

## The Death of Saul

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Samuel 31

The day before he died, King Saul went to visit a witch. Did you know that? The day before he died, Saul disguised himself and went to visit the witch of Endor. She was a medium; she's a person who talks to the dead and summons spirits. This sort of behavior is prohibited by God's law, but Saul does it anyway. He does it because he's desperate. He's desperate with the kind of desperation that borders on panic.

Saul is panicking because the Philistines are gathering an enormous army. They intend to smash Israel. Saul is trying to figure out what to do, so he did what he did early in his reign: he prays to the Lord. He prays, he cries out for guidance, "Lord tell me, what should I do." "Lord, show me the way!" "Lord please speak to me!" But there was no reply. No dreams, no signs, no voices, nothing. All he hears is the silence of his God and it is deafening.

It didn't used to be this way. In the old days, when Saul wanted to know the Lord's will, God would give him a sign, or he would ask the prophet Samuel. But Samuel was dead, and the Philistines were coming. So in his desperation to hear from the Lord, Saul goes to the Witch of Endor and asks her to bring up the Spirit of Samuel so he can ask him what to do. It's not a good plan. It's the plan of a man whose life is starting to come apart. At this point in the story, Saul's life is a slow motion car crash and it's terrible to see.

Here's the amazing thing, the medium succeeds in raising Samuel's spirit from the realm of the dead, a ghostly figure rises up from the earth. Saul sees the specter of Samuel and he falls on his face and begs for information. "Samuel please help me. Tell me what to do! God has departed from me! He no longer answers me by prophets or in dreams. I am in great distress. Please Samuel! Please! Please! Help me. I don't know what to do" If Samuel is moved by Saul's plea, he doesn't show it. The ghostly figure doesn't answer Saul's question, instead he pronounces Saul's doom. "The Lord has departed from you. The Lord will deliver you into the hands of the Philistines. Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. Tomorrow, you and your sons will dwell with me in the realm of the dead." The spirit of Samuel departs and Saul loses it. He falls down and he can't get up. He refuses to eat. He raves and weeps.

As we heard in the Bible reading, the next day is the day of the battle, and it all goes just exactly as Samuel predicted. Israel is defeated. Saul's sons are killed. Still gripped by fear and panic, Saul takes his own life. And as if that weren't enough, when the Philistines find Saul and his sons dead on the battle field, they further humiliate the dead king. They strip him of his armor, they cut off his head and they hang his dismembered body from the wall of the city. Saul's body is hung up where the people hurl insults and the birds could feast. So ends the story of Saul son of Kish, the first king of Israel.

I wonder... do you feel sympathy for Saul? I do. I would say that as I've studied First Samuel and read and re-read the stories of David, I have become more and more sympathetic to Saul. He is one of the most tragic figures in the Bible.

Saul never wanted to be king. He just wanted a regular life on his dad's farm in Benjamin. When Samuel came to anoint him, he resisted. When Samuel presented him to the people of Israel, he hid in embarrassment. Yet he was the chosen one of God. He was the Lord's anointed. And when he was anointed God's Spirit was alive in him. 1 Samuel 10:10 the Spirit of the Lord comes powerfully on him and he prophesies! In his early days he spoke to God and God spoke to him. In the early days he made sacrifices and God accepted them and strengthened him. In the early days he fought battles for the Lord and the Lord gave him victory.

For example, did you notice that little detail about how the men of Jabesh came and took Saul's body down from the wall and gave it a decent burial. Does anyone know why the men of Jabesh did that? Because early in his reign Saul had saved their city. The Ammonites had besieged the city and were threatening to

enslave everyone, but before they became slaves, the Ammonites were going to gouge out one of the eyes of every citizen. It was a way to cripple and humiliate them. Saul rallied Israel to save the city. He won a great victory and gave God the glory for it. The men of Jabesh never forgot that, which is why they rescue his body.

So even though our passage shows us Saul's disintegration, it also reminds us that it was not always this way. In the beginning he was a good man, chosen, anointed and blessed by the Holy Spirit of God. But over the years, fear and envy and pride and vanity and anger worked in his heart and he gave himself to those things. His hands which used to be open and obedient closed into clenched fists of fear and self-preservation. Saul's soul slowly disintegrates until he becomes this desperate weeping man on his knees in the living room of a witch.

Think, for a moment, about the sins that brought Saul down: Pride, envy, fear, anger. What strikes me is how ordinary these sins are. Saul's end is like a Shakespearean tragedy, but the sins that bring him to this end are regular sins. They are our sins. They are my sins. They are your sins. Are we really so different from Saul?

