

Tragic Life, Tragic Death
1 Samuel 28 & 31
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Whenever I take a longer road trip, there is usually a bit of excitement as I am about to reach my destination. Part of that, at my age, is just the thought of being able to get out of the car and stretch a bit. Yet, there is also this sense of accomplishment – of completing the journey.

Folks, I kind of feel that way this morning, as we are about to finish our journey through the book of 1 Samuel. For the past two summers, we have been exploring this Old Testament book describing events which occurred about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

This morning, we conclude our study by looking at the demise of King Saul which is recorded in 1 Samuel 28 & 31 (page 250). Today we will highlight some of the warnings the Lord gives us through Saul's rather tragic life. Let's pause and pray that the Lord would enable us to hear and heed them.

Before we explore our text, I want to take time to give a concise summary of 1 Samuel. For those of you who have been here for most of these sermons, it will help you see "the big picture" of the book, as well as a reminder of some of the lessons the Lord has had for us along our journey.

For those of you who have not been here for most of these sermons (maybe you are here for the first time today), it will at least give you a clue of what we are talking about.

The prequel to 1 Samuel is the book of Judges, where...

Judges 21:25 – In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

It is a time of moral confusion and social/political chaos. Now Israel actually did have a King. The Lord God was their King, and the Judges were to be his representatives; but

most of the people refused to acknowledge and submit to the Lord's authority.

1 Samuel gets its name because the book opens with the birth of a baby named Samuel. Right from the beginning, we see this is a special boy committed to the Lord, who will serve Him as both Judge and Prophet. His primary role, however, will be to lead the time of transition when Israel gets a King.

Samuel warned the people that having a King was not a good idea, but...

1 Samuel 8:19b-20 – The people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We must have a king over us. Then we'll be like all the other nations: our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles."

So even though it was the opposite of what the Lord desired, the Lord chose to give the people what they wanted. The people are very excited to learn that the King God had chosen for them, the one anointed by Samuel, is Saul, a man "head and shoulders taller" than anyone else. It seemed he would be a great military leader. Yet, it isn't long before it becomes clear that Saul is not the godly leader Israel needed.

The Lord regrets choosing Saul as King and has Samuel privately anoint a new King, a young shepherd boy named David.

Most significantly, the Holy Spirit leaves Saul and comes upon David. It soon becomes evident that this young man is, indeed, someone special.

When the Philistine warrior, Goliath, has paralyzed the army of Israel, including the head and shoulders above everyone Saul, David volunteers to fight the giant and defeats him with just a sling and a stone.

David soon becomes a popular figure among the people of Israel. Saul, who initially was fond of David, becomes very envious of him. In the last chapter of the book, Saul, to use modern

terminology, develops a case of paranoid schizophrenia which may have been demonically induced. He attempts to kill David and even his own son Jonathan, a very close friend of David. Soon David is living as a fugitive with a band of a few hundred men as Saul and his army of thousands seek to capture and kill him.

Ten to twelve years go by between the time David is anointed as the new King and until he actually takes the throne. During this time, it becomes clear which of the two is truly on God's side, as Saul murders the priests who were serving the Lord.

And it becomes clear whose side "God is on" as He repeatedly protects David from Saul, as well as from the pagan Philistines. David is not without his flaws, but he is clearly the leader God has chosen. He is the "anointed one," the lower case "m" messiah for his people, Israel. He assumes the throne when, as we see today, Saul dies a tragic death.

This is a summary of 1 Samuel, though it is hardly the end of the story. Originally, 1 and 2 Samuel were one book, which was divided into two volumes so the sermon series in the synagogues would not be so long. Just kidding!

The story continues in 2 Samuel, describing David's reign as King. That becomes the golden age for the nation of Israel. David's 40-year reign was a time of much peace and prosperity.

However, David's personal flaws and moral failures also were revealed during this time. We learn that David, a man after God's own heart, who had won many victories by trusting God, was also a man who has an affair with Bathsheba and then conspires to murder her husband.

Saul, the people's choice to be King proved to be a disappointment. David, God's choice to be King, ultimately proved to be a disappointment. Both of these men were "anointed" ones, lower-case "m" messiahs who pointed ahead to a greater King – a capital "M" Messiah, who would never disappoint God or His people.

That would be Jesus – Jesus of Nazareth, often known as Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Messiah (capital M). Jesus, as a descendant of David, fulfills the promise that God gave to David, of an heir who would reign forever. In fact, much of David's life is a shadow of the reality which would be fulfilled in Jesus.

This is a reflection of the overall purpose of the Bible, including the book of Samuel. It points to Jesus as the one true (capital M) Messiah we should honor and embrace. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has accomplished and provided salvation for all who, by God's grace, are trusting Him.

He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Trusting, loving and honoring Him are not just good things to do. They are really what life is all about. Friend, if you know that, you understand the main point of every book in the Bible.

