June 11/12, 2016

Judgment Day

Courage to Lead Series

1 Samuel 31:1-13

Pastor Bryan Clark

The story started in a garden, a paradise. Adam and Eve were perfect in every way—perfectly related to God, perfectly related to one another—in a garden God defined as *Paradise*. But as good as it was, the temptation before them was the lie of the serpent that life could be even better if you functioned as your own god. As you take charge of your own life, you can have even more. And even though Adam and Eve had everything, they still wanted more. They believed the lie, and sin and rebellion entered the picture. The tension then throughout is: will we as people, made in the image of God, surrender to God as God, and live life His way, or will we choose to practically function as our own god, because we think life will be better with us in charge?

The two paths are seen in Genesis 4 through the stories of Cain and Abel. Abel represents one willing to surrender to God, to worship God. Cain represents one who wants to function as his own god and, "I will deal with God on my own terms." The New Testament refers to that as *The Way of Cain*. Basically, then, those two brothers define two paths that go all the way through the Old Testament and all the way through the New Testament, and you can identify story after story after story that identifies one path or the other.

So in our Samuel study you have the same thing. You have Saul who represents the story of Cain, "I want to do it myself, on my own terms," and you have David who represents the path of Abel, "I choose to surrender to God as God." So this week, as we finish up our 1 Samuel series, the question I want to pose to us as we wrap this up is: When you look back and your story is told, will you be a Saul or will you be a David? It's a choice you make every single day.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 31. It's really important to understand chapter 31, to keep in mind last week's study in chapter 30. There's no question the writer here at the end of 1 Samuel wants to draw the comparison between David and Saul, and David's choices and Saul's choices. In chapter 30 David engaged in what was probably his finest leadership moment to date. David comes back to Ziklag with his men. The city is burned; their wives and children are gone; everything they have is gone. His men are embittered; they're considering stoning David to death. It would have to be the lowest point in David's leadership so far. But David turns to God, inquires of God, and he gets his marching orders. He and his men go into battle; they chase down the Amalekites. There are only four hundred in David's fighting band. There probably were a thousand to several thousand Amalekites, but it is a total and complete victory. David doesn't lose one single man. One hundred percent of their wives, their children, and their stuff was recovered. David gives God glory. He becomes benevolent and generous with what they have, and in some ways David is already busy about the work of rebuilding the southern part of the kingdom of Judah, even though he's not king yet. So you have this wonderful story of David and David trusting God, and complete and total victory. The story, then, in chapter 31 is just pretty much the opposite of that. Verse 1:

> **Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua the sons of Saul. The battle went heavily against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was badly**

wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and pierce me through with it, otherwise these uncircumcised will come and pierce me through and make sport of me." But his armor bearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. So Saul took his sword and fell on it. When his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword and died with him. Thus Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together. (*NASB, 1 Samuel 31:1-6)

The way chapter 31 opens, the Hebrew grammar would be capturing this idea that the battle up north is happening simultaneously with the battle in the south. One translator uses the word *meanwhile* to capture this Hebrew grammar. The author wants us to draw this comparison: in the north Saul is fighting the Philistines, and on the same day David is fighting the Amalekites in the south. Two leaders...two battles...two outcomes.

It's interesting in verse one that the text gives us virtually no details. There's not a lot of mystery to this in the sense that Samuel has already told Saul and us as the readers that Saul and his sons will die in battle. But the way the text reads is no detail, matter of fact. Now compare that with last week when there was a great deal of detail about what David fed the Egyptian slave when they found him. Why so much detail around what David fed the slave and virtually no detail about the battle? This would be a Hebrew technique that creates this *one, two, three—matter-of-fact—done* feel for the reader. We know that Saul has made God an adversary. We know that Saul no longer has the power of the Spirit of God. He stands no chance. There's no need for detail: *one...two... three...done*. It's this idea that the outcome is obvious, and so it leaves that impact.

In verse two, three of the sons are named: Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchi-shua. There is a fourth son, Ishbosheth that will show up in 2 Samuel. We just don't know why he's not at the battle in chapter 31.

So Saul and his army are escaping up into the mountains; the Philistines were best on the flat ground. They are launching arrows. An arrow hits Saul. He's wounded and he asks his armor bearer to run him through with the sword. Now before we're too hard on Saul, his concern about the Philistines is a legitimate concern. For example, remember the story of Samson. It was the Philistines that captured Samson and tied him between the pillars, gouged out his eyes, mocked him, and tortured him. So there was every reason to believe they would do the same with Saul; he's probably right about that. He wants his armor bearer to kill him. His armor bearer will not do it, so Saul falls on his sword and takes his own life. The armor bearer sees that, and does the same thing. Verse 6 then sums it up: **Thus Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together.**

Of the three sons, the one that probably grips our heart the most is Jonathan. Jonathan was godly; Jonathan was courageous. We wanted to see Jonathan in David's kingdom. We wonder what the possibilities could have been. But sadly, Saul's choices cost Jonathan his life. As a matter of fact, if you compare the two stories, there is a reminder from chapter 30 that we were told it was because of the faith of David, not the faith of the four hundred, that God gave them great victory. Their lives were spared; their wives and children were recovered. It is because of the lack of faith of Saul, the disobedience of Saul, that his sons died and all of his army died. And there is this reminder of the responsibility of leadership—that the decision that leaders make dramatically affects the lives of many people. And you see that as this story plays out. Verse 7:

When the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, with those who were beyond the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned the cities and fled; then the Philistines came and lived in them.

