

'Contemplating a Life'

1 Samuel 31

Reflecting on an end

I wonder if you'd come with me in your imagination.

Let's stay in this building.

But let's travel in time.

And as we do, let's settle on an indeterminate time in the future.

As you look around the building you notice that it is filled with familiar faces.

Your friends are there.

Friends from your childhood, your adolescence, your adulthood.

There are people from work.

People from church.

People from nearly every area of life.

And of course, there are your family members as well.

And as you glance around, you notice that the mood is somewhat sombre.

And then you see the cask.

You realise that the occasion is your funeral.

And as you watch on, you wonder what is going to be said.

How will people speak of you?

What will they remember?

What achievements will they mention?

What failures will they have noted?

What will have been important to them about your life?

Friends, the writer of Ecclesiastes notes in chapter 7 that visiting funerals can be a very wise thing to do.

Visiting funerals reminds you of how life ends.

Visiting funerals gives you a sober perspective from which to view life.

Today, we are going to take a look at the death of the first king of Israel.

And as we do, I want to contemplate his life.

And my hope is that as we contemplate his life we might contemplate our own.

As we see him die, I hope that we might consider how we ourselves might live in the light of our own impending death.

So, please turn with me to 1 Samuel 31.

The death of Saul

A quick run through the chapter

Let's take a quick run through the chapter.

For the last few chapters we have been watching the emergence of an increasing threat from the Philistines.

We know that they are on the warpath.

And we know what the result will be.

After all, Samuel told us when he was called up from the dead by the medium in chapter 28 on the day before the one recorded in this chapter.

We know that Saul will die.

And so the threat becomes a reality here.

In verses 1-3 the Philistines fight hard.

The Israelite men flee.

Saul's sons are killed.

Saul himself is badly wounded.

In verse 4 he calls upon his armour bearer to kill him.

It is possible that he wants to escape torture.

But it is also possible that he wants to avoid a situation where God's king is mocked by these Philistines.

However, the armour bearer refuses.

Perhaps he is fearful of killing the Lord's anointed.

And so Saul suicides.

His armour bearer suicides.

And verse 6 summarises the terrible events of the day in a series of packed phrases.

[Read slowly and deliberately.]

'So Saul ... and his three sons ... and his armour bearer ... and all his men ... died together ... on the same day.'

And in verses 6 and 7 all Israel realises the enormity of what has happened.

They abandon hope and abandon their towns.

In verses 8 to 10 the Philistines desecrate the body of Saul.

They proclaim the good news to their people.

And they put Saul's armour in the temple of their god.

And then, in verses 11 to 14, some men from Jabesh-gilead hear of the fate of the bodies of Saul and his sons.

They rescue the bodies from humiliation.

They probably cleanse them from defilement by burning.

And then they bury them and mourn them.

Some allusions to Saul's life

- The Philistine threat

It is a story full of pathos, isn't it?

But it is also a story that is full of hints about his life.

In many ways, those hints give us access into some key moments in his life.

The first hint is the presence of the Philistines.

We get hints in 1 Samuel 8 that kinship was brought into existence to deal with the problem of external enemies such as the Ammonites (cf. 1 Sam 12:12) and the Philistines.

The people of Israel were not convinced that God's usual mechanisms for dealing with foreign aggressors was the best way to go.

They were not convinced that Spirit-filled judges was the best plan.

They wanted to have a king like the other nations.

Well, God gave them a king.

And he was physically impressive from day one.

But he no longer has God's Spirit.

And he now lies dead, along with his progeny.

Israel wanted kingship to solve the problem of foreign aggressors.

But the Philistines have been victorious and their king is dead.

- The men of Jabesh-gilead

The next hint is the men of Jabesh-gilead.

The mention of the men of Jabesh-gilead takes us back to shortly after we first meet Saul.

He has been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel in chapter 10.

He has been gladly welcomed by the people.

At the same time Nahash the Ammonite has been threatening the tribes of Gad and Reuben.

