

1 Samuel 31

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[0 : 00] Would you pray with me? Lord, I pray that you would bless your word and teach us tonight that every bit of it has truth for our edification.

And that you are speaking to it, through it, to us even now. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen.

Amen. Long live Dagon, the God of the Philistines and conquerors of our enemies.

Long live Dagon, God of the Philistines. For Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our enemy, is defeated.

And the body of his servant Saul, stripped of its armor, its dignity, and its very head adorns our walls.

[1 : 05] Long live Dagon, God of the Philistines. These, perhaps, were some of the chants of the Philistine warriors in their hall of rejoicing, returned from the fresh destruction of Israel, the people who claim to be the beloved children of the one true God.

But where was their God yesterday when they fled as cowards before Philistine swords? The ones who remained behind were the dead, whose souls the Philistines stole from their bodies yesterday, and whose jewels, armor, weapons, and clothing the Philistines stole today.

And among them, Saul. The people of God are bloodied, horrified, defeated. Their God made them promises.

And what a mockery those promises are. How did we get here, to this hall, where Philistine wine is poured out today in celebration as freely as Israelite blood was spilled out yesterday in their defeat? That story is found in our passage for tonight. Turn with me, if you will, to 1 Samuel chapter 31. Let's read it together.

[2 : 34] 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 Malkishua, the sons of Saul.

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. Thus, Saul died.

[3 : 42] 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. 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.

They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

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.

[5 : 06] And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted seven days. This is a weighty passage.

And I hope as we look together at it tonight, we can learn from it three things. Number one, the word of God, even when it speaks terrible things, does not speak in vain.

Number two, the people of God have enemies who hate him and who rejoice in the destruction of God's people. Number three, through every defeat of the people of God, God is working a greater salvation.

First, the word of God, even when it speaks terrible things, does not speak in vain. We saw this chapter coming.

For the last several months here at Trinity, we have been looking at the book of 1 Samuel. Because we believe here that the Bible has one coherent, unifying narrative, every bit of which is useful for building up the church, we have looked chapter by chapter at this book.

[6 : 31] And as we have looked at it, we have seen that Saul grows more and more desperate. He began this chapter as the Lord's anointed one.

Everyone in Israel rejoiced to see him leading their nation, going in and out to war and winning great victories for the people of God. But no political leader, then or now, can live up to expectations so messianic.

And Saul was no exception. He disobeyed God by offering sacrifices unlawfully in an attempt to force God to support him.

And Samuel informed him that God had taken the kingdom from him and given it to another. Saul was, from that point forward, a man accursed.

But was he really? After all, that message from Samuel came all the way back in chapter 13. And here we are now in chapter 31.

[7 : 41] And up until this chapter, Saul still reigns. Saul still spent his days sitting in the royal palace on the throne over all Israel.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of armed men at his beck and call. He spent his nights in a palace bed while David, the one he hated, his arch enemy, slept in caves, fearful for his life.

By all accounts, it seemed that the word from the Lord against Saul was in vain for 17 chapters. Saul, the wicked one, prospered while the man after God's own heart was forced into a meager existence of exile, laying his head night by night on rocks in caves, far from the palace, far from what we might expect of the Lord's anointed one.

And Saul here even had the confidence to go out into battle against this Philistine army. Because he had defeated this army over and over, and why should this battle be any different?

Well, this battle was different this time, not because of the number of troops that Saul commanded, but because of the word of the Lord. A few chapters earlier, in a mad attempt to receive some guidance, Saul invoked a witch to summon Samuel from the dead.

[9 : 07] His message to Saul was bleak. Moreover, he says, the Lord will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me.

That is, dead. The Lord will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines. Yet Saul went to battle anyway.

Hadn't this Samuel been threatening such things for a while now? And surely Saul had plenty of time to find some way out of his predicament. After all, on more than one occasion, David could have killed him, but he didn't.

And after these incursions, Saul would make some weak attempt at repentance each time. Oh, David, I'm so sorry. Please come back. And then a few weeks later, he was back on the hunt for David with no repercussions whatsoever.

Surely this time would be no different. Samuel must have been exaggerating. But the word of God to Saul did not fail.

[10 : 20] For the word of God never fails. In this chapter, all things fall out precisely the way Samuel, speaking on behalf of God, predicts they would.

The word of God does not fail. And so it is also now. God has spoken to his people.

This is one of the central claims of the Christian faith. And he has done it in his word. And that word contains both warnings and promises.

