

1 Samuel 31

- We're wrapping up our story of Saul's fall and David's rise
 - It's been ten years since David first entered Saul's court
 - And in those years, the Lord has trained David in skills necessary for his time as king
 - David's been trained in warfare and in music
 - He's learned shepherding and diplomacy
 - And during his time in the wilderness, he's learned some of the most important lessons of his entire life
 - He's learned to rely on the Lord, to seek Him in prayer and follow His commands
 - He's suffered loss, deprivation and despair
 - He's known triumph, seen miracles and found love
 - He's almost ready to take the throne
- And so today's the day Saul and Jonathan will die on the battlefield, and as a result the nation will seek for a new king
 - The question of who should succeed Saul will be on everyone's mind
 - And with David having been living in the land of Israel's enemies for the past 16 months, the answer isn't obvious
 - The Lord needs to make sure David is the natural and only choice in the minds of the people
 - For he is the Lord's choice
 - Therefore, the rest of Chapter 30 is devoted to explaining how the Lord prepares the hearts of the people to receive David as king even as He removes Saul
 - David has just returned from defeating the Amalekites in the south and rescuing the families of all his men
 - He won the victory with only 400 men

- He was forced to leave 200 of his men behind due to exhaustion
- Despite having a third fewer men, David's army has still managed to win a great victory
- And as a result of his victory, he's taken considerable spoil
- In v.20 last week we read that the people called this war booty "David's spoil"
 - In other words, David has the right to determine the distribution of this wealth
 - Logically, he will share it with those who helped him fight in the battle
 - But David is prepared to go well beyond that
- Here's another difference between David and Saul
 - David is a man after God's own heart
 - So David does the unexpected with this bounty

1Sam. 30:21 When David came to the two hundred men who were too exhausted to follow David, who had also been left at the brook Besor, and they went out to meet David and to meet the people who were with him, then David approached the people and greeted them.

1Sam. 30:22 Then all the wicked and worthless men among those who went with David said, "Because they did not go with us, we will not give them any of the spoil that we have recovered, except to every man his wife and his children, that they may lead them away and depart."

1Sam. 30:23 Then David said, "You must not do so, my brothers, with what the Lord has given us, who has kept us and delivered into our hand the band that came against us.

1Sam. 30:24 "And who will listen to you in this matter? For as his share is who goes down to the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike."

1Sam. 30:25 So it has been from that day forward, that he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel to this day.

- David and his 400 men and the families they rescued return from the battle and enter Ziklag greeting those who returned
 - The word for greet is *shalom*, which means they wished peace upon these who stayed behind
 - It's probably an understatement for what would have been an emotional reunion for those families

- But it's also an indication that David is not going to hold these men in contempt for their unwillingness to enter the battle
- Once again David displays a degree of compassion out of keeping with the way most military commanders thought
- But this is in keeping with God's heart
- But within the group that entered battle, there were some men who were not like David's heart
 - They are called wicked and worthless in v.22
 - And their wickedness is evident by their willingness to cut off from receiving any of the spoil all those who didn't fight
 - This was probably normal for most armies
 - But it wasn't David's heart
- And the reason David viewed the situation differently was because he understood the source of the victory differently
 - The wicked and worthless soldiers were taking full credit for this victory
 - They believed they had defeated the Amalekites by their own power
 - And therefore, they felt they deserved the spoil
 - And conversely, the men who failed to fight could not claim a part in the victory nor the spoil
 - But remember we saw last week that these men were likely greatly outnumbered in the fight
 - The number of Amalekites who escaped the battle on camels was equal to the total number of David's force
 - So we can be sure these men were a long shot to win this battle
 - What explains their victory then?
 - David recognized that the Lord brought the victory supernaturally, in keeping with His promise to David that they would recover their families
 - In v.23 David says the Lord gave them the victory

- And then David concludes that the share of the spoil must be divided equally since no one earned this victory
- The ones who went into battle could take no more credit for the victory than those who stayed behind with the baggage
- So the spoil should be divided equally
- The principle David is following has profound implications for all believers in many areas of our spiritual lives
 - This principle recognizes that believers can't take credit for God's work through us
 - And therefore we can't use our successes in ministry as cause for individual distinction at the expense of others
 - This principle impacts how we talk about our success, how we fund our work and how we qualify those who serve in the church
 - Paul says it this way

Rom. 12:3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

Rom. 12:4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,

Rom. 12:5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Rom. 12:6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;

Rom. 12:7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching;