He has been gouging out the right eyes of those he oppresses.

And in chapter 11 he comes to the city of Jabesh-gilead and threatens to do the same.

He knows that this will be a disgrace on Israel.

And so the men of the city send messengers to Saul.

And the Spirit of God comes upon Saul in power.

He leads the people of God in war.

Nahash and his men are routed.

And Saul and all the Israelites rejoice greatly.

It is one of the great moments in Saul's life.

He is God's elect, God's anointed.

And his position is sealed by his possession of God's Spirit.

He leads the people of God in victory.

They are bound to him and he is bound to them.

This is an event rightly remembered by these men of Jabesh-gilead.

It is an event rightly remembered by us.

Saul was a man so full of potential and promise.

- Saul's sword and armour

But let's now move to the other side of the story.

And the way I want to do this is by noting the references to Saul's sword and armour.

You see, when Israel first asks for a king in chapter 8, Samuel warns them that kings will have a propensity to rely on weapons.

In chapter 12 he notes that the benefit of the period prior to kings is that God's people learnt to rely on God alone.

When they were distressed, they called out to him and he helped them and rescued them.

The danger now that they have a king was that he and the people would rely on horses and chariots and might rather than on God.

The danger is that the people and their king will not rely on God and follow him.

And as Saul's life progresses this is exactly what happens.

He does not listen to God's voice.

In fact, he wilfully disobeys God's word to him.

He disregards the advice of God's prophet.

And when rebuked, he does not seem to turn personally in repentance and trust.

Throughout the last fifteen chapters he does not seem to have a significant personal relationship with God.

Moreover, he often appears to act with an eye on how he is viewed by the people rather than on how he is viewed by God.

His attitude is captured in chapter 17 when he is contrasted with David.

David comes on the scene with a keen dependence upon God and his honour.

He finds Goliath offensive because he defies the armies of the living God.

He volunteers to fight the giant.

Saul offers to give David his armour and his sword.

In other words, he thinks that this is what will hold David in good stead.

But David puts them aside.

He approaches Goliath and replies to his taunts with these words:

'You come out to me with sword and spear and 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 very 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 Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand.' (1 Sam 17:45-47, NRSV)

This is the attitude that should have characterised the life of Saul.

But he relied on the sword.

He relied on armour.

And those who take up the sword will perish by the sword.

Saul never learnt this.

He therefore dies a tragic and dissolute figure. _____

The beginning and end of kingship

The beginning: 1 Chronicles 10:13-14

This is how kingship begins in Israel.

This first king of Israel simply cannot get it right.

Turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Chronicles 10:13-14:

¹³So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance, ¹⁴and did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.

The writer of Chronicles wants us to know what the major issue is.

Saul was unfaithful.

He did not fear the Lord.

Therefore the Lord put him to death.

In between

And as the writer of Chronicles tells the story of the kings of Israel and Judah he makes very clear that Saul does not stand on his own.

He notes that there are occasional good kings who DO fear the Lord.

David is one of those.

Josiah is one of those.

But such kings are few and far between.

The vast bulk of them do evil in the eyes of the Lord just like Saul.

They do not fear the Lord.

The end: 2 Chronicles 36:15-21

And the writer of Chronicles shows us where all this ends up.

Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Chronicles 36:15-21.

¹⁵The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; ¹⁶but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

¹⁷Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble; he gave them all into his hand. ¹⁸All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. ¹⁹They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

What makes a king good and bad?

So, I wonder if you can see what makes a king good or bad from all of this?

A good king is not a perfect king.

He is not a king who always does right.

No, it is impossible for humans to always do right.

We will see this in the life of the model king, David.

But what God wants is that kings trust him.

That they fear him.

That they listen to his word and tremble at it.

That they repent when sin is committed.

And that they have a heart for him.

This is what matters to God.

And this is what matters to God in all people.

He wants people that fear him.

People that listen to his word and tremble at it.

That repent when sin is committed.

And that have a heart for him.

This is what matters to God.