Do we, the people of God, who trust that God's promises are unshakable, think that his warnings are somehow less unshakable?

That they are witty banter? Or so much bluster and empty threats, as Saul perhaps did of the words of the Lord and Samuel for 17 chapters, without any repentance whatsoever?

[11 : 25] Do we emulate Saul in this way? Do you put off holiness until tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

Or perhaps you are not of the faith yet. You have flirted with Christianity, coming to church every so often, being intrigued by it, and planning that one day perhaps, perhaps at the end of your life when you have little else to do, less fun to have, you too shall bow the knee to God, but not yet, for there shall always be tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

But my brother, my sister, let the blood of Saul cry out to you in warning not to presume upon the mercy of God.

flee to Jesus. Flee to Jesus. When you hear the warnings spoken to you in Scripture, flee to Jesus. Take shelter in Him, the one who bore away God's wrath for all who would believe in and follow Him. Psalm 711 says, God is a righteous judge and a God who feels indignation every day.

[12 : 54] Some translations say, He's angry every day. This is not a popular conception of God. But when you look at Saul's corpse on that wall of the Philistine fortress and think that he was put there because of the judgment of God, can you think anything other than this verse?

That God feels anger every day against sin? And it is precisely because he is righteous that he feels that anger? If you are not in Christ, if you have not believed in Christ and clung to Him in faith, then God's indignation burns against you no less than it did against Saul.

This is the warning for us in this difficult passage. And the response, though it would come only thousands, hundreds of years later, is this.

Flee to Christ. Flee to Him. He is full of mercy, rich in love for you if you would come to Him. As the old hymn says, let us love and sing in wonder. Let us praise the Savior's love. He has hushed the law's loud thunder.

[14 : 26] He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame. Mount Sinai, that flame that threatened to consume any who would approach it unworthily, can be quenched by the blood of Jesus.

Flee to Him. When you gaze upon the naked, beheaded body of Saul on the wall of that Philistine fortress, rejoice that such a judgment is not for you if you are in Christ.

Therefore, flee to Christ. Flee to Him and live. For the Word of God, when it issues its warnings as well as its promises, are not in vain.

Yet perhaps it seems to you that God is tarrying. As it did for Saul from chapter 13 until chapter 30 of this book. Perhaps you think he tarries.

Perhaps he is slow to keep his promises. And when we look at the world, it does seem that God appears to tarry. But even then, not without reason.

[15 : 42] Every day that passes without God bringing judgment upon the sin that He so hates, He is doing one of two things. He is either giving the wicked opportunity to repent.

Or He is amassing greater and greater evidence for His final work of judgment on the evildoers. So if you are not in Christ, flee to Him.

And if you are in Christ, but find yourself to be in a condition of being oppressed, know that God will vindicate you.

Either by converting your oppressor, as He did with Saul in the New Testament, turned Paul, that persecutor of God's people who then became a famous evangelist for God's gospel.

Or God will vindicate you by condemning your oppressor, as He does here with Saul in the Old Testament. The Word of God, when it offers its threats and its promises, does not fail.

[17 : 04] The second point I hope we can see tonight. The people of God have enemies who hate Him and who rejoice in the destruction of God's people. In this chapter, we see a tragic, ironic reversal.

Throughout the book of 1 Samuel, Israel and the Philistines have been at war constantly, perpetually, almost boringly. Perhaps the most famous battle in that war that you can think of is the battle between David and Goliath.

David, the champion of the people of Israel, Goliath, the champion of the people of the Philistines. As David charged the giant in that battle, he declared to him this, you come to me with a sword and a spear and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

This day, the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth that all the earth may know there is a God in Israel.

For David, the battle between him and Goliath had theological significance. It was not only a shepherd boy against a giant, it was the God of Israel against the God of the Philistines.

[18 : 27] And David's claim was that his victory would vindicate that God. All the earth will know there is a God in Israel because I will defeat you.

And that's precisely what happened. David was victorious, which meant that the God of Israel was victorious over the God of the Philistines. This battle had theological significance.

David cut off the head of the champion of the Philistines, stripped him of his armor and sent word throughout the land that Yahweh, the God of Israel, reigns.

And he sent back Goliath's head to Jerusalem, the city of God, as an enduring reminder that Yahweh had conquered. Do you see the reversal of that in this passage?

The Philistines have done to Saul precisely what David, who was then in that battle acting as an agent of Saul, did to Goliath. 1 Chronicles 10 says that when they fastened the body of Saul into the Philistine fortress, they took the head of Saul into the temple of Dagon.

