

Message #17

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Life of David

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## THE DEMISE OF SAUL'S KINGDOM

### 1 SAMUEL 31-2 SAMUEL 1

#### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We were disappointed not to be able to have stay-in-your-car Easter services last Sunday. Nevada, of course, is not the only state to have strict stay-at-home requirements. In suburban Richmond, Virginia, the prominent pastor of a large church refused to follow state rules and continued to have normal church services in his building last month. In an interview with the *New York Post* the pastor acknowledged that he was in violation of safety regulations. **"I am essential,"** he said. **"I'm a preacher--- I talk to God. I firmly believe that God is larger than this dreaded virus."**

A couple of weeks later the pastor got sick. In early April he tested positive to the coronavirus. Last weekend he died. I suspect that he is indeed talking to God. In-church services for his congregation have ceased. The pastor's daughter has encouraged everyone to stay home. She told a local TV station, **"It becomes very real to you. I just beg people to understand the severity and the seriousness of this, because people are saying it's not just about us, it's about everyone around us."**

This pastor may have been seeking to promote the kingdom of God. But was his behavior the best way to do that? Christians are commanded by the New Testament to meet together. But we are also commanded to submit to the governing authorities. More importantly, we have been told by Jesus that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor. The medical experts have made a strong case that large public meetings right now present a real danger of spreading this serious disease among our neighbors.

The Bible has much to say about the kingdom of God. A theme interwoven throughout the pages of the Bible is God's plan to establish His rule upon the earth. Prior to the coming of Saul upon the scene, God Himself was serving as the leader of His people Israel. They wanted a king like all of the other nations of the world. So He gave them Saul. We have seen that Saul has blown it. David is about to come upon the scene. He will do a good job of promoting God's rule upon the earth, but his descendants will not do a

very good job. The prophets, especially Isaiah, will describe the wonderful conditions which will characterize this coming earthly kingdom.

Eventually Jesus will show up on the scene. His predecessor, John the Baptist, will announce His coming by declaring that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus Himself then gives that message. In the Sermon on the Mount he describes the desired characteristics of the citizens of His kingdom. He teaches them to pray, "Thy kingdom come..." Jesus is rejected by His own people. So He declares that there will be a mystery form of the kingdom of God. Eventually Jesus will return and rule upon this earth. In the Book of Revelation in #11 v. 15 the announcement will come from heaven, **"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."**

Our passage today describes the demise of an early stage of this kingdom. We are going to look at it to find lessons that may apply to us and toward our responsibility toward God's kingdom program.

I.

In the first thirteen verses of 1 Samuel #31 we are going to learn about GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE WAYWARD KING AND KINGDOM. We have seen in recent lessons that a battle was brewing with the Philistines in north central Israel. King Saul was worried about this. He resorted to a medium to try to contact Samuel from the dead. This medium seemed as shocked as anyone to actually bring up Samuel from the dead. The prophet told Saul that he and his sons were going to be killed the next day.

Meanwhile David and his men had gone over to the Philistines. The Lord intervened through having the other Philistine kings reject the idea of having David and company join them in this looming battle. David's clan returned to their home base in Ziklag and discovered that the Amalekites had raided their town. They took off after the Amalekites and rescued their family members in a surprise attack. Now they are back in Ziklag.

We take up the story in the first two verses of 1 Samuel #31. The narrator says, **"Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul."** In Hebrew story-telling it is typical to begin with a summary of the action.

Back in #9 v. 16 Saul was commissioned by God to defeat the Philistines. God instructs Samuel, **“Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines.”** Saul had initial victories over the Philistines. But what has happened now shows that there has been a major failure.

There was a trade route that cut across north central Israel and followed the Jezreel Valley down to the Jordan River. The Israelites were on Mt. Gilboa on the south of this valley. The Philistines were situated on the north side of the valley. They evidently forced the Israelites up Mt. Gilboa, killing Saul and three sons in the process. A fourth son either escaped or was not present for the battle.

The oldest son Jonathan had been David’s best friend. Although he was the heir apparent to the throne, he recognized God’s call upon David and gave up his claim to the throne. He saw the danger coming here, but he did his duty to his father and his country. He was a heroic figure who died in this battle.

Details follow in vv. 3-5 of #31: **“The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, ‘Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and mistreat me.’ But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him.”** Perhaps Saul was thinking about how the Philistines had mistreated Samson by poking out his eyes and putting him to work in a mill. Perhaps Saul realized that he was dying and was worried that the Philistines would make that process even more painful and humiliating.

