



Do You Really Know the King?

A Study in Samuel

An Ignoble Death

1 Samuel 31:1-13

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A Messy Eventuality

As soon as the shaving cream cans came out a few weeks back at the Messy Kids Olympics at Ridge Road, I knew it was going to happen. Despite being dressed like an actual adult and not a lay-about hobo riding the rails, I knew that at some point, at least one child covered in paint, sweat, stink, and shaving cream was going to come and share the blessing with me.

I was destined to be overwhelmed by gloppy, sloppy, filthy, and messy nastiness. When the event devolved into the Organized Mass Chaos portion of the event, it was only a matter of time. All roads were leading to mess. And sure enough, a few young hooligans shared their shaving cream and the water-based paint. Right before it was time to leave. So, I took my messy self and then my children, both having been hosed off after being covered in paint and shaving cream, climbed into my van and a smell that still haunts and lingers came with them.

The best way to describe the stink would be to imagine every kid in the world took off sulfur socks in my van. And to make the van smell better, I shaved. Just the smell of nasty feet with a hint of menthol.

As soon as I got there, I knew what was coming. I had an anticipation of what was to come. While it was messy, it was fun, and I enjoyed it. I saw all those kids running and laughing and screaming with joy and I was hopeful because we were able to, in the middle of the mess, share the good news of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Similarly, when we read 1 Samuel 31, we are to read it in anticipation, with hope for the future. A new king will be coronated in David and the ideal anointed one will rule Israel. There is more to the story. I invite you to 1 Samuel 31. (Read text)

Tragedy At Gilboa

1 Samuel 31 records the tragedy on Mount Gilboa and lets us see how Israel's first anointed one meets his fate. Saul dies in battle against the enemies that he was supposed to subdue, the Philistines (1 Sam. 9:16). This ending of 1 Samuel answers decisively and emphatically the question that the book has been asking: Who may serve as Israel's king? Certainly not Saul. Further, God's anointed will never again be anyone like Saul. We see that in some powerful contrasting figures. David and then the Messiah, Jesus.

Saul had rejected God's authority as the true king of Israel. God was to be Israel's king and Saul would serve as a sort of viceroy, a steward who would act and lead on God's behalf and under God's authority. Saul rejected this role, and these actions were unacceptable behavior for Israel's king. As the narrative unfolds over the course of the book, we see this become more apparent.

Saul was unfit and will serve as a bad example for future Israelite rulers about the dangers of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. As we move further into 2 Samuel, Saul's descendants gradually disappear altogether until the only one left is the poor, unfortunate soul, Mephibosheth – Jonathan's son who is graciously sustained by David in response to the covenant he made with Jonathan.

After a few chapters checking in with David, we return to Mt. Gilboa and the conflict between Israel and the Philistines. The Philistines were barbaric warriors. Saul knew that death was far more preferable than being captured as far as the Philistines were concerned. Remember the torturous fun that they had with the judge Samson? Gouging out his eyes and putting him to shameful servitude and grotesque entertainment in a pagan temple. Saul's fears that they would abuse him were justifiable and well-founded. As Saul dies, it brings the contrast between Saul and David to an end. We've just in chapter 30 about David's great success against the Amalekites. David rescued the people of Ziklag, including saving the lives of everyone associated with his army. By contrast, Saul and everyone associated with him die in this losing battle with the Philistines.

Saul was commissioned to bring victory and deliverance against these Philistines, so his death at their hands is ironic and frames for us the full measure of his failure.¹

Saul's Desecration

In the heat of the battle, Israel's army retreated and were killed. Saul's sons died. Saul is mortally wounded. He asks his armor-bearer, the last man standing with him, to finish him off. Ironically, before Saul takes his own life, his last order is disobeyed. Saul falls on his own sword. And then the Philistines steal Saul's corpse and desecrate it.

The result of the loss at Mt. Gilboa is devastating for Israel. Towns around are evacuated, allowing those rotten Philistines to move in and control a chunk of Israelite territory. Saul's body is decapitated and then fastened to the wall of Beth Shan, a city that stood impressively over the junction of the Jezreel and Jordan valleys, guarding access to both.² It had never been conquered by Israel (Joshua 17:11, 16; Judges 1:27). It was a natural stronghold. They place Saul's armor in a pagan temple.

Interestingly, the Bible is less concerned to provide the details of this national tragedy. The Bible moves quickly to emphasize the personal and theological consequences of Saul's disappointing rule.

Sadly, the steps Saul takes to protect himself from humiliation and desecration fail, as his body is dismembered. Even more, Saul's death and defeat become occasions for the Philistines to spread their pagan gospel that their gods are more powerful than Israel's. Saul has failed to vigorously defend and honor the name of God.

Jabesh Gilead Remembers

The residents of Jabesh Gilead never forgot how Saul rescued them from the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11). Saul's victory there was truly his one shining moment. It was the occasion in which Saul's anointing was clearly manifested. Now those citizens will repay Saul's memory with their loyalty.

¹ Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary*. TOTC 8. (Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1988.) p.170

² Patrick E. McGovern, "Beth-shan," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:693-96; Amihai Mazar, "Beth-Shean," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 1:305-309.

