



## The Clarity of the End

1 Samuel 31:1-13

Grace Church | 5.9.21

Ascension Sunday. The ascension is a vitally important and woefully overlooked piece of Christ's work. The Apostle's Creed reminds us:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.  
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Why is the ascension important? Because without it, Jesus Christ would not be seated at the right hand of the Father, ready to come back to judge the living and the dead. The ascension is the proof that Jesus did not rise from the grave just to go back down to it. It proves that his resurrection is final, and if his resurrection is final, ours is too. We have not been raised to new life only to die again, we've been raised to new life so that one day we too will ascend to meet God. Because Jesus ascended, you will never descend. Ascension Sunday means that in Christ, our only trajectory is up. And that, friends, is very very good news.

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Today we come to the end of the book of 1 Samuel, and we realize why the saying "hindsight is 20/20" is a common colloquialism. When you come to the end of a matter, the past is interpreted in a different light. And more often than not, we see that 20/20 vision gradually. Piece by piece, we begin to realize: "ah yes, that is what I missed." Sometimes, however, the clarity of the past comes in a sudden, singular moment. All of a sudden, as it were, it *clicks*. Have you ever had that moment? Perhaps you made a poor decision, but for a while you stood by it, claiming it was a good decision. And then in a rush of clarity, someone says something just so, or some emotion hits you just so, and you realize it.



I will beat this drum one last time, but by now you have heard me say that the genre 1 Samuel is primarily a literary tragedy. At the end of every tragedy there is a moment of clarity: maybe it's by the tragic hero, maybe simply by the other characters, but the audience finally gets to breathe and think back and recognize: I see now what brought us to this point. But the thing about tragedies is that they end in death. And for the main character, that means that whether his realization never comes, or comes just a few moments before his death, it's too late. But the beauty of tragedy is that it's not too late for the audience. They learn, they see, they have a moment of clarity that they can act on.

Today, at the end of our tragedy, the moment of clarity comes for Saul. He realizes he is finished, that his actions have led to the point of his destruction. He's hidden it, he's fought it, he's ignored it. But now, it's all caught up to him. And of course it's too late—there is no going back. It's what makes a tragedy a tragedy. But for us, it's not too late. 1 Samuel 31 is a wake up call for us, much like many parts of this book have been. In our text we will see the end of the road for those who play God instead of fear God is death, mockery, and pity. So let's summarize the tragedy of Saul with these two observations: 1) self-autonomy brings self-destruction and 2) self-preservation brings idolatry.

## **Self-Autonomy Brings Self-Destruction (1-7)**

Notice how quickly the action moves along. **Verse 1**, we are brought right into the battle. The verb is “were fighting”. The author has intentionally taken us away from the last two chapters to record David's victory with numerous specifics, but is now circling back with strikingly little detail to Saul. The men of Israel fled and fell slain. I remember reading the end of Shakespeare's Macbeth in high school and being shocked at the brevity of the ending. There is a fight off stage, Macbeth is killed, his severed head is brought onstage, they announce the new king and promise to make things right, and the curtain is closed. That's it? We don't even get to see the main character die on stage? We don't get the details? But you see, this is all part of the tragedy. Saul's life had so much potential, but now it can be summed up with a few lines of dry prose.

Saul's folly has consequences that go beyond him too. **Verse 2**, all his sons except one are killed, including the valiant Jonathan. Here is the real horror: that the faithful, true Jonathan would pay for his Father's actions. Verse **3-6** gives us the scene. Saul is overtaken, badly wounded, and he knows it is the end. He hears the prophecy of Samuel from the night before, and the cloud has finally lifted. He realizes that the time has finally come to pay for his mistakes. But does he own up to them? Now, in one final move he expresses his character most truly. He asks his armor bearer to take his life so that he can avoid the mistreatment of the Philistines. And when his armor bearer will not go through with it out of his own fear of harming God's anointed, Saul does the deed himself.

