

LIFE LESSONS – 1 SAMUEL: The Bitter Endⁱ 1 Samuel 31

INTRODUCTION:

Well, good morning, Trinity family! It is so good to see you this morning.

I want to invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me to the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. Chapter 31. Today we wrap up our study through this incredible book.

EASTER:

But I just want to share with you how excited I am about Easter next weekend! It's going to be a great opportunity to share the gospel with what we are praying will be 1,400 people! Stop by the Easter invite supply table and grab some resources as we make a final push this coming week. Also, if you haven't registered to volunteer for Easter, please do so today. Easter Training is tonight at 5:30pm. It's going to be a great time together and we even have a great dinner planned. Breakfast for dinner!

I'm also kicking off a new teaching series next weekend called, "Unshakable." We will be studying the book of 1 Peter as we see how to develop an unshakable faith in a chaotic world. It's going to be so awesome; I can't hardly wait! But, this morning, we close out our study on 1 Samuel 31.

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: Alfred Nobelⁱⁱ

Now, you probably recognize the name Alfred Nobel. A chemical engineer, he made a living selling explosives. At 33, he invented dynamite. His assumption was that his invention would end violence. He thought the knowledge of dynamite's power would cause people to cringe at the idea of war. But instead, dynamite has been used to intensify and fuel war.

In 1888, Alfred's brother died, and a newspaper wrongly assumed that it was Alfred who had died, and they mistakenly published his obituary. Very few people have the opportunity to read their own obituary. But Alfred did. And in the obituary that was written, he was called the "merchant of death." That label had a profound impact on Alfred Nobel's remaining years.

Fast forward 8 years, when Alfred Nobel did indeed pass away. His family was surprised to find that he had left all his life's earnings to establish 5 yearly

prizes, the most notable prize being the Nobel Peace Prize. The heart behind this award was to recognize people who contributed to peace. So, the man once labeled the "merchant of death," is now forever known for promoting peace. And the glimpse of what he would be known for in death caused him to use his remaining years for good. And in the end, good sprang up from tragedy.

How would we live life differently if we got a glimpse into what we would be remembered for? If you got to see the end ahead of the end, what would you change?

In this last chapter of 1 Samuel, we get a glimpse of Saul's final moments in life. You'll remember in Chapter 28, Saul got a glimpse as to when his life would end, but it did not have the impact on him that it did on Alfred Nobel.

The bitter end of Saul's death had been mounting for the last half of 1 Samuel. Saul got off to a great start as king, but his selfishness took over. Beginning in chapter 15, 1 Samuel compares and contrasts king Saul with the next anointed king, David. And that's the theme of the second part of the book.

David was on the rise. But Saul continued on a downward spiral. The comparison between the two culminates in chapters 28 through 30. King Saul steps outside of God's design and consults a medium in a moment of crisis. While David, on the other hand, when he faced a crisis, turns to God and renews his faith. And those choices led to different endings. We are going to examine that today and then look at three life lessons to apply to our lives.

MESSAGE:

Let's jump in. Verse 1 of 1 Samuel 31. You follow along in your copy of God's Word. *¹Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel,* [This picks up with the battle that was brewing back in chapter 28. The same battle that David almost fought in with the Philistine army against Israel in chapter 29. ⁱⁱⁱ Keep reading.] *and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ²And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua [Mal-Kai-Shew-Ah], the sons of Saul.* [A heartbreak to read that. Especially Jonathan dying. Remember, he was a great friend to David, and they had dreams of ruling together]. *³The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers.*

In chapter 28, when God was silent toward Saul, and he went to the witch at Endor. He asked to bring up Samuel from the dead. Remember what Samuel, or the manifestation of Samuel, predicted? That Saul would die in 24 hours. He and his sons.

That prediction comes true. Saul sees his sons die and now he's wounded. Verse 4. *⁴Then 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."* [Saul knew the customs of the day and how they would have tortured him.^{iv} He figured it was better to be killed before that happened.] *But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it.* [The armor-bearer wouldn't do that, maybe because he didn't want to touch "The Lord's anointed."^v] *⁵And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him.* [Followed Saul's example.] *⁶Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together.*

This story is so tragic. But what is interesting is that 2 Samuel, chapter 1, tells a slightly different story. In that chapter, a man came to David and reported what had happened. This man identified himself as an Amalekite and said that he was the one that killed Saul. So, which is it? Is there a contradiction in the biblical accounts of 1st and 2nd Samuel?

Well, I think one of two things happened.^{vi} When the armor bearer refused to kill Saul, he fell on his sword and died. Then the Amalekite mentioned in 2 Samuel saw this, lied, and took credit for taking out Saul. If this was the case, he probably wanted a reward or some kind of something from the next king.

