

Title: The King is Dead  
Text: 1 Samuel 31  
Theme: Man's ways lead to destruction  
Series: 1 Samuel  
Prop Stmtnt: The way that seems right to man leads to death, but God will overrule even that.

Read Text:

In the beginning of 1 Samuel, the children of Israel are in danger of being completely overrun by the Philistines and other enemies. Israel enjoyed seasons of rest brought by the judges, but these would not last and life in sin, slavery, oppression and poverty would return. Then came one of the worst defeats that the nation had ever experienced. In one particularly bad war with the Philistines, the sons of the high priest were killed, the Ark of the Covenant was captured and the high priest died. A child born on that day was named Ichabod because the glory had departed. Hope was gone.

In the end of 1 Samuel, the children of Israel are in danger of being completely overrun by the Philistines. Israel enjoyed seasons of rest brought by her first king, but this would not last and the rejection of God by the king, led to a rejection of the king by God and now, a return to slavery, oppression and poverty was almost certain. This day was a particularly bad battle with the Philistines. Three sons of the king were killed, the king died, his armor-bearer died, the army was routed, cities in Israel were abandoned and the Philistines sent missionaries throughout their land preaching the gospel of Dagon. Yahweh had lost. Saul was dead. The victory was almost a total rout.

Chapter 31 marks the sad, sad end of the life of Saul. He died without God and without hope. There was no last-minute repentance, no cries to God for rescue, but one last act of self-will in dishonor. Chapter 31 goes back a few days now. We just concluded the story of David being rescued from himself and then rescuing his families in a rout of the Amalekites that results in an incredibly large bounty. Meanwhile, the contrast is stark. Saul cannot rescue himself, he cannot rescue others, his forces are routed, and his people are robbed. The Philistines enjoy the bounty and his death is the pinnacle of the tragedy.

### 1. **The tragedy of a wasted life** (1-13)

To American political history nerds, Aaron Burr was the 3<sup>rd</sup> vice-president of the United States, who is infamous for killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel (while he was V.P. by the way) and for being arrested in Alabama 3 years later and charged with treason for his alleged plot to create his own country here in these United States. The real tragedy of Aaron Burr is his rejection of the gospel. Aaron had a brilliant mind. He was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest theologian that his country has ever produced. Aaron's father was a winsome and godly pastor, but died while Aaron was still young. Aaron's mom, Esther was a gracious and godly lady. While Aaron was at Yale, there was a revival movement on campus. After one service, Aaron seemed to be really impacted by the message and was going with a number of

other students who were interested in professing faith in Christ, when he was spotted by a fellow student who yelled out, "Look at Aaron Burr going into the inquiry room." Aaron, embarrassed, pivoted and jested, "I was only fooling." He never would bend the knee of his heart to Christ. His brilliant mind became the occasion for a proud and stubborn heart to drive this very skilled and capable man to a tragic life and a tragic end. He died, penniless in a boarding house. He had such promise and such an opportunity, but he wasted it on himself and became a bane to those around him. Like Saul, there were many times that Aaron could have turned to the Lord. In Saul's case, in spite of the abundant reminders of God's grace to him, Saul never really took it to heart. Up until the very end of his life, Saul was surrounded by honor and that honor was evidence of God's grace to him.

#### **A. Saul was surrounded by honor undeservingly so.**

##### **1) His sons**

The Philistines were on an elevated area called Shunem and the army of Israel was by the spring near Jezreel. The battle was enjoined in the valley that lay between them. Look at the verbs in the opening verses. The Philistines fought, the men of Israel fled and fell, slain on Mt. Gilboa. The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons. Jonathan and his brothers died before their dad did. Based on the topography it is pretty clear that in spite of Israel's retreat, Jonathan and his brothers attempted a stand on Mt. Gilboa, hoping that the higher ground would give them a little advantage. The chariots of the Philistines would be useless now, however, the Philistines called in the archers, and their arrows of death found their mark. The sons of the king were killed. The final ring of protection had been broken and the enemy was closing in on Saul.

We know more about Jonathan than we Abinadab and Malchi-shua, but three of Saul's sons died fighting for their father. In Jonathan's case we know him to be a God-fearing, God-trusting, risk-taking, humble, faithful, and honorable man. When you compare Jonathan to David, Jonathan looks way better, although David's life is dealt with in greater detail. But, every time we see Jonathan, we are impressed with the character of this guy. From our perspective he would have been an incredible king.