[19 : 42] They took the champion of Yahweh into the house of the idol, for Yahweh was defeated. Look here, even in this chapter at verse 9, when they discover the body of Saul, they cut off his head and strip off his armor and send messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people.

This word, good news, it's the exact same word that is often, in fact, I think everywhere else, translated gospel. The Philistines have a gospel.

The enemies of God have a gospel and it is the champion of Yahweh. Indeed, Yahweh himself is defeated. His people are defeated.

You see, we, reading this book, realize what's going on. God is taking the throne away from Saul and giving it to David, but the Philistines know nothing of this. All they know is they have killed the king, the royal family, and the whole army that came out to meet them and their response is to spread this gospel around.

If David, when he cut off the head of Goliath, says, all men will know that there is a God in Israel, now the Philistines can say, all men will know there is a God of the Philistines. That's the way I began this, that's why I began the sermon the way I did.

[21 : 11] With the Philistines praising Dagon for the destruction of Israel, that blasphemy that they would have dared to utter. But with good reason, it seems.

This battle had all the theological significance for them that David and Goliath had for Israel. It was for them a sign that Yahweh had failed, and the enemies of God rejoice.

Do the enemies of God still rejoice? I contend that they do. And we ourselves can give the enemies of God reason to rejoice.

Consider this. Satan said to God that Job only loved him because God was kind to him and blessed him. So God took away that kindness temporarily, took away that blessing, and let Satan torment him.

Now, what would have happened if Job, after Satan afflicted him, would have taken his wife's advice to curse God and die, what would have happened? Could you imagine how terrible it would be to hear Satan gloating of his victory over God?

[22 : 32] I told you, Yahweh, I told you. God yet, how do we know that heaven is not paying attention to our affairs as well?

How do we know that we, when we choose the pleasures of sin over the pleasures of Christ, do not give equal opportunity for the enemies of God to rejoice and gloat over him?

Would we do that? would we caress our favorite sin and give the enemies of the Lord opportunity this week to gloat over our King who loves us?

Brothers and sisters, let us encourage one another that we ought to fight to allow our enemies, the enemies of God, no reason to gloat of their victory over our King.

Amen. Let us cling to Christ, love him, and love like him so that the opponents of God can be put to shame because Saul gave them opportunity to rejoice.

[23 : 47] Do you notice in this story also that the Bible is not at all rosy-eyed about the evils of this world? This is not some farcical fantasy book out of touch with the difficulties, the evils of life.

Think of the gruesomeness of this scene. But we need a book like this because the world around us is just as gruesome.

You can watch it on YouTube tonight. The Bible must contain these harsh messages if it's going to speak to us in a harsh world.

The Bible would have us be sober, serious, and well aware of the fact that God has enemies and those who would ally themselves with the one true God make for themselves powerful, powerful enemies.

We have seen those enemies at work this week. Most especially and vividly and proximally in Charleston, South Carolina where a white supremacist gunman walked into the house of God and murdered the people of God.

[25 : 06] We know this because he had a deep hatred for blacks, a racism pervasive and deep, a racism that has no place among the people of God.

This story rightly breaks our hearts. We wonder rightly where God was, especially because this racial hatred has taken center stage in our country this year, time and again, even though it was prevalent in this country for centuries and it seems tragically still is.

This time the target was a church, a church with a long history of preaching the implication of the gospel, that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, that Christ has broken down the dividing wall between all races and ethnicities, and therefore hatred between whites and blacks cannot stand.

This was the message this church preached and that man hated that message, so he killed them. These are our brothers who were murdered.

These are our sisters whose blood splattered the ground where they once knelt to pray only minutes before. Has the Bible anything to say to this?

[26 : 29] I think the gruesomeness of this passage shows us that it does. The enemies of God have another gospel that they proclaim, that they try to advance, that is advanced by the people of God being destroyed.

The hour is coming, Jesus says, that whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. So mourn for Charleston and have conversations and pray and fast among your friends about how we individually and as a church might continue to show God's love, his message of reconciliation instead of violence and hatred.

And all the while, remember that it was not only Charleston that saw the blood of Christians shed this week. We have been killed this very week in Nigeria by Boko Haram.

We have been killed this very week in the Middle East by ISIS. We have been killed this very week in dozens of other places around the world that we do not know about and will not know about until we see the martyrs in heaven.

Pray that the faith of the people of God persecuted throughout the world would stand. Pray that the false gospel of the enemy of the people of God would be exposed as false gospel.