The king asks his armor bearer to finish him off. He is unwilling. He fears greatly. He is responsible for the life of the king. Perhaps he, like David, has too much respect for Saul’s position as one anointed by God for this special role. Notice also that there is no reference to prayer or appeal to God in the face of Saul’s dire situation.

According to vv. 6 & 7, **“Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley and those beyond the Jordan saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned their cities and fled. And the Philistines came and lived in them.”** Thus this swath of territory across the middle of the country was occupied by the Philistines. Northern Israel was cut off

from the rest of the country. It probably meant that the Jews there could not observe the religious feasts by going south to the tabernacle.

Verses 8 & 9 tell us, **“The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. So they cut off his head and stripped off his armor and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people.”** This was similar to what David did to Goliath. Perhaps the memory of that was part of their motivation for what the Philistines did to Saul.

Verse 10: **“They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.”** Ashtaroth was the main female goddess for many people of the Ancient Near East. The primary temple for Ashtaroth among the Philistines was in Ashkelon. Beth-shan was closer to the scene of this battle, and some scholars think that there was a temple to her in this city. Beth-shan was a bit to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee and just to the west of the Jordan River. All of this was intended by the Philistines as a further humiliation to the Hebrews.

Then in vv. 11-13: **“But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and went 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. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.”**

Jabesh-gilead was ten or twelve miles east of Beth-shan, east of the Jordan River. Jabesh-gilead played a key role in Saul’s rise to power. Soon after Saul was anointed to be king, Jabesh-gilead was surrounded by the Ammonites, who threatened to do in the city. An appeal was sent out to the rest of Israel. King Saul organized a rescue effort and succeeded in defeating the Ammonites and rescuing the city. The people remembered that deliverance and were forever grateful to King Saul for that rescue. Here they mounted a risky intervention to claim the body of Saul and his sons.

Cremation was not a normal way for the Hebrews to deal with the deceased. Given what had happened to these bodies and the putrefaction that had already set in, it was perhaps appropriate. Notice also that it was not a complete cremation in the sense that the bones were rescued and buried.

Thus we come to the demise of King Saul. It was a sad end for one who had so much potential. It was also a kind of judgment upon the people of his kingdom in that this was the kind of leader whom the

Israelites wanted. Sometimes we may wonder about God's dealings with wayward Christians. We might wonder if the Lord was upset with this Virginia pastor who seemed oblivious to the physical well-being of his own parishioners as well as the members of his community.

We can know for sure what the divine reason for Saul's demise was. In 1 Chronicles #10 vv. 13 & 14 we are told, **"So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse."**

Saul's failure of spiritual leadership had negative consequences for his country. But the people themselves also bore a responsibility for what happened in that they had wrong priorities. Back in #12 v. 13 the prophet Samuel declared, **"And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked..."** Sometimes the Lord grants our requests, but it is to our own detriment.

God is a perfect Heavenly Father. But there is a warning here that we, His children, can sometimes stray so far from the proper path that He can take us out of this earthly life. The Apostle John warned about this in his first epistle. In 1 John #5 v. 11 we are told, **"If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life--- to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that."**

II.

In the first sixteen verses of 1 Samuel #1 we come to GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE WAYWARD KINGDOM MESSENGER. There was originally no separation between books here. Perhaps for practical reasons and the difficulty of getting the whole book on one scroll a separation was made.

Our story picks up again in vv. 1 & 2 of #1 of 2 Samuel: **"After the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. And on the third day, behold, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. And when he came to David, he fell to the ground and paid homage."**

We left off in David's part of the story with his clan having just rescued their families from the Amalekites, who had raided their town of Ziklag. Now they are back in Ziklag, which was somewhere along the border of Philistia and the tribe of Judah in the south.

On the third day after their return to Ziklag this guy shows up from the site of the battle some 80 to 100 miles to the north. His appearance suggests bad news about the outcome of the fight. His deference toward David suggests that he regards him as the new leader of the country.

Verses 3 & 4: **“David said to him, ‘Where do you come from?’ And he said to him, ‘I have escaped from the camp of Israel’ And David said to him, ‘How did it go? Tell me.’ And he answered, ‘The people fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead.’”** This is a summary report of the outcome of the battle, which is consistent with the story that we have in the previous chapter.