This is so different than almost anything we see in our world, particularly in our political world. Jonathan is loyal and honorable, but not because this is what he has to do in order to get the throne. Jonathan's honor does not get him the throne, it gets him killed. Jonathan is not honorable because it will make life go well for him. He is honorable even in death because he is honorable and faithful to his father, the king, even if his father is not faithful. This was the role that God called him to play. Like the John the Baptist, Jonathan prepared the way for another king and died an early death under tragic circumstances, but having fulfilled his role in God's plan to the fullest. Dale Ralph Davies said, "...Jonathan laid aside a kingdom he could not have to enter a kingdom he could not lose."

Many may look at this and think, "what a waste." Why didn't Jonathan save his own life? There is no waste when you die at 30, 40 or 50, pointing people to Christ. The waste is shriveling on

the vine at 60, 70, or 80 when your loss of the temporary things that you have existed for in your shallow and unexamined life fuels a bitter heart and closes the blinds on a very small world.

If this battle were a scene in an epic movie, the action would go to slow motion, the clash of violence, the screams of man and the thundering of the tympani would fade while the strains of a sad cello would compel your eyes to tear, and your heart to be heavy. Saul, look at your sons. They are with you to the end. They are willing to die with you, for you and they do. They were faithful to you. Do you realize the grace of God to you through your sons? Do you realize what a gift these men were to you? Do you not see how kind God has been to you and up until the very end, he has surrounded you with examples of honor because God is worth trusting in, no matter what. There is no evidence that Saul saw his sons and their bravery as a mercy of God toward him. There was nothing in his heart that believed now.

The Philistines are like sharks when there is blood in the water. The archers find Saul and their volleys are relentless and find their mark. Saul is wounded, badly. He is incapable of fighting, yet death has not yet come. He fears that his dying would be prolonged and that he would suffer more indignity if he is captured by the enemy. He may be dying, but he is still the king and he issues one last order, this time to his armor-bearer. "Draw your sword and thrust me through."

## 2) His armor-bearer

"Draw your sword and thrust me through?" The armor-bearer is in the most honorable of positions because the king entrusts his very life to this man. This man's number one job is to protect the king at all costs. And now, the king orders him to kill him. By now we have become used to the irrational and godless orders that Saul so often gives. He orders the death of David, the death of the priests, the death of David again and again, and yet he spares Agag the king of the Amalekites. Saul orders his men to find him a medium in direct violation of his law. And now, to the man who is sworn to protect his life, he orders him to kill him. That is an order that the armor-bearer cannot carry out. Saul feared the Philistines, but his armor-bearer feared God.

There it is. One last chance. Why would this man disobey? Why would this man who kept every order ever given by Saul refuse this one? Because there is a God worth believing in and being faithful to, no matter what. Saul, in your last minutes of life, you are surrounded by men who believe in God, unlike you. Therefore, they are going to die, unlike you.

Saul's sadly died how he sadly lived. He took matters into his own hands and determined that he would never take a backseat to anyone; not to David, not to Jonathan, not to Samuel, not to the Philistines, and in the end, not to God. This was not an act of honor. This was not an act of contrition and sacrifice for having lost in battle. This was defiance.

The death of Saul and his sons was devastating news that sent the Israelites running east with whatever they could gather. The orcs of the Philistines would be descending on these towns in

the next few days and the plundering, raping and murdering would be like a plague, and with no one to stop it. A preview of what to expect happened the very next day.

As the Philistines were stripping the dead, they found Saul and his sons. They cut off his head, they stripped off his armor, fastened that to a wall in the temple of Ashtaroah and they fastened his body to a wall in Beth-shan in all likelihood without any clothing. They would shame this man, his nation and Israel's God. And, in that moment, it looked as if they were right. Was Dagon the real god? Was Dagon more powerful? Were the faithful in Israel fools to believe that somehow, someday Yahweh would raise his people up again? There were some who believed that, and while they appeared to be in the minority, these people were willing to stake their lives on it.

