

The death of Saul

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Date: 17 March 2024

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[0:00] Which began 10 days of national mourning for someone who people would have described as a faithful servant of our country and indeed of the Lord.

! In 1 Samuel 31, we come to a day in Israel's history, we don't know the date, the day when King Saul I died by falling upon his sword.

A tragic way to die. And I think as we've looked at his life over this series in 1 Samuel, if you don't know, we've been looking at it, this book, together as a church for some while now.

As we've been looking at King Saul's life, I'm not sure we would describe him in the same way we would have described Queen Elizabeth. Let me recap just a little bit of Saul's reign, what we've seen.

The Lord raised up this man Saul after the people chose to reject God's rule over them and decided they wanted a king of their own.

[1:28] A human king. Like all the other nations had. And he kind of gave them exactly what they were looking for.

A tall man, a head taller than the rest of men. And he was handsome. Strong, tall and handsome as King Saul.

I've said a few times I think of him as someone like this. The rock. Strong, tall, handsome chap. What more could you want in a king?

And it all started with some promise actually. Early on in Saul's reign, in 1 Samuel chapter 11, there was a great victory.

One for the people of Jabesh Gilead, who are mentioned in this chapter, we'll come to them later on. Where Saul goes and fights against the Ammonites who were threatening that town.

[2:25] And we read 1 Samuel 11, verse 11. The next day Saul separated his men to three divisions during the last watch of the night. They broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day.

Those who survived were scattered so that no two of them were left together. Saul won a victory. Right there. Right at the beginning of his reign.

So much promise. And yet we have seen, as the chapters have gone on, he is clearly not a king after God's own heart.

He is, as Samuel warned them. A king who took from the people. A king who was interested in himself and holding on to his position no matter what.

We've seen him paranoid when young David was anointed as king and was winning great victories. Famously over Goliath, that strong, tall, big Philistine giant.

[3:32] And people were chanting in the streets. Well, Saul has killed his thousands, but David is tens of thousands. And Saul was jealous and he was paranoid that David was going to get on his throne.

There were several attempts to kill David with his spear. So many attempts which repeatedly went wrong. And the judgment was made by God, wasn't it?

That Saul, the kingdom is going to be torn away from you. It was repeated just a few chapters ago in chapter 28. When Saul foolishly, instead of trying to inquire of the Lord, he actually chose in the end to find a medium.

And she managed to bring Samuel up from the dead to speak to Saul. And in 1 Samuel 28, verse 16, the judgment on Saul is repeated.

Samuel said to him, Why do you consult me now that the Lord has departed from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors, to David.

[4:54] Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites. The Lord has done this to you this day. The Lord will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines.

And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines. That's God's words of judgment to Samuel.

And we've seen in the book, God's word does not fail. We can trust it to be right and true. And so the judgment upon Saul and his sons, it is sure to happen.

And so we arrive at what is a sad and sobering day in the life of Israel. The day of death.

The Philistines, we're told, come in for battle. Verse 1. Now the Philistines fought against Israel.

[6:02] The Israelites fled before them and many fell dead on Mount Geboah. The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons. It was battle day.

Fights were happening. Arrows were shot. But swords were slaying. And we're told the Israelites were fleeing. But that didn't stop men from dying.

The Philistines really particularly wanted to capture Saul and his men. Saul and his sons even. They were in hot pursuit of the royal family.

Kill the royal family and maybe we'll get the land. Kill the king and gain victory. That was their mission. That was the Philistines' mission.

And verse 2. The rest of it says they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchishua.

[7:02] And the first son named there is Jonathan. We have seen him in this book of 1 Samuel at different points.

A son who we have seen is so different from his dad. Couldn't be more different. He was faithful to the Lord. He was faithful to the Lord and faithful to his friend David.

If things worked out as they should have done, Jonathan rightly could claim the throne for himself. But he knew that was not God's plan.

He knew that God was in his wisdom choosing to end Saul and his family line, royal line. And instead start again with David as king and successor.

Jonathan knew that he himself would not follow as king. But what a wonderful friend he was to the future king of Israel, to David.

[8:07] He honoured him. And we found him last in chapter 23. Helping David to find his strength in the Lord. And yet he also honoured his dad too.