They choose to burn Saul's remains, providing Saul's memory with a bit of dignity in this otherwise tragic and ignoble death for a king.

The account of Saul's life is a puzzle to contemporary readers. On one hand, Saul is anointed, chosen by God and anointed by the prophet and priest Samuel to rule as king and deliver Israel from her enemies (1 Samuel 9:15-17; 11:11). Conversely, Saul is often reluctant in his obedience and will descend into outright rebellion (10:21-22; 13:9-13).

Saul's Inner Turmoil

Over the last twenty-four hours that Saul lives, the Bible shares his inner desperation and pain. It is a very dark episode for him, emotionally, physically, as well as spiritually. Consider further how the Philistines respond to Saul's death.

The Bible tells us that the Philistine soldiers were so excited that they sent messengers to spread the good news. The ancient Greek translation of this text uses the same word that we find used heavily in the New Testament for "gospel," *evangelize*. These Philistine soldiers were literally evangelists of the pagan Philistine gospel. That gospel said because Israel's king was dead, their God was weak and could be rejected.

It is a stark reminder that our pain and suffering preaches one of two gospels to people around us. I am reminded of the man who once said, "It's not that I am afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens." We don't like pain, suffering, and loss. However, how we handle it, how we deal with it, how we process pain and respond preaches either the gospel of God's grace or it preaches that pagan, Philistine gospel of rejecting God.

What gospel does your response to suffering preach? That God is gracious and can be trusted or that a person can reject God and dismiss faith? C.S. Lewis wrote that our suffering, even our approach to death, is related to the way we live. He wrote that we have no more urgent task on earth, no greater a task in this life, than to learn how to suffer well.³

Saul is a compelling study in contrasts. Obviously, we see the contrast with the other man anointed king in David. And if we look a little further, we can also see the contrast between Saul and Jesus.

³ C.S. Lewis, "Dogma and the Universe," *God in the Dock*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp.38-47.

Saul's life is a cause-and-effect relationship that demonstrates for us the benefit of being right with God and each other and the consequences of not relating rightly to God or to others. When we look at David in 1 Samuel, we see a man who is trusting and depending on God. When we look at Saul in 1 Samuel, we see a man who becomes manipulative and vindictive in his rebellion from God. The consequences for Saul are severe. In one battle, he loses his kingdom, his life, his sons and despite his actions, his dignity.⁴

Perhaps the most significant contrast between David and Saul is how they ended their lives. Saul dies and so does most everything and almost everyone with him. Saul's death is horrific. His sons died with him, his body dismembered, his bones given a modest disposal.

However, the Bible tells us that David "rested with his fathers," meaning he was buried in the family tomb (1 Kings 2:10). David's death came after a long reign and he died surrounded by family, with his son Solomon on the throne⁵.

The Messiah

It is also striking to consider the contrast between Saul and Jesus. Saul spent his last moments as a forsaken king and a servant who refused him. Jesus was, at the end, a servant-Savior who God had forsaken, who would become the true King. Similarly to Saul, Jesus's friends would bail out on him gradually, according to prophecy. Judas, like Saul's armor bearer, would also take his own life. Judas could not deal with the betrayal.

Saul, mortally wounded and staring certain death in the face, chose a quick death. He met his end on his own terms to try to avoid embarrassment, shame and mockery at the hands of his enemies. When Jesus faced certain death, he endured suffering and humiliation at the hands of his own people. And rather than taking His own life, Jesus gave His life for us as a ransom for many.⁶

Jesus is the true and perfect anointed King, the Messiah who delivers us from sin, death and hell.

⁴ C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p.282

⁵ Though not without great difficulty because of Adonijah, see 1 Kings 1.

⁶ Acts 3:18; Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45

Further, Jesus is the Savior and Sustainer of our lives and can walk with us through our suffering. Because of the decisions we can make while we live in trusting Jesus as Savior and Lord, death is swallowed up in victory for us.

Death overwhelmed Saul as an unwanted but irresistible foe. David met death as the timely and natural outcome of his life. Jesus is victorious over sin and death through His resurrection.

Death is not the end of our story. There is more to come. The Anointed King of kings has given us reason to hope. Our hope is believing that Jesus Christ died an ignoble death on the cross for our sins, according to Scripture. Further, he was victorious over death through His resurrection. This is our reason to hope, and we who believe confidently expect to swing out into eternity on that hope.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:

Okay, messy minions, describe times in your life when you or your family felt an excitement in anticipation of something. Perhaps a Christmas morning or some vacation. What is that like, that feeling of hope and excitement?

What aspects of your faith do you approach with the anticipation that there is more to come or more to this life? Do you have a sense that your life is preparing you for more beyond this existence?

We saw in 1 Samuel 31 that there was a “Philistine Gospel” that proclaimed God was weak, that God’s anointed king was defeated, decapitated and humiliated. How does our suffering reveal the truth of the gospel of God’s grace in Christ? How does our suffering reveal that “Philistine Gospel?”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. What hope, what anticipation can we read there?

Jesus was the true and perfect Saul – the anointed King. Jesus was set apart as the Messiah, the one who would deliver His people. What has Jesus delivered you from?

What has your suffering, your pain, taught you about your faith in God? What has it revealed about God’s purpose and plan for your life? (Romans 8:28)