Or, when Saul fell on his sword it wasn't fatal and the Amalekite man came by, and Saul asked him to finish the job. Either way, this man is wanting to get in good with David. Either of those cases resolves any conflict in the storyline.

Let's pick back up in verse 7. *⁷And 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 king is dead, and the army has been defeated, so everyone ran for the hills, they hid. They did not want to be captured and tortured by the Philistines. I don't blame them. Look at verse 8 to find out why.

⁸The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹So 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. ¹⁰They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. Not a soothing image. But it was common in those days to display victory over a nation. David did something similar when he defeated Goliath.

Verse 11. *¹¹But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹²all 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. ¹³And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.* Who were these valiant men from Jabesh-Gilead? Why would they risk their lives for this kind of mission?

Well, remember, early on in king Saul's reign, he did some great things. One of those things was protecting the people of Jabesh-Gilead. When Saul learned of that the Ammonites were attacking, he swung into action and defended them. They were fellow Israelites and they never forgot what Saul had done for them. As a result, wanted to give king Saul a proper burial. And this closes 1 Samuel.

It's a bitter ending. But even in the ashes of the king Saul's end, there is hope. The end of one era was the birth of another. Saul's death opened a path for David to assume the throne. At the age of 30, he became king of the tribe of Judah. And then, 7 years later, under a united kingdom, he ruled all of Israel.^{vii} He would go down as a great king. And God promised David that his throne would endure forever. A promise that was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the root of Jesse, from the line of David.

You know, it reminds us that even in the most desperate of situations, we can trust that God is at work. Such is life in Christ. Despite what happens around us, even in the midst of despair, King Jesus is on the throne, working all things for His glory and His promised end.

LIFE LESSONS:

In our life lesson take aways this morning, I not only want to consider our passage of study this morning, but I want us to consider the entire book we've studied. 3 life lessons we can take away. And just like 1 Samuel, I want to set

our life lessons in comparisons. And remember, I tell you often. I am preaching to myself; you just happen to be in the room. So, if any of these hits close to home, please know that it's hitting close to home for me. Okay? So, First, ...

1) Choices versus Consequences.

This is a common theme throughout the book of 1 Samuel. It opens up in the tabernacle. But it ends in tragedy. It starts with a prayer for a baby, but it ends with a death of a king. 1 Samuel begins with worship, as Elkanah and Hannah present Samuel to The Lord. But it ends in woe.^{viii}

And between the hopeful opening of the book and its tragic end are a series of decisions. A decision by Eli, the priest, to not lead his family. A decision by the people to demand a king. A decision by king Saul to partially obey God. And another decision to step outside of God's design and consult a medium. As a result of those choices, a king, and a nation, experienced utter demise. A lesson for our day.

But in the same book, there are choices that honored God. Hannah making good on her promise to give Samuel back to The Lord. The godly leadership of Samuel as Israel's last judge. The boldness of David to believe God and to honor The Lord's anointed. The willingness to repent and pursue The Lord. As a result of such choices, a true leader for God's people arose.

Choices have consequences. Decisions often make us. Don't they?

ILLUSTRATION: Lou Brown

I know I have mentioned this before, but my childhood pastor, Bro. Lou Brown, had sayings that we would lovingly call Louisms. I can remember one sermon he delivered where he was talking about decisions and consequences. He said, "If you eat fat greasy foods, you'll be a fat greasy dude." Boy isn't that true!

The point was simple. Every decision has a consequence. That is a consistent theme throughout 1 Samuel. For Saul, the decisions led to tragedy. For David, they led to success. And the book begs the question, "What choices are we making?"

Good, healthy choices lead to good, healthy consequences. But poor, unhealthy, ungodly choices lead to the same consequences. So, we see choices versus consequences. Secondly, ...

2) Repentance versus Sorrow.

You know, there is a difference between true repentance and just being sorry. King Saul was sorry about a lot of things, but he never repented. Perhaps Saul was sorry he got caught. Ever been there? I can think of many times in my life where I was more upset about getting caught than being repentant.

One commentator I read said to this point that, "Repentance is full trust in God and complete satisfaction with God that leads to unconditional surrender to God."^{ix} King Saul was definitely sorry but wasn't unconditionally surrendered to The Lord. As a result, he expressed sorrow, but not repentance.

So, how do you know if you have truly repented or you're just sorry? Well, false repentance often shows up in rationalization.^x We will admit that our actions are sinful, but we tend to twist it a little. We will say things like, "Well, I'm only human. Yeah, that was sin, but at least it's not as bad as others. You know, I just had no other choice." That's not true repentance.

