fortunes to Christ. Let everyone know you belong to Him. Then if people hate Him they will hate you. And if they reject Him they will reject you. You will bear in your body the marks of Christ, but in the end you will be at His side at the end when He is exalted above all things.

Revelation 21:7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is Your power for all who believe. Nor am I ashamed of You, dear Lord. No matter what reproach is being heaped upon Your name I will gladly stand with You outside the camp and bear Your disgrace. Give Your servant courage, dear Lord, and grant me the privilege of suffering reproach for the sake of Your great name.

Day 5

It is interesting to me to note how often Scripture records deaths – not just the fact that someone died, but a description of how they died. And when I say “how they died” I don’t mean so much the cause of death, but rather how well or how poorly they died. There is a great deal God’s Word has to say about dying well. The great theologian Woody Allen once said, “It’s not that I’m afraid of dying; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” What he means is, “I’ll be fine once I’m dead – I’m just not looking forward to the experience of actually dying.” Now obviously that is an exceedingly foolish statement for an unbeliever, because if you don’t have forgiveness of sins on that day then you should be terrified of dying. But what about the experience of dying itself?

There is a huge difference between dying with God’s blessing and without God’s blessing. And dying with God’s blessing, believe it or not, is not so bad. You can see that in the descriptions of the deaths of godly men in Scripture.

Genesis 25:8 [Abraham] took his last breath and died at a ripe old age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people.

Genesis 35:29 [Isaac] took his last breath and died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days.

That word translated “full” is not the normal Hebrew word for “full.” It is the word they used to refer to a full stomach. It is usually translated “satisfied.” When Abraham and Isaac died they died satisfied – with satisfying years under their belts. And the Lord frequently lets us know when someone dies that way.

2 Chronicles 24:15 Jehoiada died when he was old and full (satisfied) of days

Job 42:17 Then Job died, old and full (satisfied) of days.

Psalm 91:16 I will satisfy him with a long life and show him My salvation.

It is that same word each time. You see, it is not so bad being there when you die if God has given you a satisfying life.

That is another contrast between Saul and David. Saul died agitated and in great distress and unhappy and unsatisfied and afraid. But David died satisfied.

1 Chronicles 29:28 He died at a good old age, full (satisfied) of days, riches, and honor, and his son Solomon became king in his place.

Dying like that is a great blessing, and dying like Saul is the worst horror.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 A man may father a hundred children and live many years. No matter how long he lives, if he is not satisfied by good things ... I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

In the moments of his death Saul had no comfort of any kind. He knew his sons were dead. He knew he was dying at the hands of God, who was nothing but angry with him. And as he thought back over his life – what kind of memories did he have. His life was a waste. He had the opportunity to be a great king, but instead he spent his life chasing after an innocent man and making a fool of himself.

And far worse than that – not only had his life been a waste, but he entered into death a guilty man. No matter how pleasant or unpleasant – successful or unsuccessful your life on earth seems, if you arrive at the door of death guilty rather than forgiven, that is the worst imaginable fate.

While you are living your life it seems so full and rich and complex. But after you die it gets real simple. Someday your entire life will be reduced to a little dash between two dates on a tombstone. And given the whole sweep of human history, representing your life span with a dash is probably about the right size. And yet

eternity rides on the tail end of that dash. Your position before God when that second date arrived determines whether you exist for eternity in paradise with God or in torment in hell.

And if you live according to your own wisdom and follow your own way you may have lots of fun for a few years, but after you die that little dash will soon be forgotten and your life will disappear into insignificance. But if you trust in His way – if you prefer nearness to God over the treasures of this world, then that dash will be like a seed that will grow and expand in its impact for all eternity.

“Only one life, twill soon be passed. Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

This world doesn't care about dying well – why should they? If they think death is the end, what does it matter how one dies? But I believe Your Word. You have said that death is not the end. It is the blessed gateway through which I can pass to see You face to face! It is the dark currier who will carry me to Your presence.

I am nothing – less than a speck in the universe, and yet by the way I die I can actually bring honor and glory to Your name. Oh, let it be, dear Lord!