

How The Mighty Have Fallen  
1 Samuel 31 – 2 Samuel 1  
July 16, 2023  
Rev. Dave Dorst  
CenterPoint Church

## Introduction

There's a common saying that everyone grieves differently. That's an important thing to realize when we see people who don't react to death the same way we would or the way we think they should. We've all heard of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but people process and respond in their own way and time. Sometimes people find it helpful to deal with, and express, their grief through songs, poems, or other written tributes. One of the most famous literary poems of lament is Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" tribute to Abraham Lincoln. Since today's culture is much more into songs than poetry, I was reflecting on, and did a little research on, the many pop songs that have been written in lament:

- Elton John famously memorialized Marilyn Monroe in the song "Candle in the Wind" though he admits in the song that he had never met her. He updated the words 24 years later when Princess Diana, whom he did know personally, died.
- Bruce Springsteen wrote the song "The Last Carnival" after the death of the organist, Danny Federici, who had been in his band for over 40 years.
- After Eric Clapton's son, Conor, died after falling out of a balcony window, he wrote the song "Tears in Heaven" to process his grief: "Would you know my name, would you hold my hand if I saw you in heaven?"
- Green Day's song "Wake Me When September Ends" and Christina Aguilera's "Hurt" are both laments or tributes their deceased fathers.
- Both Lady Gaga's "Edge of Glory" and Avril Lavigne's "Slipped Away" are tributes to their grandfathers after their deaths, and Ed Sheeran's "Supermarket Flowers" and Taylor Swift's "Marjorie" are about their deceased grandmothers.<sup>1</sup>

If you've been to the Delaware Museum of Art in Wilmington, you've seen the room on the second floor where pictures of young people who died of drug overdoses are hung. Next to each picture is a description of their life written by a loved one. It's a poignant reminder that whatever mess their lives turned into, these addicts were once children full of life, and that they are greatly missed by those who love them.

Our Scripture passage today brings us to the end of an era with the death of the first king of Israel, Saul, and three of his sons. We'll read two accounts of his death and find out that they don't really match up. We'll see how his enemies and his allies reacted to his passing. As we've followed David's life on the run from Saul, staying out of reach of the king's attempts on his life, we would expect to hear rejoicing and relief. Instead, what we find is David composing a heartfelt poetic lament to the fallen king and his son that set the bar high for the poets, songwriters, and any who would memorialize the deceased to come.

We begin our study with the last chapter of 1 Samuel:

### **I. Rejoicing in the Death of the King (1 Samuel 31:1-13)**

*<sup>1</sup> Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. <sup>2</sup> And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck*

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://middermusic.com/songs-about-death/>

down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. <sup>3</sup> The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. <sup>6</sup> Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. <sup>11</sup> But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

The spirit of Samuel that Saul had called up from the dead back in chapter 28 had told Saul that he and his sons would be killed the very next day. So none of this comes as a surprise for the reader, though we don't know the details until now. Saul's sons are struck down first, their deaths recorded matter-of-factly. Jonathan passes from the pages of Scripture in one verse. Not all of Saul's sons died on Mount Gilboa; there is one that will make David's life difficult named Ish-bosheth in the years to come.

One of the best strategies to win a battle is to find the leader and take him out. If you can cut off the head (figuratively and literally), the body will be much easier to destroy. In the midst of battle, Saul took a couple of arrows from the archers, and though he was only wounded, he knew that his time was almost up. So he begged the closest man to finish him off before the enemy could. Just as David had not been willing to take Saul's life, now this unnamed armor-bearer refused to honor the king's desire to end his life, even when Saul commanded him.

Nothing justifies suicide or euthanasia (helping someone else end their life), but you can understand Saul's desire to escape potentially being tortured by the Philistines, so we see Saul make the quick decision to fall on his sword. As Richard Phillips notes, Saul "died as he had lived, in hardened self-will and without faith in God's salvation, not even crying out to the Lord with his dying breath."<sup>2</sup> He had been in self-destruct mode for quite some time, disobeying God and his prophet and lashing out at everyone close to him, and here it finds its logical end. His hardened heart and terrible choices eventually led to his literally destroying himself. Saul was right about the Philistines mistreating his body, because when they discovered it, they cut his head off and hung his body on the wall next to his son's bodies.

There's a whole lot of fear to go around in this chapter – Saul's fear that the Philistines would mistreat him if he didn't kill himself first, the armor-bearer's fears, and the fear of the rest of the Israelites that made them flee their cities after they heard of the king's death. Thankfully, there were some valiant men left, the men of Jabesh-gilead, who tracked down Saul and his sons' bodies, took them off the wall where they were being hung as trophies, and gave them a proper burial. Why

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2012), p. 513.

would these men risk their lives to honor Saul? 1 Samuel chapter 11 tells of the time at the beginning of Saul's reign when a man named Nahash the Ammonite had Jabesh-gilead in a place of defeat. They offered to serve Nahash, but his one condition to accept their surrender was that every person had to gouge out their right eye. When Saul heard this, he gathered a force of over 300,000 men and intervened, striking down all of the Ammonites. It was Saul's first battle as king and the men of Jabesh-gilead never forgot it. They honored him in death as they had been grateful in life.