Rom. 12:8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

- If the Lord has given us the means for our success in serving Him, then who are we to elevate ourselves among others?
 - If we are part of a body, then how important can any one part be?
 - And if the same Spirit is empowering all of us as He desires, then what part did we play in creating any distinction?
- When we operate with an awareness of this principle, several good things will happen

- First, we remain humble, or as Paul put it, we have “sound judgment”
 - In Greek, the term means having the right mind
 - We see the spiritual world accurately, without deluding ourselves and inflaming our pride
 - We’ll worry less about perceptions of us and spend less time promoting ourselves and more time lifting up the Lord
 - We’ll experience contentment with our anonymity knowing that it’s woe to us when men speak well of you
 - Men and women who serve God in this way typically accomplish far more for the kingdom than those who make personal recognition a priority
- Secondly, living under this principle means we be preoccupied with the contributions of others as they seek to serve the Lord
 - We can set aside questions of who does more or who does enough to serve the Lord
 - We can trust that the Lord will judge all fairly and we can rest in that assurance without passing judgment on one another
 - Again, Paul puts it this way

Rom. 14:4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Rom. 14:10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Rom. 14:11 For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall give praise to God.”

Rom. 14:12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

Rom. 14:13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.

- David has made a wise and courageous decision
 - He has resisted the temptation to selfishly exclude the 200 men so as to ensure the 400 received a higher reward

- Moreover, he has set forth a principle that all those who serve in Israel are equal beneficiaries of the Lord's blessing
- In v.25 we're told that as a result of David's actions, a new ordinance or statute was instituted in the nation
- And this unconventional choice becomes the opening for David to claim the throne of Israel
- David's wisdom doesn't end with his distribution to the soldiers
 - David holds some of the spoil back so he can use it to win over the entire nation

[1Sam. 30:26](#) Now when David came to Ziklag, he sent some of the spoil to the elders of Judah, to his friends, saying, "Behold, a gift for you from the spoil of the enemies of the Lord:

[1Sam. 30:27](#) to those who were in Bethel, and to those who were in Ramoth of the Negev, and to those who were in Jattir,

[1Sam. 30:28](#) and to those who were in Aroer, and to those who were in Siphmoth, and to those who were in Eshtemoa,

[1Sam. 30:29](#) and to those who were in Racal, and to those who were in the cities of the Jerahmeelites, and to those who were in the cities of the Kenites,

[1Sam. 30:30](#) and to those who were in Hormah, and to those who were in Bor-ashan, and to those who were in Athach,

[1Sam. 30:31](#) and to those who were in Hebron, and to all the places where David himself and his men were accustomed to go."

- David distributes a portion of the plunder to the elders of Judah
 - Judah is the tribe of David and these towns were the principle places David had spent his years wandering during his time in the wilderness
 - David is taking the same principle we just examined and applying it on an even broader scale
 - David's victory over the enemies of Judah wasn't just the result of a momentary intervention by God
 - On the contrary, the Lord had been working steadily over the past ten years to bring David through the entire episode of wandering
 - It seems that David has learned the final and most important lesson of his time wandering

- That the Lord was forever and always working in every circumstance to care for David and direct his steps
- Therefore, the spoil from this victory was just the latest evidence of God's grace in David's life
- So as David reflected on the events that brought him to this point, he must have realized that the elders of Judah were likewise responsible for this victory
 - When the elders in Bethel or in the Negev supported David, they were doing the Lord's work
 - When the Kenites or the men of Hormah protected or fed David, they were instruments in God's hands
 - So when David received his reward in battle, he understood that the Lord was working long before to grant this outcome
 - And therefore, these men should share in the spoil too
- Not only was David living true to the principle he established, but he was also acting in a very politically astute manner
 - This gesture was sure to cement loyalty among the elders of Judah
 - So that after the death of Saul later this day in battle in the north of Israel, David will be positioned to receive their support
 - And David is well prepared to assumed that role
 - In fact, if we glance back across the events of this chapter, we see David exhibiting a list of admirable leadership traits
 - He shows empathy, decisiveness, kindness, integrity, generosity and above all, faith
 - These qualities were present in David to varying degrees from years ago
 - But his experiences in the wilderness fleeing Saul have matured him in necessary and important ways
 - So that now David is clearly qualified to sit on the throne of Israel, in a way that Saul never was
 - And in this way, Saul and David become a striking picture of Satan and Christ, respectively

