

The Fall of Saul

1 Samuel 31:1–2 Samuel 1:27

Key Verse: 2 Samuel 1:19

“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights. How the mighty have fallen!”

Every person leaves some sort of legacy. Of course there are many traits that make up a person’s character but their dominating factor produces some sort of legacy. For example, Hitler’s life was dominated with power, destruction and death, while Mother Teresa typifies giving. Donald Trump embodies success or wealth and Jesus lived a life of sacrifice. When you breathe your last, what will be your legacy? How will your life be defined? Will it reveal a hunger for wealth, a craving for attention or a thirst for pleasure? Or will it be driven by hope, a pursuit of peace, or a longing for righteousness? Or why should we even care about what kind of legacy we leave? The good news is, if you’re still breathing, it hasn’t been determined yet. In today’s passage we’ll see how the legacies of Saul, Jonathan, David and Israel. May God dwell with us this morning.

When David left the Philistines they were gathering at Aphek and heading toward Israel at Jezreel. Take a look at verses 1-2. “Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ² The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua.” It says that the Israelites fled before the Philistines, they sought to make a stand on the slopes of Mt. Gilboa. But the Philistines fought fiercely and when their archers joined the fight many of the Israelites dropped in battle. As they tried to fall back, the retreat became a full fledged rout as their army fell into chaos. The Philistines continued to press the battle hard, they weren’t giving up. They had Israel right where they wanted them. When God had removed his protection from Saul, his tragic end was nearing its completion. Now that God had decreed His judgment upon Saul, which had been spoken the previous night through the prophet Samuel, (v28:19) and David, God’s appointed successor was far from the battlefield, there was nothing to stop the Philistines from sweeping over Saul’s army. Now it was time for “Ichabod” to be pronounced over Saul’s reign since the glory of the Lord had departed.

What’s tragic is that Saul didn’t die alone in God’s judgment. The Philistines struck down many in the army as well as Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. (v31:2) The Israelite leaders didn’t shrink back from the fight. Especially we can picture Jonathan, the God-honoring hero of so many battles, rallying Saul’s troops and holding the line until finally he is overwhelmed and killed. One pastor offered this eulogy: “He remained a true friend to David and a faithful son of Saul. He surrendered his kingship to David (v18:1-4); he sacrificed his life for Saul. In this hopeless fiasco Jonathan was nowhere else but in the place God had assigned to him – at the side of his father.” One might say that the legacy of Jonathan’s life was faithfulness, and he shows us that a worthy life doesn’t depend on our circumstances. He lived in dangerous times and suffered from a thankless obligation to his insane father. But through all of it, Jonathan’s faithfulness to God, and to his friends, and to his father allowed him to persevere with integrity, and to smell the roses of his life despite the many thorns. We are tempted to think that his death was the great tragedy of this battle, but **what is tragic about remaining faithfully to the calling God has assigned us?** In view of eternity, Jonathan’s death is more glorious than tragic, because by keeping his faith in the Lord, Jonathan escaped tragedy and entered into God’s glory. The account of Israel’s defeat climaxes with a bitter end: “The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.” (v31:3) At this point, Saul realized that it’s over. His sons were dead and his army scattered. He was wounded and the Philistines were drawing near. So he turned to his armor-bearer and gave his final command: “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.” (v31:4). Saul’s concern about being tortured was well-founded because that is what the Philistines did. But his armor-bearer wouldn’t kill him. It says that, “he was terrified,” that is, like David, he feared God and refused to kill the Lord’s anointed. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it and so did his armor-bearer. (v31:5)

Saul’s suicide was a calculated decision. From a worldly point of view it may have been understandable, like a Japanese samurai warrior. The reality was that Saul had no chance of survival and the prospect of torture was real. And thus his suicide becomes the last nail in the coffin of the faith he once professed. But what’s more

troubling than what Saul **did** in his last hour of despair, is what he **didn't do**. There's no cry to God for help. No appeal to heaven for mercy. We read nothing along the lines of the pleas that virtually fill David's psalms. And even as the Philistines are closing in, Saul makes no spiritual appeal at all. And thus he dies just as he lived, in his hardened self-will and without faith in God's salvation. And when we look back at his life, no hand ever injured him but his own; and just as he lived, so he died, his own murderer.

Verse 6 solemnly notes, "So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day." Saul's kingship arose from Israel's demand to "...be like all the other nations with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." (v 8:20) What the Israelites saw as a practical solution to their military predicament was denounced by God as idolatry. Israel was created to be unique among the nations in that God would be its leader. The Lord said, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19:5-6) But Israel refused and just as Jonathan's legacy was faithfulness, Israel's legacy became idolatry. The end result of their idolatry was the death of both the king they desired and the army he led.