According to vv. 5-8, **“Then David said to the young man who told him, ‘How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?’ And the young man who told him said, ‘By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and there was Saul leaning on his spear, and behold, the chariots and the horsemen were close upon him. And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he said to me, ‘Who are you?’ I answered him, ‘I am an Amalekite.’”**

David has just dealt with Amalekites who have raided his town and kidnapped the families of his people. The Amalekites have been long time enemies of Israel. In this first part of his story we already may have questions. How is it that this guy was near Saul by chance? In #31 we learned that at least one armor bearer was nearby. One might also expect that there would be other defenders of the king close by, including his sons. Chapter 31 also makes no mention of an Amalekite having any part in the death of Saul.

The Amalekite continues his story in vv. 9 & 10: **“And he said to me, ‘Stand beside me and kill me, for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers.’ So I stood beside him and killed him, because I was sure that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the crown that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord.”**

This story is clearly at variance with the news reporting in #31. Would Saul ask an Amalekite to do him in? Perhaps he didn't realize his ancestry. But where is any mention of the armor bearer? Chapter 31 says that the armor bearer killed himself only after he saw Saul fall on his sword. That this guy showed up with Saul's crown and armlet may suggest that the Amalekite has ulterior motives. Perhaps he is looking for a reward of some kind.

Verses 11 & 12: **“Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.”** The literal terminology for “mourned” is “beat their breasts.” The grief which this report has produced is genuine.

David’s whole clan has been on the run from Saul and his government forces. Yet these are their countrymen. Jonathan has been David’s best friend. Saul was his father-in-law. David served in his court. In spite of Saul’s murderous jealousy, David has been able to see him as the appointed head of God’s people. He recognizes this as a terrible defeat for his people. He knows that in the Ancient Near East such battles are popularly regarded as tests of the gods whom each side represents. Thus this will appear as a defeat for YHWH, the God of Israel.

According to vv. 13-16, **“And David said to the young man who told him, ‘Where do you come from? And he answered, ‘I am the son of a sojourner, an Amalekite.’ [This means that he is a second generation immigrant.] David said to him, ‘How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?’ Then David called one of the young men and said, ‘Go, execute him.’ And he struck him down so that he died. And David said to him, ‘Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, “I have killed the Lord's anointed.””**

We have seen in David’s history of dealing with Saul that he recognized that as long as Saul was king, he remained in a position in which He was appointed by God. It was not his place, or the place of any other human, to take Saul out. That was something for only which God was responsible. The ironic thing is that the Amalekite really did not kill Saul, at least that is the conclusion that the text seems to give us. He is killed, in effect, for lying. He appears to also have had selfish motives in telling his story, hoping to benefit from his report.

The Amalekite thought that he had good news for David about the kingdom and David’s new position in it. But he lied and had selfish motives. This is reminiscent of a story that is told to us in the New Testament in the Book of Acts. After Ananias and Sapphira see the sacrificial giving that Barnabas demonstrates, they want to receive similar attention.

In vv. 1-5 of Acts #5 we are told this story: **“But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.’ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.”** The same judgment happened to his wife after this. It was a harsh lesson about greed and lying and selfish motives for the early church. At the very least the stories of the Amalekite and Ananias and Sapphira serve as warnings to all of us about the need to stay humble and walk closely with God, to be faithful representatives of His kingdom.

III.

We come then to vv. 17-27 and GOD’S LAMENT FOR A FALLEN FORM OF HIS KINGDOM. We read in vv. 17 & 18, **“And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he said it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar.”** It is David who is doing the actual lamenting. But I suspect that under divine inspiration his thoughts are reflective of God’s thoughts. This is a kind of funeral eulogy, or perhaps more accurately, a lament.

It is directed toward Judah, David’s tribe. After this incident David is going to become leader of his tribe, but leadership of all of Israel is still in the future. Perhaps David is already leader of Judah by the time he composes this lament.

The original Hebrew text calls this lament “the Bow.” It is omitted from our ESV translation. This may be a reference to Jonathan and his skill with the bow, which is referenced in v. 22. Also it is archers with the bow who have seemed to bring Saul and Jonathan to their earthly end.

The word “Jashar” means “upright.” The Book of Jashar is referenced one other time in the Old Testament, in Joshua #10 v. 13. It may have been a book of Hebrew war ballads, or a history of Israel’s wars.

The poem begins in v. 19: **“Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!”** The high places where Saul and Jonathan have fallen is Mt. Gilboa. The most common meaning for the first noun in the verse is “glory.” But a secondary meaning is “gazelle.” The second line in v. 25



says that Jonathan is slain in your high places. So some suspect that David is making a veiled reference to his friend in this verse.