Suicide is an incredibly dark act. There is mercy at the throne of grace for those who take their own life, it is not an unpardonable offense. We recognize that often the darkness of depression and the



trauma of the world we live in pushes men and women to actions they themselves deem as unconscionable. We weep and mourn that it exists in our world, and pray for it to end. But suicide is a serious spit in the face of God, because it says to God: “I am the master of my fate, I hold the keys to life and death.” Suicide, like murder, is taking what belongs to God and trying to wrestle it away from him.

You remember Job, the man whom God permitted to have Satan take everything from him, including the lives of his own children? And Job still said: “the lord gives and takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.” How is he able to say this? Because he knows the truth professed later in Job 12:10: “In [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.” God is the author of life, and the taker of life. He decides when it begins and when it ends. The taking away of life is not an unjust action of God—we are his creation, to do with as he pleases! We are not our own.

Did you know that ten states in the U.S. have laws that permit medical suicide or assisted suicide? Now, I know this is nuanced and specific, but as a general observation I think Christians should find this lamentable. Oregon’s calls their law the Death with Dignity Act. This is a misnomer: because every death is a dignified one. Every man and woman has dignity from God: it cannot be stripped from them by the sin of our world. And suicide is so incredibly tragic because it is a cry for help, a soul saying: “I cannot believe that God holds my destiny!”, it’s a fatal act of self-autonomy.

And for Saul, it is sadly not a surprise. His whole life he has lived as if he were God, and so it is no surprise that he would attempt to die on his own terms. But notice the effect of Saul’s actions. His armor bearer too takes his life, and **verse 6-7**, all his men and his sons die, and more from Israel who witness this destruction abandon their cities, giving them over to the Philistines. Remember that Saul was anointed primarily to address the Philistine threat. Now Israel is in a worse state than they were before Saul. Typically in a battle like this, when a people hear of their fallen king, they rally to him to protect his body before retreating, hoping perhaps to save him. But no, the men of Israel flee. No one comes to Saul’s aid. It’s so so sad to witness. I can’t imagine a more potent tragedy than this scene.

And friends, it reminds us this: when we try to play God, our end is self-destruction. We cannot hold the line of our own destiny, we cannot tip-toe so close to the edge and not fall in. Without God, without his hands on us, tragedy is our end. God doesn’t have to commit us to destruction against our will—we will do the willing ourselves! Left on our own, we will destroy ourselves and others. So hear this, because you won’t get this in your movies or music or your cultural messages: if you put yourself at the center of your life, you will tear yourself apart. I don’t know how else to say it. Do not believe the lie that you can just focus on your own happiness, that you can just do what’s best for you, and everything will be rosy and swell. It’s not too late to wake up and realize that when we play God, we are headed for a collision course with self implosion. When we believe we are self-autonomous, we are only destroying ourselves.



Jesus Christ subverted our understanding of self-autonomy. He was with God and is God from the beginning, but took on human flesh to do the will of his Father. He came to earth to feel what we feel, the beauty of submitting to God's authority. And he did it perfectly, to the point of death on a cross, so that by faith in him you don't have to be your own master any longer. You don't have to control your narrative, and you don't have to hold the power of your own life or death. It's not too late: you can give up your self autonomy and turn away from tragedy.

## Self-Preservation Brings Idolatry (8-10)

The ironic thing about Saul's death is that he kills himself to avoid mistreatment. He is trying to preserve himself, instead of trusting God to do it. He doesn't want to be paraded around and mocked. But Saul's final act of self-determination utterly fails. What happens in **verses 8-10**? Because Israel has fled and Saul's men have fallen, no one is left to recover his body. The Philistines are surprised to stumble across it on the battlefield the next day. And they cut off his head and strip off his armor. The severing of the head is the ultimate insult. It shows not only victory, but domination. This is why in 1 Samuel we have seen two other decapitations. First, Dagon, the idol of the Philistines, beheaded by God himself to show his dominance. Secondly, Goliath, the champion of Philistia, beheaded by David to show the strength of God's champion.

