**The Death of Saul and His Sons**

1 Samuel 31:1-13 Key Verse 31:6

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

Today we reach the end of the book of 1 Samuel, which is also the end of Saul, Israel’s first king. It’s not a happy ending, for Saul or Israel. But in truth, it’s not really an ending at all; it’s God setting the stage for the next step of his salvation plan. And there is one ray of light in the tragic story of Saul’s end: it’s the thankfulness of people who remembered the good things that God used Saul for. Today we want to learn how to face life with a different kind of spirit than the one Saul had, and we’ll see what thankfulness can really do. The message has two parts.

I. How Saul met his end (1-4)

Today’s passage is the direct continuation of the events that started in Chapter 28. The Philistines amassed a huge army to launch an attack against Israel. In Chapters 29 and 30, we followed how this affected David, who was living among the Philistines with the 600 men and their families who followed him. David was in a tight spot, because it seemed he would have to fight against his own people under Achish, the king of Gath. But God gave David a way out and had him fight a different battle, against the Amalekites who had raided Ziklag in his absence and captured all the women and children. God gave David victory; he rescued everyone, with no one missing, and returned to Ziklag with a large amount of plunder. In all this, God purposely kept David away from this fateful battle between the Philistines and Israel.

So now we return to that battle. Saul had gathered the army of Israel to confront the amassing Philistine army. But when Saul saw the size of that Philistine army, his heart was filled with terror (28:5). Saul tried to inquire of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer because of Saul’s disobedience. At that time, Saul should have repented from his heart and sought the Lord all the more earnestly. But instead, he went to a pagan medium to try to bring up the spirit of Samuel to tell him what to do. What he got instead was a message of judgment, prophesying that Saul and his sons would also be dead the next day when the battle took place. At this, Saul was paralyzed with fear, but the medium helped him eat and get some strength back.

In today’s passage we see the battle itself, and Saul and his sons participating in it. We might wonder why Saul, after hearing what he heard through the medium, didn’t try to escape the battle. Someone might say that Saul was very courageous to join the battle anyway after the prophecy of doom he had heard. However, to me, also based on Saul’s actions we see later in this passage, I would say it’s not real courage but more like hopeless resignation to fate. I mean, given what he heard through the medium, why wouldn’t Saul at least send his sons away? This looks more like the attitude that Apostle Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 7:10: “Worldly sorrow brings death.”

As the battle is joined, right away things start to go badly for Israel. Look at verse 1. *“Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell dead on Mount Gilboa.”* Everything started to happen as Saul feared it would. In addition, the Philistines began to target those they recognized were the leaders of the Israelite divisions, and they were successful in that at well. Verse 2 says, *“**The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua.”* Saul lost three of his sons in one day. Mercifully, these were not all of Saul’s sons; as we’ll see in 2 Samuel, Saul had one remaining son who was still a child at the time of this battle.

Clearly, Jonathan’s death is the most tragic. Jonathan, as we saw, was a young man of genuine faith which bore fruit of courage and true friendship to David. He did not deserve to be killed for his father Saul’s sins. It’s hard to make sense of God’s will in tragedies like this. But perhaps it was God’s mercy to take Jonathan before he saw the tragedy that befell his father’s family, and no doubt Jonathan died bravely in battle.

Finally, the battle came to Saul himself. When we read about battles of the Biblical times, we often see that the king is able to escape when he realizes the battle is lost. The king usually has the fastest horse or chariot and is in position for a strategic getaway. But that was not the case here. The Philistine archers were persistent in going after Saul, and they got within bow-shot range. Look at verse 3. *“**The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.”* It doesn’t say where on his body Saul was hit by the arrow or arrows; but Saul, being intimately familiar with fighting and killing throughout his life, could immediately tell that his wounds were fatal. He knew he was done for. I heard that the US founding father Alexander Hamilton had the same realization immediately when he was shot in the side in his fateful duel with Aaron Burr. Also, for Saul, there was nowhere to escape to; it was only a matter of time before the Philistines caught up with him in person.