Clearly as we see in this chapter. He was on his dad's side. He was fighting against the Philistines. But today, along with his brothers, he dies.

1 and 2 Samuel are really one big book. They're separated in our Bibles. We'd have one massive book in our Bibles if they were just the book of Samuel.

And so the story continues over the page in 2 Samuel. And in 2 Samuel chapter 1, David hears of the death of Jonathan, his friend.

And in verse 25, this is part of his response. How the mighty have fallen in battle. Jonathan lies slain on your heights.

[9:12] 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.

We see there David's grief in the face of losing such a dear and faithful friend to him.

And that's an encouragement to us that the Bible deals with the reality of death. For David here, he had confidence, I'm sure, that Jonathan was the Lord's and he was safe with his God's.

And the Bible does teach us of the resurrection hope that we can have when a Christian brother or sister dies.

But the Bible is also very real and honest about how we're going to feel. It's okay to grieve.

[10:20] It's okay to mourn. It's okay to be sad. Death was not a part of God's original design for this world.

It's hard. It feels unnatural. It's a parting. But a comfort that David could have was that his dear friend Jonathan has gone from one kingdom ruled by a failing king.

He's gone from that to an eternal kingdom under the reign of a king who will rule forever. This passage is a day of death.

Jonathan is just one of three of Saul's sons who have died. And it gets worse. Have a look down at verse 3.

The fighting grew fierce around Saul and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically. The fighting grows fierce.

[11:25] And it particularly grows fierce around Saul. The Philistines, remember, they won the royal family dead. They've completed their objectives in killing Saul's sons.

And now they're after the king himself. And fighting grows fierce. Kill the king, they are probably saying to one another.

And finally, in verse 3, we see that they wounded him critically. And so in verse 4, Saul's final moments arrive.

Have a look. Saul said to his armor bearer, draw your sword and run me through. Or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.

Saul knows that the situation is critical for him. He doesn't want the Philistines to have the satisfaction of killing him themselves.

[12:29] And so he asks his armor bearer, who's alongside him, to do the deeds. But he refuses. Maybe like David, when faced with the opportunity to kill Saul, the Lord's anointed.

Perhaps he thought it's not right to lay a hand on him. Our time is in God's hands. But Saul goes ahead and makes sure it happens anyway.

Verse 4b. But the armor bearer was terrified and would not do it. So Saul took his own sword. And he fell on it. And there is the end of the first king of Israel.

A sad end. So he feels quite a selfish end, doesn't it? Saul's last words there in verse 4. Again, draw your sword and run me through.

All these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me. Again, it's all about me, me, me. That's what we've seen throughout Saul's reign.

[13:39] Me, me, me. That kind of sums up Saul's reign, doesn't it? Whereas, contrasted with the ruler that I mentioned at the beginning, the queen, she gave up her life to serve others.

We can't really say that of Saul here in this passage. King Saul tried to serve in his own strength. I think one of the lessons we can learn from 1 Samuel is not to be looking to our own strength, actually.

Do you remember the beginning of the book where we saw Hannah's weeping? Weeping because she could not have a child of her own. And she prayed.

She prayed and wept. And then through her tears and prayers, the Lord provided for her a son, who this book is named after, Samuel.

And Hannah prayed in response to the birth of her son, a wonderful prayer, a prayer that helps tee up the rest of the book.

[14:54] And in part of her prayer, she prayed this. It is not by strength that one prevails. Those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

Saul was seeking to serve in his own strength. And now we find him dead. It didn't work. The most high will thunder from heaven and the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

And in this passage, the Lord's judgment on Saul and his reign has been carried out. Now we find him humbled and broken down.

He didn't feel any strength left to fight and gave up by falling on his sword rather than looking to the Lord for his strength. David, in 2 Samuel 1, we've read his words about Jonathan.

But also, he doesn't just hear of Jonathan's death. He also hears of Saul's. And in that passage, three times we hear this referring, how the mighty have fallen.

[16:08] And that's what's going on in 1 Samuel 31. How the mighty have fallen. How the mighty King Saul has fallen.

Once a tall, strong, and handsome man appointed as king of the Lord's people. Now dead. The end has come for him. In 1 Chronicles chapter 10, we see Saul's death.