The Philistines cut off Saul's head and notice what they do next. They send messengers to carry *good news*. They preach the gospel of Yahweh's destruction with the head of Yahweh's king. By fastening the armor of Saul and his sons in the temple, they are mocking the "protection" he was supposed to receive from God. Now, here is what we know. We know that Yahweh is not defeated, and we know this because in the last chapter we saw the deliverance of Yahweh for his *true* king. The good news brook, Besor, showed us that the generous king is coming to reign soon. We know that it's not the Philistines who cut off the head of God's servant, but rather God is using the Philistines to cut off the enemy of his people. Because that is what Saul has become, the anti-king, the antichrist. But the Philistines don't know that. The Israelites who are fleeing don't know that. Saul is intent on preserving himself, he is intent on preaching the gospel of himself. He doesn't care about the glory of God or the victory of God. And what happens is that he becomes a conduit for an idolatrous false gospel.

We know this gospel is false not just because of what it says,, that God is lost, but also because of how it is preached. Notice in **verse 9**, the Philistines carry this good news to the house of their idols. What this is implying is that they go to inform their false gods of the victory they have won on their behalf. In other words, the false gospel comes from man into the temple of idols. Idols only have power when we bring a false gospel to them. Our idol of money has power over us when we preach the false gospel, saying "money can save us!"

But the true gospel doesn't flow from the lips of man to the gods, it flows from God to man. The true gospel is the gospel of God, that comes from the mouth of God. And this is what is so tragic about this part of the text: it shows us that when we try to control our own narrative, when we



seek our own self preservation, than all we are doing is preaching false gospel, all we are doing is giving praise to idols. Again, the contrast of Saul and David. When his life was on the line, David strengthened himself in God and dove headfirst into suffering. When his life was on the line, Saul tried to cover his own reputation and save himself from suffering.

Friends, it's not too late to turn back from the tragedy of self-preservation. The goal of your life is not to protect yourself from suffering. It's not to make sure everyone likes you, it's not to preserve your reputation. Seeking after these ends will ultimately lead to feeding idols and preaching false gospels. Your own armor can't protect yourself, and if you go down that path you will realize it some day. Some day your Idol will bite back and hang your armor on it's wall and make a mockery of you. But listen, it's not too late.

Jesus Christ threw off the false gospel of self-preservation. He didn't seek his own reputation, he didn't flee from suffering. He submitted himself to mockery and torture. And in doing so, he subverted victory forever. Victory doesn't come by saving your own skin, it comes by laying it down for the glory of God. When we follow Christ in this cruciform life, we preach the true gospel. When we live not for our own preservation but for the glory of God, willing to lay aside comfort and fame and fortune and well-being and ready to take on suffering, mockery, hardship, and battle—no Philistine can preach idolatry in the street on account of us. And the only way we do this is by turning away from this tragedy now into union with Christ by faith.

The Spirit seals us for this kind of backbone in the face of hardship. The Spirit gives us words and actions to preach the true gospel. The Spirit will lead us to victory and glory soon. So let's trust God, who has promised to preserve us to the end.

## **It's Not Too Late To Learn (11-13)**

I love how this book ends. Because it doesn't end with Saul. It's a book primarily about him, but no good tragedy ends hopeless. How does Romeo and Juliet end? I promise our next sermon series, no Shakespeare tests. It ends with hope that perhaps tragedy can be the tool that awakens virtue. The two feuding families make a tenuous peace. And that's what we have here. This is no doubt a tragedy, but it reminds us that it's not too late to learn from example. **Verse 11-13** give us the hint of how we are to interpret this tragedy. The men of Jabesh Gilead, if you remember, were rescued by Saul from the hands of Ammonites, Saul's first act as king. They have not forgotten this. So these "valiant" men risk their lives by entering Philistine territory to retrieve Saul and his sons remains. They burn the bodies to prevent further decay or mutilation, and bury them underneath the tree where Saul judged the people.

So often we respond to tragedy that we feel is rightly deserved with an air of false justice. Saul murdered his own people and led them into bondage. He was not just suicidal, but genocidal. How would we respond if a president of our nation slaughtered a whole class of people and subjected us to a foreign power simply to fuel a personal vendetta, and then he was defeated and mocked?