- Saul assumed the throne of Israel yet lacked the proper pedigree and qualifications
- He wasn't of the correct tribe and he didn't possess the tested character nor heart of God
- And as a result, the usurper's reign brought only death and destruction to Israel
- Meanwhile, the Lord raises up a humble servant from unassuming circumstances to rule the nation
 - This man comes from the proper lineage
 - He has a heart after God
 - And after a time of severe testing, he is shown worthy to take the throne of God's people
 - A throne he assumes after the usurper is destroyed
- It's easy to see the comparisons with Satan and Christ
 - Obviously, we aren't suggesting that Saul is satanic or evil or even an unbeliever
 - We're just noting the way the arc of his life represents Satan's role in contending with Christ
 - Satan wants the throne reserved for Christ, and for a time he appears to have it as he rules the fallen world enslaved to him
- But a humble Christ was tested and proven worthy to sit at the righthand of the Father
 - Even now the kingdom has been ripped away from Satan and granted to Christ
 - Yet for a time, the body of Christ is being tested, living in a wilderness of the world
 - While our enemy desperately tries to hold on to power and persecutes us as he did our Lord
 - But in a day to come, the Lord will assume His rightful throne and the enemy will be vanquished
- And now has come the time for David to assume his throne

[1Sam. 31:1](#) Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.

[1Sam. 31:2](#) The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua the sons of Saul.

[1Sam. 31:3](#) The battle went heavily against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was badly wounded by the archers.

[1Sam. 31:4](#) Then Saul said to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and pierce me through with it, otherwise these uncircumcised will come and pierce me through and make sport of me." But his armor bearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. So Saul took his sword and fell on it.

[1Sam. 31:5](#) When his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword and died with him.

[1Sam. 31:6](#) Thus Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together.

- The story now turns back to Mt. Gilboa and to Saul and the army of Israel in the north
 - This scene was probably taking place simultaneously during David's fight with the Amalekites in the south
 - Obviously, the Lord is working to time these two outcomes so that they create a contrast with one another
 - On the one hand, Saul's ignominious defeat in the north
 - And on the other, David's triumph in the south
 - The Philistines press the battle and the result is exactly as Samuel foretold the night before
 - Saul's son Jonathan is killed on the battlefield
 - But Saul's other sons Abinadab and Malchi-shua are also killed
 - Once again, this is to be expected since the Lord has said that Saul's dynasty would come to an end
 - And then Saul himself dies and in a most shameful way
 - Saul is struck by multiple arrows and is mortally wounded
 - Recognizing he has come to his end, Saul instructs his armor bearer to kill him lest the Gentiles capture him alive
 - The armor bearer is reluctant to follow Saul's orders for obvious reasons

- Had the armor bearer killed the king, there would be no one alive to testify to Saul's instructions
- And the armor bearer would have been seen as Saul's murderer
- So he refuses to comply
- Saul then decides to do the deed himself, committing suicide by falling on the point of his own sword
 - Saul's death is the final irony in his sad story
 - The day earlier, the Lord had finally spoken to Saul as Saul desired, saying Saul would die in battle
 - The Lord's silence had been the product of Saul's unwillingness to submit to the word of God in prior days
 - Yet nevertheless, Saul was determined to hear from God, necessitating his visit to the medium
 - And once more Saul has heard the voice of the Lord and chosen to go his own way, even in his death
 - Rather than conceding to the Lord's will, Saul decides to take his own life
 - Of course, the word of God was still correct that Saul dies as a result of the battle
 - But the specific cause was Saul's own hand, a fitting conclusion to a life that rejected the word of the Lord time and again
 - It's interesting that Saul was more concerned with what might happen to him when the Philistines found him
 - When he should have been focused on what was to happen when he faced the Lord following his death
 - When the armor bearer sees Saul take his own life, he decides to follow in like way
 - The armor bearer falls on his own sword
 - This was not an uncommon response under the circumstances
 - The armor bearer was charged with protecting the life of the king

- And if the king died, especially in such a dishonorable way, the armor bearer was likely to be executed anyway
- His death simply emphasizes that Saul's sin and death brought many others down with him
 - Not only did this armor bearer lose his life because of Saul
 - But so did many in Israel's army on that day
 - As we read in v.6, all Saul's army died on that day
 - Many wives lost husbands and many children lost fathers
 - Such is the consequence of sin
- Those consequences extended well beyond the dead on the battlefield

1Sam. 31:7 When the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, with those who were beyond the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned the cities and fled; then the Philistines came and lived in them.

- As a result of the army's defeat, the entire north of Israel is overrun by the Philistines
 - The towns throughout the Jezreel Valley and beyond the Jordan are left exposed to the Philistines
 - So the Jewish people and other peoples living in these towns abandon their homes and fields in anticipation of the Philistines' advance
 - This is a terrible defeat for the people and the low point in Israel's history since entering the land
- This is the opposite outcome from the one Saul was supposed to accomplish
 - The Lord declared that Saul was the one through whom He would deliver Israel from the Philistines

1Sam. 9:10 Then Saul said to his servant, "Well said; come, let us go." So they went to the city where the man of God was.