This scene accounted for again in the Bible. 1 Chronicles chapter 10. And it concludes with these words. These words from the chronicler.

A bit of an obituary to Saul. 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.

[17:09] And did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David's son of Jesse. That's the words that the chronicler finds for Saul.

He did not inquire of the Lord. He did not look to the Lord. In fact, he even consulted a medium. And as we read these sobering verses, let's turn and think just for ourselves of this matter, this hard matter to think about, but necessary to this matter of death.

Perhaps it's something we don't particularly like to speak about. People will often use other ways to describe it, won't they?

Or they've kicked the bucket, gone to a better place. That they'll always live on in our hearts. But the reality that we need to remember is that people do die.

The reality is for us that unless the Lord Jesus returns again, we too will die. And when it comes to our own death, when the funeral service happens and the coffin walks in, how are people going to remember us?

[18:35] We thought about how Saul is remembered unfaithful to the Lord, the chronicler said. Did not keep the word of the Lord.

Is that how people are going to remember us? Or alternatively, we could be remembered as someone who knew they were a sinner.

Yeah. The Bible's very clear about that. But also knew a great saviour. And we can even be remembered as people who have lived life in service of the Lord.

Our great saviour. You see, this morning we meet together here in this place, in a church that proclaims the Lord Jesus.

We often sing or say words like this, what is our hope in life and death? Well, it's Christ alone. And we can say that because we are confident that Jesus has taken the judgment that we deserve for our sins, which is death.

[19:51] He's taken that on himself. And the great blessing of a Christian, of being a Christian, is knowing the Lord Jesus who says these words, I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Why do you believe this?

And so this morning I want to ask you, do you believe this? Perhaps this morning, actually, you don't.

You know death is a reality. We've been saying that. You agree with that. But you just sort of think of death as the end. Or maybe you're scared of what comes after death.

Well, I'm delighted to tell you that in the Lord Jesus, we find a precious, great, genuine hope that goes beyond the grave.

[21:01] Because we are confident in that because the Lord Jesus himself has been through death. And he himself has conquered the grave.

He did not stay dead. And you, this morning, you can even turn to him now and confess your sin to him and say, I trust you to save me.

I trust that in you I can have hope beyond the grave. This is a sad day for Saul in 1 Samuel 31.

A sad day for a man who has rejected God. And fallen on his own swords. But we've remembered Jonathan as well.

And we've remembered him to be a man who clearly and faithfully trusted the Lord. And so we can choose.

[22:10] Do we want to go the way Saul was heading? Rejecting the Lord? Or do we want to go the way Jonathan was heading and look to the Lord for salvation?

Be someone who's faithfully seeking to follow the Lord. Second point, and briefer as well.

The day when darkness seems to win. Saul, the rejected king of the Lord's people, is now dead.

And the Philistines are gruesome in their victory celebrations. Have a look. Verse 8 to 10. The next day when the Philistines came to strip the dead.

They found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Geboah. And they cut off his head. And stripped off his armor. And they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines.

[23:14] To proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. And they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreth. And fastened his body to the wall of Beth-sham.

They cut off his head. That's gruesome. And they began to parade it around the Philistine land. And they proclaim a gospel.

They don't proclaim the gospel that we preach here of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who's died and risen again. But gospel, it means good news, doesn't it?

And in verse 10 we read, They go throughout the land to proclaim the news or the good news in the temple of their idols and among the people.

They were telling, we've won the victory. We've won the victory over Yahweh and his people. And we've killed their king and his sons. And if you're a Philistine, that's good news to hear.

[24:20] And verse 10, like a trophy that you put up on display on your mantelpiece or something. When you've won something. They put up the body of Saul.

And 1 Chronicles 10 verse 10 even tells us that his head was put up on display in the temple of Dagon.

We heard about Dagon a long time ago in 1 Samuel chapter 5. A God who kept falling down. But now they pronounce victory among their gods.

This day of death for Israel was a victory for the Philistines. A day when the enemy seems to have won. And I think it's a day which should remind us of another day when it feels like the enemy had won.

A dark day when God's rejected king was put to death on a wooden cross.

[25:36] A day we're going to remember in just a couple of weeks time. Good Friday. The day when Jesus died.