Many of us would rejoice. But these men are seeing the whole picture. There is pity here, and humility and honor. In honoring Saul, evil as he was, they honor God. There is great power in pity, because it shows a soft heart to the plans of God. To have compassion on someone undeserving is to acknowledge that we are not in control, but God is. The men of Jabesh Gilead again teach us: tragedy should do something to us. It should stir something in us, some sort of honor, some sort of virtue, some sort of Godliness.

What have we spent so many weeks in the tragedy of 1 Samuel? Because tragedy is opportunity. It's an opportunity for clarity, for 20/20 vision. It's an opportunity to read hope in between the lines, to strengthen ourselves in God, to remind ourselves of the stakes. It's an opportunity to learn to trust God in the wilderness as David did, to cry out to him in our barrenness as Hananah did, to follow him in our darkness as Samuel did, to humble ourselves before his anointing as Jonathan did. It's a chance to look at the past failure of one kingdom, and to see with renewed clarity the future glory of another, better one. We entitled our sermon series *Behold the King*. And in 1 Samuel, we have done just that. In the dark backdrop of the tragedy of king Saul, I pray we have torn open the curtains to see the brightness of the story of King Jesus.

So let me end this sermon, and our series, with one more picture of our king, one more opportunity to behold him.

Remember two weeks ago, when Saul went up to the medium's cave at En-Dor? We mentioned the curiosity of the meal he received. A fattened calf, and unleavened bread. Eaten in dark on the eve of the coming of death. This was the anti-passover supper. And now the time for sacrifice had come. Notice the way Saul dies. He is on a high place, the Mount of Gilboa. In Scripture, mountains are often associated with places of worship, and temples were normally built on such high places. Saul is punctured by arrows, his side or belly split open with a sword, just as a passover lamb would have been split and drained of its blood.

Jesus Christ was our passover lamb who removed the curse too. He also was punctured, pierced, and his side split so blood and water ran out. It was not just Christ that died up on the cross. Death died there too, sin met its. In this sense, the death of Christ was the passing on of a new kingdom. Sin and Death reigned over all, Satan as the prince of Earth—but on that day when Christ died, the tide turned. And when he rose again, ascending to the Father's hand, he proved that Satan's self-destruction was final. At Gilboa, God used the sinful Philistines to defeat Saul, the accuser of his people. At Golgotha, God used the sinful Jews to defeat Satan, the accuser of his people. At Gilboa, the beheading of Saul made room for the new king David. At Golgotha, the beheading of Satan made room for the new king Jesus. There was sacrifice, there was a passover, and there was a changing of the guard. Move over old, dead, king, make room for the new.

In this sense, we close 1 Samuel not in the shining brightness of victory, but in a veiled victory, masquerading as defeat. Saul was defeated, but it was not God who was defeated, it was God



doing the work. So too at the cross, it was not God who was defeated, although that may have appeared the case. The resurrection proved God had triumphed in Christ.

And so, in Christ, we live on this side of his cross and his resurrection, and we too have been crucified with him and received new life, but we await the day when we will be raised fully again with him. So it may appear that the victory, the gospel news, belongs to your enemies. It may appear that Satan has won, that there is nothing left for you but self-destruction. But don't be fooled: the passover meal has been taken, the passover lamb has been sacrificed. The angel of death has passed over our door, and we have made it out of the Egypt of sin. But for a time, we still wander in the desert of this world, prone to forget our Exodus. But the promised land is coming, the new king is taking us there in him. He made the way by clearing out the old king from the throne of your life and putting himself there in his place.

And it's not too late, it's not too late to bow before this king of kings. It's not too late to kneel, to reorder that piece of your life you have held onto as your own, that sliver of self-autonomy or self-preservation that you have hidden or ignored. It's not too late to trust again and be awed again by the glory and perfection of our king. Let's do it now as we feast with the king at his table.