Basically understand that as the Philistines are up north, the Israelites are fleeing the cities. The Philistines are moving into these cities, and it would be right to say at this point in the story, that Israel is hanging by a thread. From purely human terms, Israel is all but wiped out. It seems there is no future. But we as the readers know, that for over a decade God has been busy raising up and training and preparing a great leader that will come along and rescue Israel from the Philistines, will set them free, and they will have a future. So again, even in the moments of desperation, you see the sovereign hand of God preparing to act. Verse 8:

It came about on the next day when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and stripped off his weapons, and sent *them* throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. They put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. (Vs. 8-10)

This is relatively common, so the winning army is going back among the slain and taking anything of value—weapons—whatever else might be valuable. The text makes it sound like they just happened on Saul. Maybe they hadn't realized Saul had been killed. They recognize Saul and his sons. They cut off his head; that's their trophy. They are going to go around the land holding the head of Saul. Once you got the opponent's king, that is a complete and total victory. They also keep the sword, the weapon which also is like a trophy of the victory, and it goes ultimately in the Philistines' temple, acknowledging that the god of the Philistines has defeated the God of the Israelites.

Now while this seems rather bizarre to us, it wasn't bizarre in the ancient world. As a matter of fact, this should sound familiar. When David defeated Goliath, what did he do? He cut off his head; that was his trophy. Our God wins! What else did he do? He took Goliath's sword and he gave it to the priest to be kept in the tabernacle. It's an acknowledgement that our God wins. The sad thing is now the Philistines are doing the same. They believe that their god has defeated the God of Israel. While this isn't the way we think today, it was the common thinking in the ancient world, that any war was ultimately a war between the gods. And so if your army wins, your god wins. If your army loses, your god loses. That was just conventional thinking.

You remember early on, under Eli and his sons, that Israel was fighting against the Philistines and the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant. What did they do with it? They put it in the temple under Dagon, the statue of their god. They were declaring: our god beat the God of Israel. But they wake up the next morning and their god is on his face, broken into pieces because the God of Israel cannot be defeated. They ultimately give the ark of the covenant back, and God wins a tremendous victory over the Philistines without one single soldier. There was a reminder God doesn't need any soldiers to win. God Himself is a majority.

But what's so sad about this story is because of Saul's disbelief, because of his sin, because of his disobedience, because of his lack of faith, he has caused the Philistines to believe that their god is greater than YAHWEH God. The Philistines' god has defeated the God of Israel.

Now think about this, and this is still true today. The God of the universe puts His reputation in the hands of His children to rightly represent Him to the world—and especially so in the hands of those whom He has called to be spiritual leaders. And when we fail to rightly represent God to the world, we dramatically affect the world's view of God. God appears to be anemic. He appears to be powerless. He appears to be unfaithful. The people of the world think somehow their gods have defeated the one true God. It's a serious responsibility we have to be stewards of the glory of God. Saul's one assignment was to defeat the Philistines. If you go all the way back to when the people were asking for a human king, they said they wanted a human king "to win our battles for us." Specifically, when Saul was anointed king the text said "in order to defeat the Philistines." And yet when the story is finally over, it was the Philistines that defeated Saul. Verse 11:

> **Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men rose and walked 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. They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.** (Vs. 11-13)

So the Philistines nail the headless body of Saul and his sons to a wall in Beth-shan. Basically this was a town at the intersection of the Valley of Jezreel and then the Jordan Valley comes up north/south and in that intersection is the town of Beth-shan. It would have been a heavily trafficked area, and they chose that area for their public declaration: We win, and the God of Israel loses.

The men of Jabesh-gilead had a debt that they owed Saul. If you remember the story all the way back in chapter 11, that Nahash, king of the Ammonites, was coming into Jabesh-gilead and they were far more powerful than Jabesh. So the people of Jabesh said, "Tell you what, we'll surrender and we'll be your servants if you let us live." And Nahash said, "You know, we'll do that, but we're going to gouge out the right eye of every man." And the men of the city said, "Tell you what; give us seven days to think it over. We'll let you know." So word gets out to Saul—and remember the people of Jabesh were blood relatives of Saul and the Benjamites—and he cuts up oxen, sends the pieces around the land, says, "This is what I'm going to do to your oxen if you don't participate." The nation comes out in full force and they defeat Nahash and the Ammonites. God gives them a great victory; Saul gives the glory to God; Samuel offers a sacrifice. And I referred to that in the Saul story as the finest hour of leadership for Saul as king.