Excursus: A chapter not without hope

By the way, I shouldn't finish our looking at this chapter without noting one more thing.

You see, there is one more hint in this chapter that shouldn't be missed.

I want you to go back to 1 Samuel 31.

Look at verse 10.

Verse 10 tells us that the armour of Saul is placed in the temple of the gods of the Philistines.¹

Now, this is not the first time that the Philistines have taken a symbol of power in Israel and placed it in the temple of their gods.

They did it in 1 Samuel 4.

And in 1 Samuel 5 God acted without a king and without human armies and routed the Philistines.

And here we have a deep theological idea that runs throughout the books of Samuel.

You see, God's purposes for his people do not depend upon humans.

If they did, they would be finished before they began.

No.

God's purposes for his people depend upon God.

And this is great cause for hope.

Because we know what humans are like.

¹ Also note the similarity here with the end of Israel noticed in the Chronicles quotation. The temple elements are in the house of the gods of Babylon. 1 Samuel 4 gives hope here as well.

And the kings of Israel are humans like Adam and Eve and like us.

They are bound to fail.

But God's purposes will continue.

And they finally do in Jesus, the descendant of David.

Though human kingship fails, divine kingship does not.

Revisiting your end

Friends, I want you to return with me to where we began.

Remember our funeral.

Remember our wondering.

Remember our thinking what people will remember as they speak about us at our funeral.

Well, I am sure that for each one of us there will be grand moments of our life recalled.

I'm sure that there will be funny moments.

There will be moments of sheer human joy that are recalled and savoured.

People will undoubtedly remember but not mention some of the darker moments.

But despite what is mentioned, what will really matter is who you were in relation to God.

What will really matter will be what you did in relation to God.

And so, I want you to imagine that your life is being written up in the way in which the Chronicler sums up the life of the kings of Israel.

Will he say, 'So and so did what was right in the eyes of the Lord'?

Or will he say, 'So and so did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord'?

You see, in the end what matters to God is whether you lived in dependence upon him.

Did you live a life of intimacy with God and dependence upon him.

Now this will show itself fundamentally in trust in Jesus as your saviour.

But it will also show itself in a life of Christian discipleship.

It will show itself in family life, in church life, in personal morality, in the workplace and in how you pursued life itself.

Can you see what I'm saying?

It is your trust in God and your relationship with him that is what makes life worthwhile in God's eyes.

It can be a life full of human achievement.

It can be a life full of human failure.

But what really matters is whether it was full of God.

And this is what God wants us to strive for in life; to fill our lives with him.

So, if that is where I want to end up, what should I be doing now?

What should I concentrate on now?

Well, let me give you some hints.

The writer of Chronicles has a key word when he measures a life before God.

His key word is 'humble'.

His heroes are those who are humble before God.

And by that he means those who are ready to be dependent upon God.

They are ready to learn from him.

They are ready to be corrected by him.

They are ready to obey him.

So, my first hint is to foster humility.

Saul did not get this right.

But David did.

And Jesus lived it to the hilt.

Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And my second hint has to do with faithfulness.

The writer of Chronicles says this in relation to Saul.

He died for his unfaithfulness.

In other words, he did not trust God enough to be faithful to him.

Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

So, foster a life of faith in God.

And foster a life of faithfulness to God.

My third hint has to do with what Saul lacked but which David didn't.

You see, David sinned in many of the same ways that Saul did.

He did many of the wrong things that Saul did.

However, when confronted he acknowledged his sin.

He repented.

Now you can only do this if you have already determined to be humble.

Repentance depends upon humility.

But I want to urge you to foster this in life.

Foster a life of humbleness.

Foster a life of faithfulness.

And foster a life of repentance.

If you foster these things, you will be preparing well for your death.

You will be remembered well by others.

So, let me urge you to build into your life the things that will produce these goals.

Go home tonight and write down the things that will help you foster these things.

What will you change in life so that your life will be characterised by these things.

Write these things down.

Share them with someone else.

And check regularly to see that you are still on track.