Now, there are still plenty of other things to learn from 1 Samuel and other parts of this book. These things will nourish and strengthen our souls. They will help us honor the Lord, serve other people and bring joy to our lives today.

So now, let's take a look at 1 Samuel 28 & 31 and see how the Lord will use them to strengthen our souls.

Again, in the last half of 1 Samuel, David is the anointed King, the one God has chosen; but Saul is still the reigning King. The story has focused on Saul's efforts to kill David to keep him from becoming King.

In chapter 27, David is pretending to serve the Philistine King, Achish. In chapter 28, we find the Philistine army and Saul's army of Israel facing each other. Last Sunday, someone asked if I was skipping chapter 28 in this series. Oh, last week's focus was on David; today it is on Saul.

In chapter 28:5, Saul is "frantic with fear," probably both because of the military strength of the Philistines and his belief that they are now David's allies. He is uncertain what to do. Because the great prophet Samuel has died, Saul

cannot get any counsel from him. Efforts to get direction from the Lord are met only with silence. That is not a surprise because Saul has wandered far from the Lord.

1 Samuel 28:7 – Saul then said to his advisers, “Find a woman who is a medium, so I can ask her what to do.”

His goal is to communicate with Samuel, the dead prophet.

Now, trying to consult the dead through a medium, witch or whatever label might be used was strictly forbidden in the Old Testament, as it is in the New Testament. In fact...

1 Samuel 28:3b – Saul had banned from the land of Israel all mediums and those who consult the spirits of the dead.

But because he is afraid and desperate, Saul does what he knows is totally wrong. Saul tries to disguise himself and goes to see a medium in the town of Endor, though she quickly realizes this is the King who banned all mediums from Israel.

The woman appears to really summon the spirit of Samuel, which likely surprised her even more than it did Saul. Yes, it may have been a demonic or angelic spirit impersonating Samuel, but I think this is one of the extremely rare times when the Lord allows someone to actually encounter a person who has died.

Another time was on the Mount of Transfiguration – Peter and some other disciples apparently see Moses and Elijah, who had both died long before then.

Most mediums, both in the ancient world and today, are total fakes. Voices that are heard tend to be recordings played over some speaker. When mediums do succeed in really contacting someone, I believe it is almost always a demonic spirit, not the actual person that has died. That this woman was able to put Saul in contact with Samuel really says nothing about her powers, but reflects the fact that God has one more message for Saul.

Anyway, the spirit of Samuel brings no comfort. He says to Saul:

1 Samuel 28:17 – “I’ve already told you: The LORD has sworn to take the kingdom from you and give it to David. And that’s just what he’s doing!”

However, Samuel adds this disturbing detail:

1 Samuel 28:19 – Tomorrow the LORD will let the Philistines defeat Israel’s army, then you and your sons will join me down here in the world of the dead.

Saul’s effort to contact someone who has died brings zero comfort.

The author then switches the narrative to David and his encounters with the Philistines and the Amalekites in chapters 29 and 30, which we explored last week. Back to Saul...

1 Samuel 31:1-3 – Meanwhile, the Philistines were fighting Israel at Mount Gilboa. Israel’s soldiers ran from the Philistines, and many of them were killed. The Philistines closed in on Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua. The fighting was fierce around Saul, and he was badly wounded by enemy arrows.

The words spoken to Saul the day before are coming true. Then Saul’s life comes to a very ignoble end.

1 Samuel 31:4 – Saul told the soldier who carried his weapons, “Kill me with your sword! I don’t want those worthless Philistines to torture me and make fun.” But the soldier was afraid to kill him. Saul then took out his own sword; he stuck the blade into his stomach and fell on it.

I think there is some symbolism here. Saul is not removed from the throne by David or the Philistines. Saul does it himself. His disobedience and lack of faith led to his downfall, which is confirmed by his suicide.

It is also ironic that Saul dies by his own sword and armor. Back in chapter 17, he had offered

these to David in his battle against Goliath. David had refused, knowing it was the Lord, not these weapons that would give victory. Now these same weapons bring nothing but defeat to Saul.

1 Samuel 31:6 – Saul was dead, his three sons were dead, and the soldier who carried his weapons was dead. They and all his soldiers died on that same day.

This ends up being a total defeat for Israel. Knowing their army has been defeated, the people flee their homes, and the Philistines take over these towns.

The next day, the Philistines go to the battlefield and find the bodies of Saul and his sons. They then take the corpses, as well as Saul's armor, and in celebration of victory, display them in their pagan temples.

However, some Israelites from Jabesh learn what has happened. They sneak into Philistine territory, take the corpses of Saul and his sons, bring them back to Jabesh, burn them, and then bury the bones. And that, folks, is the end of Saul and his family.

OK, when we consider the life of King Saul, the obvious lesson the Lord has for us is a warning: Don't be like this man! Once we stray off the path, once we go into the ditch, it is easy to sink deeper and deeper. It is tragic to think of how far Saul has fallen.