So now Saul is dead; his body is nailed to a wall. They are humiliating him and the men of Jabesh determine they're going to do something about it. So it's about twelve miles across the Jordan back to the west a little bit. Under the disguise of darkness, really at great risk, they get to the wall; they take the bodies down, and bring them back. They burn the bodies, probably so the Philistines can't recapture them, and then take the bones, bury them under a tamarisk tree—you remember that was a favorite place for Saul; he often held court under the tamarisk trees—and then fasted for seven days in mourning for the death of their king. So it was just a sad, pitiful ending to a forty-year reign as king for Saul.

We are reminded it didn't have to be this way. Samuel was very clear to Saul that if Saul would trust God, would obey Him, that God would give him what he needed, would empower him to be a great king. The difference between David and Saul was not that David never messed up and Saul did. It wasn't that David never sinned but Saul did. The difference was that Saul was unwilling to surrender. He was determined to be his own god. He was determined to do it his own way. There was no confession; there was no repentance. He just simply didn't have a heart for God. David had

a consistent pattern of surrender and brokenness and confession and repentance. The text tells us *David had a heart for God.* You think about these people; these are real people with real feelings. What they wanted was a king to protect them. They wanted to have a family. They wanted to have a life; they wanted to raise their kids. They just wanted a chance, and they wanted a king who would give them that chance, but that king was not Saul.

David will become the next king. David will be a great king, and they will experience decades of peace and safety. But David is still human, and David will fail. David will make mistakes, and it will affect negatively the lives of thousands and thousands of people. There's still a longing in the hearts of these people for a different kind of king that would give them what their souls long for, and hundreds of years later, in the line of David, there would be such a King. Who would have imagined it would be God Himself who would take on human flesh in order to be the King that our souls long for, to establish the kingdom that will never end. That King was also nailed in humiliation to a wall at an intersection for all to see. Only that King's wall was a cross, where Jesus would shed His blood for the sins of the world. Jesus wouldn't just conquer the Philistines or the Amalekites or the Ammonites. What Jesus would conquer was sin and death forever. Jesus would conquer the ultimate enemy. King of kings and Lord of lords, He offers forgiveness to anyone who chooses to surrender to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus—an invitation into His kingdom now and a promise for a kingdom to come that will be everything that our souls long for. The *ultimate* King made a way that we might experience what our souls long for.

But even as Christians, we continue to struggle with whether we're going to surrender to God as God, or whether we're going to practically, daily function as our own god. It's as simple as the ordinary, everyday decisions that we make. We function as our own god because we've convinced ourselves life will be better with me in charge. But at the end of the day, you can't fight God and win. Saul's story is a reminder of every story for those who choose to function as their own god. So we're back to the very practical question: When your story is told, will you be a Saul or a David? Will you be a Cain or an Abel? Will you choose to surrender to God as God, or will you practically, daily, function as your own god?

There is this sobering reality: You only get one shot at life. You only get one chance to write this story, but because of the grace of God, it is never too late to choose, to choose to surrender to the King of kings and Lord of lords. So I ask you: when your story is told, will you choose to be a Saul or a David?

> *Our Father, we come this morning, sobered by the end of the story of Saul. Lord, I'm sure there's not a single person in this room this morning that would say," I want to be a Saul." But, Lord, we also know that's easy to say. Whether we will be a Saul or David is determined by the decisions we make every day. God, I ask that You would penetrate, convict our hearts, and, God, that You would remind us that the way of life, the way to find what our soul is longing for, is in a life surrendered to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Lord, may that be our story. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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I Samuel 31:1-13

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Opening Discussion

1. How does a Christian end up so far from God and make such a mess of things? Is it typically a deliberate decision or a slow fade? Have you ever experienced a slow fade to the extent that you woke up one morning and wondered, "How did I get here?"

2. Have you ever been hurt by a bad spiritual leader? Church leader? Parent? Boss? How did it affect your walk with God?

Bible Study

1. Review these passages in I Samuel chapters 4-7, 8:19, 9:16, chapter 14, 14:52. Now read I Samuel 31:1-13. Did Saul succeed or fail as the King of Israel? Why?

2. Compare chapter 30 and chapter 31. What difference does leadership make? Who all was affected? How complete is David's victory and how devastating was Saul's loss?

3. How did Saul's failure as king affect God's reputation? God defeated the Philistines earlier in Samuel without a single soldier fighting for Him. So why did Israel lose in chapter 31?

4. How did Saul get from the glory of chapter 11 to the defeat of chapter 31? Was it a deliberate choice by Saul or a slow fade? Do people sometimes get so far down the path of rebellion they become unable or unwilling to turn back? Why?

5. From our study of I Samuel, what would it mean to be a David, and what would it mean to be a Saul? What are the core differences? What do you learn from both leaders?

Application

1. What would you say are the top 5 lessons you learned in our I Samuel study?

2. What are some practical things you can do to assure yourself of being more like David than Saul?

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