Israel's experience shows us what the end result of Idolatry is. When Israel was determined to serve idols, the Lord gave them over to live as slaves in a land of idols. So it was after Saul's death: "When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them." (v31:7). So great was the disaster of this battle that the Israelites living in the fertile region behind Mt. Gilboa, including the cities along the Jordan River and even on the eastern side, abandoned their land and fled. Therefore the end of idolatry for Israel was the domination of their land and cities by the servants of idols. To the Lord, idolatry is like prostituting one's soul to other gods. It would be the same as if our spouse left us for another person. Once this happens, the relationship is destroyed. That's why idolatry is bad.

This disaster shows another tragic result of idolatry among God's people: the public disgrace of the Lord's name. The Philistines sent messengers throughout their land to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people declaring Dagon's supremacy over Israel's god. (v31:9) And thus we find the greater calamity of Israel's idolatry: the Lord's disgrace in the lives of his people. The rout of Israel's army at Mt. Gilboa was a national disaster of great proportions, not seen since the time of Eli in the battle of Ebenezer two generations earlier. Israel's army was broken, its leadership dead, its land occupied and its god disgraced.

This final chapter of 1 Samuel doesn't really mark the end of a book in the Bible, since 1st and 2nd Samuel were originally one book. Yet the end of First Samuel does mark an important divide in the life of David and of Israel. The record of Saul's death marks an appropriate end in God's judgment, yet the book concludes with the heroic raid of the men of Jabesh-Gilead, providing a stirring reminder of God's grace that provides hope for Israel's future. Take a look at verses 11-13. "When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹² all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. ¹³ Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days."

Do you remember Jabesh-Gilead? It was the city that Saul boldly sent relief to at the beginning of his reign, when Nahash the Ammonite besieged the city and threatened to gouge out the right eye from all the men. That was forty years ago, and maybe the best act of Saul's reign. But all that time the people of Jabesh-Gilead kept alive the memory of their debt to their king. The disgrace of Saul's remains was too much for their hearts to bear, so they put their gratitude and love into action. While the Philistines slept, they gathered the remains of Saul and his sons and brought them to Israelite soil for a decent burial.

That fact that 1 Samuel ends with a courageous act of gratitude towards Saul says more about God than it does about Saul. It reminds us that even the worst of lives was created in the image of God and has shared at least sparks of God's goodness and love. This concluding note also shows how eager God is to bless and reward the

least acts of faith and obedience. Even the death of a hardened rebel like Saul provides us with an incentive to repent of our sins, turn to the Lord in true faith, and serve the Lord whole-heartedly in this dark and dangerous world. St. Paul was a good example, he was the enemy of God, going after God's people to destroy them, but when he met the Risen Christ on the roadside, he repented of his sin and God accepted him back and made his life a blessing.

Unlike hard-hearted Saul, in the second part of this passage we see David who honors and fears the Lord so much that he won't even lay a hand on the "Lord's anointed." While the army of Israel was being defeated, David and his army were returning from a victory over the Amalekites. "When a man arrived from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and with dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor." (2 Sam 1:2) David asked him where he came from and the man proceeds to tell David how he came from Saul's camp and that he and Jonathan were dead. The young man thought that he could gain the favor of David by telling him a lie. "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and riders almost upon him."⁷ When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me, and I said, 'What can I do?'⁸ "He asked me, 'Who are you?' "An Amalekite," I answered.⁹ "Then he said to me, 'Stand over me and kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I'm still alive.'"¹⁰ "So I stood over him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive. And I took the crown that was on his head and the band on his arm and have brought them here to my lord." (v6-10) When David and his men heard what had happened they tore their clothes and wept and fasted till evening for Saul, Jonathan and the Israelite army. When their weeping was over David asked the man, "Why were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?" (v14) David believed that God anointed Saul, and only God could remove him from office. If it became casual or commonplace to assassinate the king, the whole society would become chaotic. It was God's job, not David's, to judge Saul's sins. (Lev 19:18) We must realize that God has placed rulers in authority over us, and we should respect their positions. (Rom 13:1-5) David ended the matter and had the young man struck down.