This was the man Samuel had anointed as Israel's first King. This was the man whom God's Spirit had come upon, enabling him to lead the people with wisdom and grace.

Soon, however, Saul's pride, pride that was nourished by the success with which God had blessed him, resulted in Saul not taking God's commands seriously and choosing to cut corners instead.

This happens in chapter 13 - When confronted by Samuel about his sin, he refused to take responsibility. He tries to justify his actions. The Lord then removes His blessing from Saul and has Samuel anoint David as the new King.

Soon, envy begins growing in Saul's heart. And that envy grows into hatred – a hatred of the King God has chosen. It is really a hatred, not only of David, but also of God.

That hatred becomes Saul's obsession and controls everything he does. He becomes emotionally unstable and probably mentally ill. He attempts to kill David, as well as his own son. He murders the priests serving the Lord at Nob. He spends years trying to hunt down and kill David. Then he dies a very ignoble death.

Yes, everything Saul does is under the umbrella of God's sovereignty, but clearly Saul is responsible for every evil choice he makes. Friends, the warning for us is: Don't be like that!

Now, there is probably no one in this room who has fallen as far as Saul. If you had, you would likely not be here this morning. Yet, some of us here may be starting to slip into that ditch.

Pride is almost always the first step off the path. When good things happen in life, it is easy to forget that God deserves the glory; and instead, we start giving ourselves credit.

Pretty soon, we are thinking, "God is fine, but I can do OK without Him...at least most of the time." Then we start skipping church on Sunday, we don't take time to read the Bible during the week, and the only times we pray are when we decide we are in some kind of trouble. Soon our hearts become cold toward the Lord.

As we slide away from God, we tend to become more preoccupied with self. When that happens, our relationships with others often start to deteriorate. Things like envy, bitterness and hatred can start to fill our souls. It can get real ugly real fast.

Or, in other cases, these things may ferment for years. You may be able to hide the coldness of your heart from others, and you may even convince yourself it is no big deal. Yet, eventually it will become evident, to both you and others, if not in this life, certainly in the next.

Yet, there is good news for those who have been moving in the wrong direction. If you have gone off the path and are sliding further and further into the ditch, it is not too late. Even though your heart may have grown cold toward God, there is still hope.

And friends, that hope is the gospel – the great news of Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the cross for your pride, your coldness of heart, and for the selfishness, envy, bitterness or hatred that may have seeped into your soul.

Or perhaps you have acted on some of these attitudes. Maybe you have been emotionally and verbally abusive to your spouse or others in your family. Maybe addictions to alcohol, drugs or porn have dominated your life for years. Maybe you have been cheating on your income tax, stealing from your employer, or shoplifting. Perhaps you have had a sexual affair or multiple affairs over the years. Maybe you have a violent temper and have actually physically injured other people.

Folks, those are sins for which Jesus died as well. They are sins for which Jesus has paid so you don't have to pay for them unless you choose to do so.

Friend, no matter what you have done or how many times you have done it, there is free and full forgiveness if you will turn to Jesus Christ. The Bible's promise is clear:

1 John 1:9 – If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Saul, an example of falling deeper and deeper into the ditch, farther and farther away from God, stands in stark contrast with what happens to David in 2 Samuel.

David commits a horrific sin by having an affair with Bathsheba and then ordering her husband, Uriah, killed to cover it up. Yet, after being confronted by the Prophet Nathan, David confesses his sin and repents. In Psalm 51, he prays the Lord would restore “the joy of his salvation.” And that is, indeed, what happens.

Oh, David still suffered consequences for his sin – painful consequences. And when we confess and repent of sin, we will likely still suffer consequences. Our sexual sin may still destroy our marriage. Our years of chemical abuse will probably take a heavy toll on our physical health. We may still end up in prison because of illegal actions. Yet, if we turn to the Lord and experience His forgiveness, He promises to remove both the guilt and shame from our lives. That is what “forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” is all about.

When Saul was chosen as King, he was head and shoulders above everyone else. He was the first round draft choice, the top overall pick. He seemed to have unlimited potential. Yet, getting caught up in his pride and ignoring the Lord, he slipped in a ditch and just kept going deeper and deeper.

When David was anointed by Samuel, he was a mere shepherd boy, an undrafted rookie. His life was characterized by a humble confidence in the Lord. Now, at the end of 1 Samuel, David is about to become King of Israel, while Saul has died a horrible death.

The writers of 1 Samuel, both human and divine, are almost shouting to us: Do not be like Saul! Be like David! Turn to the Lord! Repent of your foolish pride and selfishness! Trust the Lord! Make pleasing Him and serving others your top priority!

Friends, if, by God's grace, that is what we do, the Lord will indeed be honored. And even though we may go through troubles and tragedies, God promises we will ultimately never be disappointed.

May the Lord enable us to heed that warning and cling to that promise – today and in all the days ahead.