How did Saul face these last moments of his life? They say that the way a person dies tells us a lot about what they are made of. What did Saul say? Look at verse 4a. *“**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.’”* From what we read in the Bible about the Philistines, Saul is not wrong. He knows he is not surviving this, and he wants to have a quick and merciful death. He fears that if the Philistines get to him they could torture him and give him a fate worse than death.

However, Saul’s last wish was not granted. Verse 4b says his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it. It’s hard to blame the armor-bearer here for being hesitant to kill his king; maybe he even thought Saul could survive. So, in the end, Saul does himself in; verse 4b says “Saul took his own sword and fell on it,” a kind of warrior’s suicide, like we hear the Japanese Samurai would do, committing “seppuku” or as it’s more commonly known, “harakiri”.

It’s a very dark and gruesome event, full of the dirty reality of war and death. What could we possibly learn from this? I don’t want to judge Saul’s actions too harshly, because I have certainly never been in a situation like that. Nobody can be sure how they would confront such a situation until they actually face it. On the other hand, though, if our faith is genuine, it should show itself even in the most extreme situations. If Saul had had greater faith, could he have acted differently? I think so. He could have faced the Philistines and fought against them to the last breath, not being full of dread of what people could do to him. I bet that’s how Jonathan went out. Even if Saul had no strength left to fight, even with just words he could have defied the Philistines in the name of the Lord with his last breath.

Anyway, the point is that Saul’s death was not a blessed death, but one that showed in some ways the judgment of God that Saul was under. Of course, the main tragedy of Saul’s life was not in how he died but in how he spent his life before that; how he died was just the cap on the end of that. As we saw in studying 1 Samuel, after Saul disobeyed God and lost God’s blessing, instead of genuinely repenting he just projected all his fears on to David, spending years in his obsession with hunting down an innocent person who was no danger to him, committing atrocities in the process. People become obsessed or demon-possessed like Saul did because they won’t simply turn to God, and in avoiding that their thinking becomes so distorted. Notice that when Saul finally meets his end here, it has nothing to do with David. Saul was done in by the Philistines, the obvious enemies of Israel. If Saul had been more focused on protecting Israel from the Philistines, as he was anointed to do, he probably would never have gotten in this situation. So Saul’s death is just the endpoint of a life wasted as a result of not repenting.

We study this so we may know how to avoid such a result of our life. The good news is that nobody who has faith has to end up the way Saul did. One thing we all agreed on in our Friday night Bible study is that, even to the very end, if Saul had truly humbled himself and sought the Lord, God would surely have shown some kind of mercy to him. But instead, because Saul had no faith, at his last moment he gave in to despair. “Despair” means ultimate hopelessness. Despair, according to the Christian existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, is the true “sickness unto death” that Jesus spoke of. But despair is the one state a believer never, ever has to give in to.

As a positive example, later on, when David is king, he commits a terrible sin, and he hears through a prophet God’s severe penalty for that sin. But David, even though he hears God’s judgment pronounced, doesn’t just lie down in despair, but fasts and prays all night, with tears, begging God to change his mind. That’s the difference between faith and fatalism. By the grace of God, knowing our God’s mercy in Jesus, none of us has to end up spiritually in the place Saul did. No matter how many years we’ve wasted before now, we can cry out to him even when it humanly seems too late and he can do things we couldn’t have imagined...even to save our soul and bring us to paradise.

II. An act of courageous thankfulness (5-13)

When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he took his own sword and fell on it. The defeat of Israel was total; according to verse 6, *“Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all hist men died together that same day.”* Verse 7 tells us that what was left of the Israelite army fled. When the Israelites who lived in nearby towns saw this, they also fled for their lives, abandoning their towns, and the Philistines came and occupied them. So Israel lost significant territory as a result of this disastrous battle.

Because everyone from Israel’s side was either dead or had run far away, there was no one left even to bring back Saul’s body. Instead, it lay there until the next day, when the Philistines came to loot the dead (8). When the Philistines realized they had found the body of King Saul, they were very excited. They cut off his head and stripped his armor and sent messengers to proclaim the news, verse 9 says among their people, and also in the temple of their idols. Also, they treated Saul’s body in an utterly barbaric way, fastening it to a wall in one of their towns (10), and his armor was put in the temple of the Ashtoreths. Needless to say, this was a great disgrace upon Israel and seems to deny Saul any dignity even in death.