David then wrote a lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan and had it published to the nation in the book of Jashar. Why would David weep and honor a man who had tried to kill him many times? John Calvin commented on David's reasoning, "Since God elevated Saul to such dignity, that is reason enough for me to honor him. That is how greatly David esteemed the grace of God in a man who was so perverse." Having honored the memory of Saul as glorious and mighty, David's main point is the disgrace to which Israel had publicly been subjected to because Saul's death and Israel's defeat was done in public, broadcasted from the top of a mountain for all to see. God's aim in this was to rebuke his people to such a degree that they would recognize their offense every time they saw the mountain. That's why David starts it out saying, "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights. How the mighty have fallen!" (v1:19) David mourns this disgrace with a specific concern for the glory of the Lord. Then he laments the fact that their enemies would be celebrating their victory over Israel and then he curses Mt. Gilboa.

David had every reason to hate Saul, but he chose not to. Instead, he chose to look at the good Saul had done and to ignore the times when Saul had attacked him. It takes courage to lay aside hatred and hurt and to respect the positive side of another person, especially an enemy. David first laments nationally for Saul in verses 19-24 and then personally for Jonathan in verses 25-27. He says, "Saul and Jonathan— in life they were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold." (v 1:23-24) Here David urges the daughters of Israel to weep for Saul. We should weep for all those who are lost in sin. Saul's death reminds us that the possession of great gifts from God does not exempt anyone from God's judgment of our sins. Those granted positions of privilege and power fall into sin because they begin to think God's rules no longer apply to them.

And finally David concludes the lament for his person friend Jonathan. "How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights."²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.²⁷ "How the mighty have fallen! The weapons of war have perished!" (v25-27) This is where David felt a personal loss. Jonathan had been his good friend, a

fellow soldier and most importantly they shared the same devotion to the Lord. No woman had ever been through this with him like Jonathan. More than that, no woman had ever sacrificed so much for him.

When we look at these two chapters we are struck with a very fundamental difference between David and Saul. It was their attitude or view of the Lord. Where as, David honored the Lord, Saul ignored the Lord. Therefore David left a legacy of repentance while Saul left a legacy of rebellion and unrepentance/ impenitence. 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 explains it plainly. “Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance,¹⁴ and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.” Had Saul ever truly repented we can be sure of his acceptance and blessing with God. The example of even more wicked kings who did call on the Lord and were saved proves this. “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other,” declares the Lord (Isa. 45:22), but Saul would not turn to seek the Lord. If the theme of Israel was idolatry and the theme of Saul’s life was his refusal to repent, then the theme governing God’s response was that of judgment. God had warned Saul of judgment many times, starting with his rebukes in 1 Samuel 15:23-28. Saul should have learned from the example of Eli and his sons, whose promised death happened exactly according to God’s schedule (1 Sam. 3:27-34). But Saul didn’t learn from the experiences of others, or the judgment warned the night before this battle (1 Sam. 28:19-20) unfortunately for him it came with terrifying efficiency.

But Saul’s case is not a isolated one. Judgment is waiting for everyone. The Bible says “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” (Heb. 9:27) Paul writes that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Cor. 5:10) This judgment is promised to those who won’t believe, and its end comes swiftly. Fortunately, the fulfillment of God’s Word regarding Saul’s judgment reminds us of the confidence we may have in the whole message of the Bible. If God’s promise of judgment upon Saul was true, then God’s gospel promises of eternal life to those who believe is equally true. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” (Jn. 5:24)

For all of Saul’s outward belief in God, he never repented or turned to the Lord in a true and living faith. On Mount Gilboa, Israel’s idolatry, Saul’s unrepentance, and God’s judgment all came together in a disastrous end that could have been averted if only Saul had humbled himself before God, called to the Lord for salvation, and turned from his rebellion and sins. Because of this single difference, Saul dies while David lives, just as Saul will spend eternity in the condemnation of hell while David dwells above in the glory of heaven. This is the decisive issue in every life: will we repent and be saved, or will we harden our hearts to God and perish. So now I ask what legacy will you leave behind? Why should we even care about what kind of legacy we leave? We think that only what we’re doing now matters. Why worry about tomorrow? But we should care about what kind of legacy we will leave because it’s who we really are. It’s not who we want to be, or who we ought to be, but it’s who we are deep down inside. I was recently at a conference downtown and heard a talk from a university president. And his conclusion really struck my heart. He said, “Guard your thoughts. Guard your thoughts because they become your words. Guard your words because they become your actions. Guard your actions because they become your habits. Guard your habits because they become your character. And guard your character because it becomes your destiny.” We don’t have to worry about what kind of legacy we will leave when our hearts are centered on our Lord. When we do what is right before the Lord, our legacy will reveal the grace and glory of God.