Another way you can tell false repentance is a lack of change.^{xi} It might make us feel good to be sorry for our sin, but what are we doing to leave that sin? Again, are we just sorry or are we repentant. And again, I'm preaching to myself here. Welcome to my conviction!

2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "¹⁰For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." In other words, godly sorrow over sin grieves because we have offended an eternally, loving, and holy God. But worldly sorrow only reacts to consequences. See the difference?

So, we have choices versus consequences and repentance versus sorrow. The third life lesson, and I want to move quickly here, is...

3) Religion versus Relationship.

On the outside looking in, Saul was a very religious man. Think about it for a moment. He fought battles against the Philistines as God told him to, he drove out the mediums and witches from the land, he prayed earnestly when he was in trouble, and he defended helpless people. These were all good things he did early on, but they were empty religious activity. See, it's possible to check all the boxes and not have a relationship with God. At his very best, Saul was using God for selfish gain. What was in it for him?

The warning for us here is to realize that it is possible to know all the correct theology, seemingly serve the Kingdom of God, and even do good things, but it all be empty religion. Saul looked the part, he was religious, but he lacked a relationship with God. And we know that because he only followed his own path, he never really followed The Lord.

You might say, Pastor Chris, that's a harsh judgment on king Saul. Isn't it? Well, it's not my judgment; it's Scripture. 1 Chronicles 10:14 says, ¹⁴*He [referencing king Saul] did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.*" So, the biblical verdict on Saul is that he didn't seek the Lord. It was empty religion.

Fast forward to the New Testament. The Pharisees were a religious people, but they were also the ones that Jesus opposed the most. At one point, in Matthew 23, beginning in verse 27, Jesus said, ²⁷*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.* ²⁸*So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*"

The difference between religion and relationship is everything. The Scriptures emphasize a relationship with God. So, choices versus consequences, repentance versus sorrow, and religion versus relationship.

CONCLUSION:

Overall, I love the message of 1 Samuel. The coming of a new king requires a death of the current king.

You know, at the center of our hearts and souls is a throne. And there is a king that sits on the throne of every one of our hearts. Prior to trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior of our lives, we are the king of our hearts. We pursue the sinful desires of the flesh. We seek fulfillment in the selfish desires of our hearts. We live life according to our own terms. And the Bible calls that sin. And the wages of our sin is death.

But the gift of God is eternal life. And Romans 6:23 tells us how we receive eternal life. Let's look at it. ²³*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus **our Lord**.* Do you see that? Eternal life comes when Christ Jesus is our Lord, our boss, our king. But in order for Jesus

to be king, we must dethrone ourselves as king. And that comes by way of death.

The Apostle Paul said it this way in Galatians 2:20, ²⁰*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live [there's been a death. A death to self.], but Christ who lives in me [In other words, Christ took the throne when I crucified myself]. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

Have you made Jesus the king of your heart? If not, you can today...

LORD'S SUPPER:

This morning we have an opportunity to come to The Lord's Table and partake in Communion. It is a powerful object lesson of exactly what we've talked about this morning. Jesus conquering death, by way of death on the cross.....

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Works consulted in preparation for this message: Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Samuel, Vol. 7*, B&H Publishing: Nashville, 1996; Heath Thomas and J.D. Greear, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Samuel*, Holman: Nashville, 2016; Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003; David Guzik, *Enduring Word Commentary, "1 Samuel 31 – The Death of Saul and His Sons"*, published by Enduring Word, accessed online: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/1-samuel-31/>; Troy Rackliffe, "Life Lessons Message 25," sermon preached at Glad Community Church in Daniels, WV; Ray Fowler, "The Bitter End," published by Ray Fowler Ministries, accessed online: <https://www.rayfowler.org/sermons/1-samuel/the-bitter-end/>; Skip Heitzig, "Expound: 1 Samuel 30-31," message taught at Calvary Church, October 13, 2021, accessed online: <https://calvarynm.church/connectwithskip/teachings/#/series/314/sermon/4615>; J.D. Greear, "How Not to Die," sermon preached at Summit Church, October 16, 2022, accessed online: <https://summitchurch.com/message/how-not-to-die>.

ⁱⁱ Illustration adapted from Ashwin Ramani, accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNcMj6r-4E0>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heitzig.

^{iv} Bergen, 282.

^v Rackliffe.

^{vi} These two options were presented very well by Troy Rackliffe.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Taken from Heitzig.

^{ix} Thomas and Greear, 174.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.