Verse 20: **“Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon--- actually it is the ‘bazaars’ of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.”** Gath was on the east of Philistia. Ashkelon was on the west of the country by the Mediterranean. The outcome of the battle was a cause of rejoicing for the Philistines throughout their country and of sorrow for the Hebrews.

Verse 21: **“You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.”** David is calling for a curse upon the mountain which was the scene of Israel’s defeat and Saul’s demise. He is asking that the fields on its slopes may not produce for the Philistines who now possess them.

Verse 22: **“From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty.”** Saul and Jonathan remained courageous in the face of defeat. They killed many of their enemies. In spite of his father’s flaws, Jonathan remained loyal to his father.

Verse 23: **“Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions.”** It is amazing that David can say such positive things about King Saul who threatened his life and made things so difficult for him. Such is the character of this man who has a heart for God.

Verse 24: **“You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.”** This implies that Saul did something right. He seems to have had a positive impact upon Israel’s economy.

Verses 25 & 26: **“How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain on your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women.”** David directly addresses his friend Jonathan.

Jonathan was heir to the throne. Yet when he saw David's bravery against Goliath, and heard his words to his father, he somehow realized that David was the one whom God intended to replace his father. Jonathan took off his royal robes and gave them to David. Jonathan maintained that loyalty to David in spite of the jealousy of his father.

This kind of sacrificial love was more than most men could expect from their wives. In a marriage relationship a woman rightly expects some return for her love. Jonathan was sacrificing everything. He had nothing to gain by giving up his position. Such was the kind of love that Jesus would have for us.

Finally, in v. 27 we read, **"How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"** This is the repetition of the refrain first given in v. 19. The lack of bitterness toward Saul by David is remarkable.

The defeat of Israel and the destruction of the royal family was a black mark on the nation's history. David, however, recognized its potential value for future generations. He commanded in v. 18 that this lament should be taught to his people. He perhaps recognized that it had value in motivating future generations in the face of conflict against the nation's enemies.

Some 2000 years later their descendants would experience a horrible defeat at the hands of the Romans. The nation would go out of existence for 2000 years. In 70 AD the Jews rebelled against the Romans. The last of the nation's fighters gathered upon the hilltop fortress of Masada near the Red Sea. The Roman army spent seven months laying siege to the 960 remaining fighters and their families and building a siege ramp to destroy them. When they finally breached the mountain stronghold, they discovered that there had been a mass suicide the night before. Two thousand years later Israeli General Moshe Dayan engineered the recapturing of the Temple Mount in the Six Day War. He initiated the practice of the swearing in ceremony of cadets who had finished basic training and who were about to enter the Israeli Armored Corps. On top of Masada they promise to defend the nation and they vow, "Masada shall not fall again." Such was the kind of powerful reminder which David's lament was intended to serve.

In Philippians #3 v. 20 we followers of Jesus are told, **"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ..."** We citizens of this heavenly kingdom are part of God's plan for the establishment of His kingdom upon the earth. Our responsibility is to promote the establishment of that kingdom upon the earth, though we realize that its establishment will not be fully realized until Christ returns.

The two divinely created institutions upon the earth which are intended to reflect God's intended kingdom purposes are the church and the family. The church is described in the New Testament as the body of Christ. In Ephesians #5 Christian marriage is described as an illustration of Jesus' relationship with the church.

In our involvement with these two institutions it is important for us to get it right. Division and brokenness in the church and in the family is a cause for lament for the failure of the proper demonstration of God's kingdom purposes. Our Lord is grieved by divided churches and broken marriages. Some of us have had experience with one or both situations. As with the lament in David's poem, these failures of God's kingdom purposes should motivate us to persevere and overcome in the present. By God's help we can succeed.

While churches can and should continue, death eventually intrudes into marriages, as has happened with too many in our congregation. We naturally grieve and lament. Yet we Christians have hope based in the promises of God. We look forward to a heavenly reunion, and we look forward to God's establishment of His kingdom upon the earth.

Esther Edwards Burr, the daughter of of the famous theologian and New England pastor Jonathan Edwards, lost her husband to death when he was only 41 years old. In a letter to her parents she wrote, **"O, I am afraid I shall conduct myself so as to bring dishonour on my God and the religion I profess! No, rather let me die this moment, than be left to bring dishonour on God's holy name..."** (Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 434)

Saul lost his life and his kingdom because he brought dishonor to the One who had called him into His service. Our high calling as followers of Jesus is to bring honor to Him, especially in our service to Him in the church and in marriage and the family. May God give us the power to succeed in doing that.