Why does the author show us this gruesome way the Philistines were celebrating? It’s to highlight the Philistines’ misunderstanding of these event in contrast to the truth of what God was really doing. The Philistines’ actions showed that they believed the defeat of Israel meant that their gods had triumphed over the God of Israel. But the Bible shows us the bigger reality, which is that the true God was in control of everything. God allowed this to happen to Saul and the Philistines were merely his instrument. Israel did not lose to the Philistines because Ashtoreth had bigger biceps than Jehovah. The true God has nothing to do with the principle of “might makes right”; rather, he is about justice and righteousness. This is a God who holds even kings accountable.

God didn’t make a covenant with Israel so they could help him one-up other gods, but so he could lead them and teach them his holiness and righteousness and mercy. That’s so far above what the Philistines were boasting about. Jeremiah 9:24 says, *“**but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.”* If the Philistines understood any of this, they would not have been so gleeful, and they certainly would not have desecrated Saul’s body.

There were some people in Israel who had learned something about God. Who were they? In verse 11, we see the people of Jabesh Gilead. Remember them? While Saul was still a young and unproven king, we read in Chapter 11 that Nahash the Ammonite besieged Jabesh Gilead and wouldn’t even let them surrender except on condition of gouging out the right eye of every one of them. When Saul heard about this, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him and he could summon up three hundred thousand men and he rescued Jabesh Gilead with a great rout.

That had been a long time ago now, but still the people of Jabesh remembered. Verse 11 says that when they heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all of their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan where Saul’s body was, and brought back the bodies of Saul and his sons. It was a dangerous nighttime raid. Why did they do this? Practically, it might look like a senseless risk to take for someone who was already dead. But this was a pure and God-pleasing expression of thankfulness. Though the people of Jabesh Gilead no longer had anything to gain from Saul, they were still so grateful for how he saved their lives that they felt compelled to do whatever it took to honor him. It reminds me of when, in the gospels, Mary seemingly poured the whole bottle of very expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet. But Jesus called this act “a beautiful thing”.

Once the men of Jabesh Gilead had rescued the bodies, the people gave Saul and his sons a proper burial and mourned him by fasting for seven days. (13). Someone might question whether it is right to show such unconditional gratitude to someone like Saul who also did so much evil. But this passage shows us that yes, it is right to show gratitude to anyone for anything good they have ever done for us. We are sinners too, so it’s very comforting to realize that even though we make many mistakes, the good things we do will still be remembered, by people as well as by God.

People who only think of their own benefit can never understand the power of thankfulness. But gratitude heals our heart wounds and binds us together in love. What the thankful people of Jabesh Gilead did accomplished something great; it helped take away the disgrace of Israel; it was a step toward healing Israel of the spiritual wounds of Saul’s failure. I’ve experienced how even one small but specific expression of gratitude can dissipate so much distrust and bad feelings. It’s hard to stay mad at someone while you’re remembering something good they did for you. Most of all, we are called to be thankful to Jesus. As the thankfulness of the people of Jabesh Gilead gave them courage to do an honorable act, our thankfulness for Jesus’ grace of dying for us is the true power source of our spiritual life.

In Part 1, we were thinking about how we can have a better result of our life of faith than Saul did. Well, here is another key to that: thankfulness will surely keep our heart in the right place and prevent us from going down the dark path Saul did. As another positive example, there was another Benjamite who was sinning terribly. He even had the same name as Saul. But then one day, Jesus asked this Saul why he was persecuting him and he was changed from Saul to Paul. If you read Paul’s letters, every one is overflowing with expressions of thankfulness, to God and also to people—to his friends in Jesus.

Paul lived a powerful life of mission powered by thankfulness, and when he came to the end of it, he was an unconditional victor, proclaiming, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”* (2Ti 4:7-8)

Today we saw the tragic end of Saul and thought about how we can avoid such a fate. We realized that we must never give in to despair but keep turning back to God even when everything seems hopeless. And we should live every day in the power of gratitude, especially gratitude for Jesus’ grace. After the Summer Conference, we’ll go right on into 2 Samuel and see what new things God is going to do with David. May God bless us to win the victory by trusting God to the end.