[28 : 06] And pray that the Lord would come. For God has enemies, bitter enemies, with an evil gospel.

Third and finally tonight, I hope we can see that through every victory of the people of God, God is working a greater salvation. Through every defeat of the people of God, God is working a greater salvation.

How foolish was it for these Philistines to rejoice, to bring their praise and worship before their gods, for where are the worshippers of Dagon now?

Indeed, all rejoicing by the enemies of God is a false rejoicing. It is a sham rejoicing.

For all rejoicing outside of Christ is merely an illusion that one day will be exposed tragically, cataclysmically. And this Philistine gospel is no exception.

[29 : 18] For when they think they have slain the anointed one of God, David is far away. Somewhere else, you see. This is an amazing progression of events.

You see what happens? David is forced into exile a few chapters earlier by Saul and his hatred. And the one place he knows he can go to receive some small amount of peace is to go to the Philistines.

And then David goes out on raids against the enemies of Israel. And the king of the Philistines asks David, where have you gone today? And he says, I've gone out against the enemies of the Philistines.

He's playing the Philistines here so that he can wait in waiting for the kingship to be his. He has proven over and over that he himself will not lift a hand against the Lord's anointed. But now there's a difficulty. Because the army of the Philistines to which he has sworn allegiance is now going against the anointed one of Israel, Saul and his army.

[30 : 21] He's in stuck between these two things. How is he going to get out of this situation? Some of the Philistine commanders see him among the ranks. They go to the Philistine king and say, we don't trust him here.

Can you tell him politely to sit this battle out? And so he does. David is off raiding other enemies of God, amassing treasure, amassing more resources that will be brought into the storehouse of the living God one day, while the Philistines are off fighting with Saul.

God has fought this battle for David. And when the Philistines rejoice over the death of Saul, little do they know what David will bring.

Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands. So sang the people of Israel a few chapters back. The Philistines ain't seen nothing yet of the great victory that God will work for his people through David.

David. So in spite of this small defeat, God is working for his people a greater salvation. To the Philistine eye, it seems that Yahweh is dead, that he has failed.

[31 : 46] yet the Christian knows that after the death of God comes the resurrection of God. And this defeat on the way to the establishment of the kingdom only serves to advance the Lord's plan to put on the throne of Israel David, from whose house will come one whose kingdom never ends, Jesus himself.

The Philistines knew nothing of this when they rejoiced over Saul's body, but God did. God was looking through the defeat of Israel to Christ on the other end.

And to have the mind and the eyes of God is to look through our defeats, to see on the other end, Jesus.

The one our hearts yearn for. The one that every defeat is in some majestically unknowable way bringing to bear in this world and in our hearts.

Is not that message embedded into the nature of the Christian gospel? That our God, in order to save us, had to die? Had to endure this defeat on the road to final victory?

[33 : 21] He emptied himself, Philippians 2 said. He lowered himself and took upon himself the form of a servant. Therefore, God highly exalted him.

This is the pattern of the Christian life. Through humiliation, through defeats, exaltation. Because the cross comes before the crown.

And there is no way to the crown except through the cross. Take it up and bear it, Christ says. Which sounds to us a difficult message.

But he then reminds us that his burden is easy and his yoke is light. Saul did not experience this rejoicing.

This hope. Will you? Will you look to the heir of David? The one who has come to establish God's kingdom.

[34 : 23] Will you look to him and live? If you've not done so, I pray that you would tonight. I pray that you would confess to the Lord your sins.

And place your faith in him as the only savior of the world. If you're interested more in this, I urge you to come talk to me or to Pastor Greg. We would love to talk to you about that.

Let the gruesomeness of Saul and the final eventual rejoicing of David be both a stick and a carrot to spur you on to love of God and citizenship in the heavenly kingdom under the great heir of the heir of the great kingdom of the heir of David, Christ himself.

Let's pray. Lord, I thank you that you have loved us enough to speak to us these harsh warnings. I thank you that you have not sugar-coated reality for us.

I thank you that you have not given us mere platitudes and wishful thinking to resort to, but you have given us firm and solid truths. You have spoken to us clearly about both the dangers of sin and rebellion against you and of the rock-solid assurance that your kingdom will go forth through every defeat.

[35 : 57] We trust that no Philistine can stand in the way of your kingdom, neither then nor now. We do pray for those in Charleston, in the Middle East, in Nigeria, in North Korea, in China, wherever the blood of your saints cries out for justice.

We thank you that your blood cries out for mercy. And so we pray, come Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray tonight.
Amen.