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1 Samuel 31:1-13

25th Message

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# THE KING IS DEAD

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

On Wednesday morning last we received the news that Brenda Mathiesen had died. When we first hear that someone has cancer, we respond in shock and disbelief. But in time, denial gives way to acceptance, and finally relief. Nevertheless, when the announcement of death comes at last we are not prepared for it. We are not sure how to express ourselves about death, what emotion to evoke. The word “death” itself is too final; it betrays our hope. On the other hand, to merely say someone “is in heaven,” that he or she “went to be with Jesus,” bypasses the pain we feel and robs us of the dignity of our grief. So we have been taught to say that someone who has died has “passed away.” But this banal euphemism avoids the issue, obscuring our true feelings. As a pastor, father, and friend, I have accompanied many people to death’s door, yet I find I am still unprepared for its dreadful knock. I feel ill equipped to speak about it.

These are exactly the feelings of the narrator of the prophecy of Samuel with respect to King Saul of Israel’s inevitable end. We come now to the final chapter on the life of Saul from the book of 1 Samuel. One commentator writes,

We approach this chapter with a sense of relief. We know Saul’s demise and death are coming; they were mandated by Samuel long ago (13:14; 15:21). Saul’s end has been confirmed explicitly by ‘Samuel revisited’ (28:19). Nonetheless, we are not ready for this pitiful death when it happens... The portrayal of this death, so long in coming, so theologically assured, is wondrously understated. There is no gloating by the David party. There is no rush to move to the next stage of Israel’s history. There is no heavy verdict passed on Saul. The action is permitted to have its own say.<sup>1</sup>

In this final chapter we hear at last the long expected cry, “The king is dead!” These words reverberate across the land of Israel, evoking mournful responses in the soul of the nation. Even David, the beneficiary of Saul’s death, does not rush to seize the crown of the fallen monarch. He, too, mourns the death of the fallen leader. He weeps, and leads the whole nation in weeping. This text is a very helpful study on the cost of life and the reality of death. It helps us learn how the majestic event of death teaches the soul to utter expressions of deep spirituality.

The chapter opens with an account of the final battle, viewed from the top of Mount Gilboa.

## I. The King is Dead (31:1-7)

Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua the sons of Saul. And the battle went heavily against Saul, and the men of the bow found 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, lest these uncircumcised 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. And 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 [as one].

And 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. (1 Sam 31:1-7 NASB)

In chapter 30 we read the account of David’s return to Ziklag, following his triumphant battle of restoration against the Amalekites. Here, in chapter 31, the scene shifts to Mount Gilboa, and the Philistine battle with the army of Saul. The timing is significant. While one king is victorious in the battle of restoration for Ziklag, another is slain in judgment in Gilboa. As is often the case in the story of redemption, an act of salvation occurs simultaneously with an act of God’s judgment. Life and death meet in an embrace. A new order, with its new king, is born out of the death of the old. We are reminded of Hannah’s prophetic couplet which opens this book:

“The LORD kills and makes alive;

He brings down to Sheol and raises up.” (1 Sam 2:6)

With exquisite skill, the narrator portrays Saul’s final curtain call. I will employ cinematic terms to describe the scene. First, the writer focuses with wide angle lens to survey the battle; then he zooms in with telephoto lens to focus on Saul’s inner circle of protection, his three sons. Next, at the center of the scene, we have a close-up view of Saul. He is all alone, awaiting his approaching confrontation with the Philistine enemy, and death itself. This is the focal point of the story. We hear Saul’s last speech, and see his final action as king of Israel. Next, the camera pans back to reveal Saul’s sons lying dead on Mt Gilboa; then, from the mountain top, the lens captures the plight of Israel’s army retreating in chaos. What a painful reversal is this scene from that great event of chapter 17, when David slew Goliath.