When I first started out in ministry, less than a year in, I found myself visiting Jackson prison with a couple of other pastors. We were there to interview a prostitute. Why? It was part of our investigation of another pastor. This pastor was at the end of his career, and as he got to the end, allegations were coming out of the churches he served. Allegations of inappropriate and abusive relationships with women. As we explored those allegations, as we started asking more questions, we found out that things had spiraled down to the point that he was involved with drugs and prostitutes. Sobering stuff. I remember wondering how he managed to get to that spot. When he started out in ministry, I'm sure he was just like me: full of enthusiasm, eager to serve God. At the beginning, he was a baptized boy reading his Bible saying his prayers, sensing the Spirit's call, trying to please his Lord...and then...what? A little pride, a little envy, a little lust, a little disappointment, some bad choices and the whole thing starts to come apart, the soul begins to disintegrate. There but for the grace of God go I.

There, but for the grace of God go you. Can you look back on a place where you feel like God protected you from yourself? Can you look back at your life at certain points where you were in a situation where if you'd made a different choice your whole life could have been different, and not in a good way. You and I are not so different than Saul. That could be you hanging on the wall of Beth Shan.

Don't believe me? Here's something that I realized this week. After he dies Saul's body is beheaded and hung up on the city wall for everyone to see. It's a bit reminiscent of the crucifixion. Saul's fate at the hands of the Philistines is like Jesus' fate at the hands of the Romans. Do you see that? Saul being hung up in disgrace reminds me of Jesus hung up in disgrace. The parallels are actually more striking than that. The day before he died, what did Saul say to the spirit of Samuel at the house of the medium? "God has departed from me!" Sound familiar? Jesus too feels abandoned by the Father and cries out, "My God my God why have you forsaken me." And what did the Philistines do to Saul's body before they hung it up? They stripped him of his armor, like Jesus Saul hung naked on the wall of the city as a way to add to his humiliation.

What do we make of these parallels? Maybe this. Saul is us. Saul is who we all are and who we all would be outside the grace and care of Jesus Christ. Left to our own devices, without the restraining grace of God, and without the saving mercy of God, our lives would disintegrate like Saul's, we would spiral down like his. Last week before communion we sang the hymn *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*. That hymn puts us at the foot of the cross and has us contemplate the death of Jesus. And as we contemplate, we sing, "So here I kneel my savior, for I deserve your place. Look on me with your favor and save me by your grace." That hymn expresses the Biblical truth that we deserve Christ's place. The wages of sin are death and without Jesus the cross would be our fate, our punishment. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." To look at Saul is to see who we would become if we were left to our own devices; to look at Jesus is to see ourselves washed clean in a love as wide as the ocean.

All this is pure grace for me and pure grace for you, but what about Saul? Is there any hope for this man who started out filled with God's Spirit and ends up falling apart? I don't know Saul's eternal fate, and

neither do you, but there is at least one sign of hope. Whatever he became in life, Saul always remained the anointed one of God. In the very next chapter, when David hears about Saul's death, he mourns the man who tried to kill him, he writes a lament and calls everyone to join him in mourning for Saul, and he celebrates Saul as the Lord's anointed. Even all of Saul's sin could not take away the power of God's anointing on him. That's because the power of that anointing had nothing to do with Saul. Saul did not earn that anointing; it was a gift. But not only was his anointing not something he could earn, it was also something he could not wash away, all Saul's clenched-fist foolishness couldn't erase God's mark on his life.

Ultimately, I don't know what Saul's status is before God. I don't know if he is saved or not. But I do know that Saul's hope for salvation is exactly the same as mine and the same as yours and the same as David's. My hope for salvation is not that I'm a better person than Saul. My hope for salvation is not that I was more obedient than that minister I talked about earlier whose life got mixed up in drugs and prostitution; when I stand before the throne of God above, my position will be no better than Saul's. When we stand before the throne of God above, my hope for salvation and your hope for salvation will be the grace of Jesus, the faithfulness of Jesus, and the righteousness of Jesus. My hope for salvation is that he will strip away the ripped and ragged robe of my life, the patchwork do-it-yourself righteousness that I've tried to make with my own power. I hope that he will burn that old thing and replace it with the pure white robe of his life and his righteousness.

So have a little sympathy for Saul and for all those souls who have cracked under the weight of their own fear and pride. And may your sympathy drive you to where you belong. Into the arms of Jesus.

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