### 3) The men of Jabesh (11-13)

This is an amazing account. The bravery that these men displayed is astounding, but what is even more astounding is their sacrificial gratitude. Do you remember their story? The second sermon that I preached from 1 Samuel 11 may have been my favorite sermon in this series so far. Nahash the Ammonite had laid siege to the city of Jabesh-Gilead and was poised to maim the men, rape the women and plunder the goods. The people of the city had no hope. They sent messengers across the Jordan to the new king, Saul, but their expectations were very low. Up until this point Saul showed no leadership, no courage and no skill. But something unexpected happened. The Spirit of God came upon him and in a few days, this new king, had assembled an army that looked like that of an empire. Jabesh-Gilead went from the pit of despondency to the heights of celebration. Saul had come through. The destruction of the Ammonites was huge. The people of Jabesh-Gilead were saved and these men, never forgot it.

Their act of heroism was a tribute to their gratitude for being rescued from certain destruction. It was also a reminder of what kind of a leader Saul could have been. He was unstoppable when the Spirit of God was on him. No one, on that day could have imagined that he would end up like this. But these men did not forget. Even though, Saul had long since turned away from that kind of conviction, leadership and bravery, they honored what he was at one time and mourned the loss of that man.

Pride is so prevalent and it is so incredibly foolish. God said in Isaiah 65.2, *"I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people..."* The patience of God and the mercy of God is amazing. Why on earth would anyone reject that? Why? Why, when it is so clear that you cannot save yourself, that you are mortal, that you are fragile, vulnerable, prone to weakness and failure would you refuse God? This is the tragedy of a wasted life. That does not have to be your story. You may have made a colossal mess, but the fact that you are here means that there are more chapters in your story to write. Make the stories of grace, gospel, humility, surrender and worship. There is a God who is worthy of your complete allegiance. His hands are held out to you. You know which ones they are. They have the nail prints in them.

### **B. Saul rejected the grace of God, even to the end.**

Could Saul's death at his own hands be an act of honor? No. Saul was anointed by God to be the king and he was expected to live in a manner that is keeping with that role. His armor-bearer knew what David knew and that it was wrong to touch the one God had anointed to be the leader. If it was wrong for the armor-bearer to kill Saul, it was wrong for Saul to kill Saul. But then Saul was never one to honor biblical categories. The pattern of his life was to reject God's commands, then whine about the consequences and act as if he was the victim. This is very instructive. I see so many examples of people who absolutely reject God and live out their rebellion only to experience severe consequences for it. Instead of letting the consequences drive them to humble surrender, they use the consequences as a reason to hate God even more. They accuse the justice of God of not being fair, when in reality it is the mercy of God that is not fair. If you hate God, you will deny his mercy. If you deny his mercy, what is left? You have no hope. Saul died without hope. His death was his final act of rebellion. Even at the end Saul was surrounded by honorable men of faith. But Saul, who rejected the words of God used his last act, his last command, to reject God's will.

I do think that there are times when a person is so hopeless because they are truly without hope in Christ, that they end their life as an act of rebellion against their Creator. I also believe that there are times when a person feels hopeless or wrongly believes they are hopeless and in that moment of weakness and vulnerability take their own life. Suicide rates are at historic highs. While I think there are reasons for the trend, you cannot paint with a broad brush on this. I have given this a lot of thought. This is how my sister and grandmother died. I don't know all there is to know about what was going with them. I do know this; it did not have to be this way. What was true for Saul was true for the nation.

## **2. The tragedy of a misplaced faith.**

Israel got the king they wanted. They got the king they demanded. They got the king who was just like them. The tragedy of Saul is a mirror that reflects the tragic misplaced faith of the nation. They wanted a king so they could be like all the nations and what did it get them? The end of the book sounds so much like the beginning of the book. The army is defeated, the enemy is celebrating to her gods, and the reputation of Yahweh is devastated.

Some of you are tempted by the elections that come around every 2 to 4 years. You are tempted to believe that if your person were elected, then we could make this place heaven on earth. Please listen carefully. I think you should vote and I think you should vote for people who will most faithfully reflect the character of Christ. But there is no human leader who can turn this thing around and keep it that way. Do not put your faith in man. We don't need a king like us. We need one who is not like us. And we have one, his name is Jesus.

In January, we will pick up with 2 Samuel and for 10 chapters we will see the rise of David and will celebrate and enjoy many of his successes. But, even this king, whose flag still flies 3,000 years later, will break your heart, Jesus, the son of David, will mend it. Bad faith has to die so that true faith will live.