Now we move to 2 Samuel, which you might know was not originally a separate book; the two books were written as one narrative. The first sixteen verses show an attempt to

## **II. Capitalizing on the Death of the King (2 Samuel 1:1-16)**

*<sup>1</sup>After the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>David said to him, "Where do you come from?" And he said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel." <sup>4</sup>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." <sup>5</sup>Then David said to the young man who told him, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?" <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, 'Here I am.' <sup>8</sup>And he said to me, 'Who are you?' I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite.' <sup>9</sup>And he said to me, 'Stand beside me and kill me, for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers.' <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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." <sup>14</sup>David said to him, "How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" <sup>15</sup>Then David called one of the young men and said, "Go, execute him." And he struck him down so that he died. <sup>16</sup>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.'"*

David had just come from striking down the Amalekites who had stolen his wives and children and those of his men. A young man ran into his camp to tell him about Saul's death, and it's clear that the young man did not know about David's latest fight, otherwise he might have thought twice about identifying himself. Because we find out that he himself is an Amalekite. There's obviously a discrepancy between what this Amalekite reported to David of the events surrounding Saul's death and the narrator's version from the last chapter: he claimed to have killed Saul. We're not told that he's lying, but what's most likely is that he changed the story in an effort to please David and gain his favor. He must have come upon Saul's body and decided that he would get the best reward if he took credit for Saul's death; then he grabbed his crown and armlet as proof to David. Most kings would want to reward the man who killed the last king and helped him gain power, right? But David was not most kings. Rather than being pleased with this young man's assistance in helping him ascend to the throne (even if it was fabricated), he was angered that this man thought that it was OK to take up his sword against God's king. He handed down the sentence that any royal assassin would have received: execution. This will be a theme we see several times later in the book – David lashing out at those who were trying to act as his allies by killing his enemies.

One of the silly things that we hear in the modern church is the Biblical phrase “touch not the Lord’s anointed” used completely out of context to warn churchgoers not to criticize or rebuke a pastor. So first of all, an ordained pastor is a whole lot different than an anointed king. I know that some pastors like to think they’re basically kings of their little kingdoms, but they’re not. They’re shepherds tasked with feeding, loving, and leading their sheep. And they’re under-shepherds because the Lord is the great Shepherd, and pastors simply model Jesus’ care for His people in a physical, tangible way. Hebrews 13:17 says, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”* But that does not mean that pastors and spiritual leaders get to operate without any chance of criticism or direct rebuke. I think that you should get all your facts right and go in a humble spirit if you are going to correct or rebuke anyone, and that includes pastors. But we’re not some group of special, super-holy untouchables. We believe in the priesthood of all believers, that every Christian can study God’s word and speak directly to him; pastors just get to study a lot more and get paid for it.

Back to the text. After seeing some people rejoice about the king’s death, and another try to profit off of it, the next eleven verses record the best response to death:

### **III. Lamenting the Death of the King (2 Samuel 1:17-27)**

*17 And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, 18 and he said it should be taught to the people of Judah; behold, it is written in the Book of Jashar. He said: 19 “Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen! 20 Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult. 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. 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. 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. 24 “You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. 25 “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! “Jonathan lies slain on your high places. 26 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. 27 “How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!”*

Four members of royalty in Israel had died. Since Saul was Israel’s first king, this was huge, their first national “the King is dead” moment. David wrote this lament (I’m not sure whether it was a song or just spoken word) and urged everyone in Judah to learn it. *“How the mighty have fallen!”* is repeated three times within it, so that’s definitely the theme. It’s interesting that it begins by saying *“your glory, O Israel, is slain,”* because the Lord Himself was Israel’s glory. But clearly David has a high view of the king and the princes. Verse 20 says to hide the news from the enemy so that they can’t rejoice. David must not have known that the Philistines had already spread the news throughout their land. And remember that David had been living in Philistine territory, pretending to be allies with their king; and now he was back to calling them “the uncircumcised” with great contempt. They have killed his king and his best friend.

In verse 21 David curses the mountains of Gilboa where Saul died; he wants that area to be barren and dry since it witnessed Saul’s death, his defilement. That’s an interesting line of thought – it would be like the Kennedy family cursing downtown Dallas where JFK was shot or the King family cursing downtown Memphis where MLK Jr. was killed. I think the main idea is that life should not just continue as if nothing’s happened, that the weather and the heavens should stop and observe this profound tragedy, not just moving on as though nothing happened. That’s one of the things that

they say happens to those who are grieving: they wonder how life can just go on, how everyone and everything just gets back to their routines when life has stopped for them. Often their grief has made life bitter and everything else seems pointless.