Listen to what Peter says in the book of Acts. In his sermon in Acts chapter 2. About this day. He said, You put this king who was God's promised anointed king to death on a cross.

That's what Peter says. And they must have thought they'd won. People wanted him dead.

And out of the way he'd been causing trouble. Was the view of the religious authorities. And they must have thought that that day, that Good Friday, was a day when they had won.

And they were probably rubbing their hands together. They may have been out celebrating. We finally killed him. He's not going to be a problem to us anymore. But that's not the end of the story.

[27:03] It's a day when darkness seems to win. But, Peter says, God raised him from the dead. Freeing him from the agony of death. Because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Jesus did not stay dead. It may have felt like darkness had won on that Good Friday. But it really had not.

Death could not keep a hold on the Lord Jesus. Perhaps this morning, some of us are facing dark situations.

At work, at school, maybe among friendships, among our family members. Maybe it feels like darkness is winning. Satan has got a hold.

It feels like the wicked are triumphing over us. Well, I think we can take comfort, not necessarily as we read 1 Samuel 31, but as we read the entire Bible story.

[28:13] Because it doesn't end here. God's plan in 1 Samuel 31 was being worked out. It was a dark day. Victory seems to be won by the enemies.

But God's plan is being worked out. He was bringing the end of an unfaithful king. And he was going to supply them with a better king.

King David on the throne. A king we know he's not perfect, but a good king who seeks to honour the Lord nonetheless. But more than that, we can take comfort, surely, in King Jesus, who wicked men who thought they had got rid of.

But now Jesus, he is alive and well. And he reigns. The Bible story shows us that the world will be brought to an end.

A judgment will be carried out. But the Bible story also shows us that evil is not going to win. Jesus wins. Our hope in life and death is found in him.

[29:30] We're going to sing soon. Rejoice, the Lord is king. Your Lord and King adore. We see one more thing in this passage.

It's the day when gratitude is shown. Have a look there at the end. It at least ends in a little bit of a positive way, in a way.

Verse 11 to 13. We mentioned, Saul's first victory as king was in Jabesh-Gilead, where he rescued the people from the Ammonites.

And the people of Jabesh-Gilead had not forgotten that. And here we see a wonderful example, really, of honoring someone who had done them good.

And making sure that in Saul's death, he was at least honored by people who could owe a great debt of gratitude to him.

[31:10] And receive a better burial than being displayed on the wall of a temple. And they were rightly thankful for what Saul had done for them.

And I think that's the lesson for us. We can honor those who have gone by. Those who have done good for us.

And even more as Christians. We worship the Lord Jesus who has died for us.

We owe the Lord Jesus a debt of gratitude, don't we? And we can live our lives in thankfulness. In thankful worship of him.

Can live our lives honoring him by telling others of his death, but also of his resurrection that we've spoken about to you. Now this day of death in 1 Samuel 31, it brings us to the end of our series in this book.

[32:21] And as we sort of conclude this book, what we have seen is the reign of Saul unfolds.

We have seen the people put their hopes in a human being to be their ruler rather than in God as king. And now this human being that they have put so much hope in at the beginning is now dead. And maybe they're going to put their hopes next in David, another human being. But we have seen in David, haven't we, someone who is certainly someone who is seeking to honor the Lord.

He doesn't get it right all the time. But he is a much better picture of what a good king should look like. But we see that even David knows he is not the king who's going to live forever.

Jesus is the king who lives forever. Jesus is the king who we must put our hope for life and death in.

[33:35] And we live in a world, and I think 1 Samuel helps us to think, which king, which kingdom are we going to follow in this world?

Are we going to follow the kingdom of the world? The kingdom which really puts ourselves on the throne, makes me number one, just like Saul did. Are we going to do that?

Or are we going to live for God's kingdom and follow King Jesus? Lay our life down for following him, for making him known, honoring him, the one who's died for us.

So which kingdom, which king will you choose? The world, self, or God's kingdom?

King Jesus. We're going to stand and we're going to sing this hymn, which seems a fitting response, I think.

[34:41] We're going to rejoice that the Lord is king. We're going to adore him. It says, mortals, human beings, give thanks and sing and triumph evermore.

Lift up your hearts. Lift up your voice. Rejoice again. I say, rejoice. Let's stand and sing this great hymn together.