1Sam. 9:11 As they went up the slope to the city, they found young women going out to draw water and said to them, "Is the seer here?"

[1Sam. 9:12](#) They answered them and said, “He is; see, he is ahead of you. Hurry now, for he has come into the city today, for the people have a sacrifice on the high place today.

[1Sam. 9:13](#) “As soon as you enter the city you will find him before he goes up to the high place to eat, for the people will not eat until he comes, because he must bless the sacrifice; afterward those who are invited will eat. Now therefore, go up for you will find him at once.”

[1Sam. 9:14](#) So they went up to the city. As they came into the city, behold, Samuel was coming out toward them to go up to the high place.

[1Sam. 9:15](#) Now a day before Saul’s coming, the Lord had revealed this to Samuel saying, [1Sam. 9:16](#) “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel; and he will deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have regarded My people, because their cry has come to Me.”

- Now we understand that the Lord didn’t mean that Saul would defeat the Philistines once and all
- Instead, he simply meant that Saul would win meaningful victories in his early days
- But in the end he failed in his mission because of his disobedience and sin
- In fact, reading this opening passage again reveals an interesting symmetry to Saul’s time as king in Israel
 - The story began with an innocent Saul seeking for Samuel and finding him with the help of a female guide
 - And the story ended with a wicked Saul seeking for Samuel by means of a female medium
 - His life has gone full circle, albeit in a downward spiral
- And now our story comes to an end with the final disposition of Saul’s body

[1Sam. 31:8](#) It came about on the next day when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

[1Sam. 31:9](#) They cut off his head and stripped off his weapons, and sent them throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people.

[1Sam. 31:10](#) They put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

[1Sam. 31:11](#) Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul,

[1Sam. 31:12](#) all the valiant men rose and walked 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.

[1Sam. 31:13](#) They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

- When the Philistines were scavenging among the dead, they come across Saul and Jonathan and Saul's other sons on Mt. Gilboa
 - They do to Saul what David had done to Goliath years earlier
 - They decapitate the king's dead body, remove his weapons and put his head and weapons on a tour of the Philistine cities
 - The land celebrates this great victory over Israel
 - In another contrast to the start of the book, Saul's head ends up in one pagan temple (according to 1 Chronicles 10:10) and his weapons in another
 - The book opened with Samuel entering service in God's temple
 - And it ends with Saul in a pagan temple
 - Saul's headless body was nailed to the walls of the Jewish town of Beth-shan
 - This town is located on the east end of the Jezreel valley, near the battle where Saul lost his life
 - In further irony, Saul died worrying what the Philistines would do to him, yet the very thing he tried to avoid happened anyway
 - By treating his body in this way, the Philistines were bringing Saul great dishonor in death
 - To treat a dead body in this way was great disrespect
- Eventually the news of Saul's body reached a nearby Jewish town
 - Jabesh-gilead was about 13 miles away from Beth-shan, which took most of the night to reach by foot
 - They wanted to show respect to their king even in death
 - So they removed him from the wall and burned his body probably to cleanse it of abuse

- And then they buried the bones in Jabesh
- This town had been rescued earlier by Saul from the Amalekites, so they were simply repaying Saul
 - They buried him under a tamarisk tree
 - That location serves to remind us of where Saul spent some of the most pivotal moments of his inglorious career as king
 - Earlier, Saul acted foolishly fearing David and making rash accusations while seated under a similar tree
 - Later in 2 Samuel David will further honor the king by reintering his bones in the family tomb
- Thomas Constable offers a fitting summary of the life of Saul:

This is how the life of Israel's first king, the man after the Israelites' own heart, ended. He was full of promise at his anointing, having many natural qualities that could have contributed to a successful reign. He also possessed the Holy Spirit's enablement after his anointing. Unfortunately he did not become a source of blessing to Israel and the world, nor did God bless him personally. Instead he became a curse to Israel, the world, and himself. He did so because he failed to acknowledge Yahweh as the true king of Israel and because he failed to view himself as Yahweh's servant. His life teaches us that the key to blessing or cursing is one's trust in, and obedience to, God.

This book opened with Samuel's birth, hope, and an answer to prayer. It closes with Saul's death, despair, and an act of divine judgment. It is a book of transition, contrasting rule by God with rule by man. If we want to run things, they will turn out as they did for Saul. If we let God rule, they will turn out as they did for Samuel and David.