Then David gets to praising Saul and Jonathan, first saying that they had often been mighty in battle. They were a strong duo, with Jonathan's bow and Saul's sword. Notice that David didn't mention Saul's spear that had several times been thrown his way, because David has taken the high road, focusing on Saul's strengths and not mentioning his weaknesses. And one of his weaknesses was that he turned on his son, Jonathan, several times; yet David says that "*in life and in death they were not divided.*" That probably owes a lot more to Jonathan's loyalty and ability to forgive than to anything that Saul did.<sup>3</sup>

David ends his lament pouring out his heart about his best friend, Jonathan. I addressed this in an earlier sermon, but it comes up here again when David praises Jonathan and says that "*your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women.*" And so modern minds quickly jump to assume that their friendship veered into the sexual; that must be what that means, right? But the point of what David was saying is that his friendship with Jonathan was not only close because they were brothers (literally brothers-in-law but also emotionally close), but also because Jonathan had made a covenant with David that gave up his own right to rule Israel because he acknowledged that David was the one anointed by God for the task. Romantic love pales in comparison to a selfless, covenant love that absolutely sacrifices everything for the other.

## Conclusion

As we think about these chapters as a whole, we see that Saul's death is a tragedy because of what his life could have been. He had been anointed king, had been filled with the Spirit of God to save his people from the Philistines, had the prophet Samuel to give him advice - everything he needed to get the job done as a good and godly king. But he defied God, ignored Samuel, and focused his aggression on David, his ally, rather than on his enemies. He fell to fear, greed, and disobedience. The best summary of Saul's life come from his own words in 1 Samuel 26:21: "*I have acted foolishly.*"<sup>4</sup> If any of you have taken the "Walk Thru the Bible" course, you learned hand motions and plot summaries to help you understand the Bible's contents. The section on the first three kings of Israel goes like this: Saul "no heart," David "whole heart," Solomon "half heart." In other words, Saul never really had a heart for the Lord. He was like a lot of people who start out well, acting wisely and faithfully early in life, but then his true character was revealed, and he became self-serving and self-destructive. We need to watch that we're not like Saul - starting well but then making a shipwreck of our faith and lives. Continually remind yourself of God's will by studying the Bible, listen to godly friends who both encourage and correct you, and remind yourself that someday you will die and you will leave a legacy: will it be a self-serving one or a God-honoring one?

I know that sometimes people who don't know the Bible well are a little confused that there are two Sauls. The King Saul here and the Saul who also goes by the name Paul, who wrote most of the letters of the New Testament. Both of them were from the tribe of Benjamin, both were appointed to their positions by God, and both were eventually beheaded (at least according to church history). But there were significant differences:

-The First Saul started well following God but ended terribly unfaithful; the Second Saul started terribly as he persecuted Christians, but he ended well as a great church planter and evangelist.

---

<sup>3</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), pp. 56-66.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Swindoll, *David: A Man of Passion & Destiny* (Dallas: Word, 1997), p. 119.

- The First Saul rarely turned to God except in dire situations, the Second Saul was constantly in prayer, eager to follow the Lord's leading.
- The First Saul clung to his position of power, the Second Saul willingly suffered hardships and gave up his rights.
- The First Saul attacked his successor, the one who would take his position after he died; the Second Saul loved, trained, and mentored the men who would take over when he died.
- The First Saul had his earthly crown stripped from him at death, while the Second Saul knew that he would be given an eternal crown when he died.<sup>5</sup>

The Apostle Paul is a good contrast to King Saul, but he's not the only one. Let's go back to verse 14 – *“How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?”* The Hebrew term for “anointed” is *mashiakh*, which has come into English as Messiah. The Greek translation is *christos*, which has come into English as Christ. There were men a thousand years later, @AD 30, who were not afraid to destroy the Lord's anointed, the Messiah Christ.<sup>6</sup> They too hung his body in a public display of ridicule and shame. Those who cared about him had the courage to bring his body down and give it an honored burial. Saul died having failed to serve the Lord faithfully, Jesus died as the righteous and faithful One, completely obedient to His Father's will. Peter summed it up in his sermon in Acts 3:13-15 – *“Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.”*

How do we respond when someone dies? We've said that whether it's an enemy or an ally, whether it's someone who honored God in life or not, whether we stand to gain from their death or not, we should mourn. Death is the great enemy, every time we hear that it has claimed a human life, a being who was created in the image of God, we should lament. But we should also ask ourselves how ready we are to face death. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 says: *“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.”* Death is not the end for those who know and love Jesus, who have been saved by His death, forgiven and cleansed by His blood. He has paid the penalty of our sins to free us to live with Him in heaven forever. God has placed us here for His purposes, to live out His will for our lives using the gifts He's given us to love those around us and do kingdom work. So we do not long for death or hasten it; but when it comes, we can embrace death with confidence. Absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. Amen.

### Benediction

1 John 5:20-21 – *“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”*

---

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=contrast\\_compare](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=contrast_compare).

<sup>6</sup> Woodhouse, *2 Samuel*, p. 49.