The narrator begins by relating how one-sided the battle was: “Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.” In Fokkelman’s view, this “suggests that considerable numbers of Saul’s army, which probably consisted mainly of citizens called to arms for the occasion, saw the superior might of the Philistines very quickly after the start of the hostilities and preferred survival to perishing.”<sup>2</sup> The superior Philistine forces had but one objective in the battle: to put an end to the leadership in Israel. But Saul’s inner circle fights to the bitter end. Their resistance buys time for Saul, and he flees. But, an archer’s arrow finds its mark, severely wounding the monarch. How ironic, to think that a bow, the instrument that was Jonathan’s gift to David to honor him as a warrior, is the very weapon that brings Saul to the edge of death. It is even more ironic

that Saul, the man who always relied on his own sword, will finally be killed by it. Thus he suffers the same fate that befell Goliath.

The camera now zooms in on Saul. He is utterly alone for his appointment with death. Fokkelman continues: "In the nick of time, Saul has bravely assimilated his destiny in awesome isolation. After consulting the prophet, only one job was left to him: to stay in place as the waves of war approach. And that is what he really has done. He has not run away from his responsibility as commander and has done his utmost to protect the Anointed one against sacrilege."<sup>3</sup> Even Saul's last wish is tragically unfulfilled: "The one blow that he can still strike the enemy is that he can deprive them of a living Saul, but that has little effect on the fact that the Philistines track him down and ignominiously mutilate his corpse."<sup>4</sup> The narrator adds, "Thus Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together (as one)." Brueggemann comments: "There must be a pause with each phrase to grasp the massiveness of the death, its finality, and its majesty. Saul could not live."<sup>5</sup> Neither could his heirs. Verse 7 reveals what this death meant to Israel—a total loss of confidence, a sense of hopeless abandonment. There is no king. There is no hope for the nation.

But for the enemy, there is rejoicing. Verse 8:

## II. The King is Desecrated (31:8-10)

**And 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. And 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. And they put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. (31:8-10)**

The Philistines happen on the body of Saul as they collect the spoils of war. They probably wondered why Israel's army appeared so chaotic in battle; now they discover why: it was because Israel's king was no more. The Philistines sever Saul's head from his body and send it as a trophy to their house of worship. This was what they did with the ark of the covenant earlier. Then, however, their god, Dagon, lost his head, while now, Israel's king, Saul, loses his. Saul's weapons are put on display in the temple of Ashtaroath, in the West; while his mutilated body, and the-bodies of his sons, are hung from the walls of Beth-shan,<sup>6</sup> prey to predatory birds, about six miles from Mt. Gilboa, in the east. As the king is dismembered, the news goes out that his kingdom too has been dismembered. "Strategically, the king's death means that the military threat has lost its main force. Theologically, it means that the enemy god has been defeated, for when the king dies, the king's god has failed...Yahweh is as humiliated as is Saul."<sup>7</sup>

As the news of Saul's death and the desecration of his body makes its way throughout the land, some of Saul's old friends are moved to act. They embark on a raid, not unlike the Israeli raid on Entebbe, in Africa, a few years ago, when the modern nation rescued scores of hostages.

## III. The King is Honored (31:11-13)

**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. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days. (31:11-13)**

In 1 Samuel 11, Saul helped the men of Jabesh when the Philistines threatened to destroy their city. The inhabitants of Jabesh had been given seven days to react to the oppressor, but within that period came unexpected help from the charismatic new leader, Saul, who saved their city. The men of Jabesh never forgot Saul. Now, to mark his death, they observe a fast for seven days. Then with lightning speed they mount a dangerous operation into enemy territory, under the cover of night, to save whatever can be saved. History teaches that when evil desecrates the righteous, people often respond with tremendous displays of heroism.

The men of Jabesh recover Saul's body and burn it. Then they bury his bones under a tamarisk tree, in Jabesh, possibly a holy place, as a sign of loyalty and respect. Normally Jews do not cremate bodies before burial, but Saul's body is burned, perhaps to cleanse it from the defilement of the Philistines. Brueggemann concludes: "In the end, Saul is humiliated and then honored. Both acts are necessary to understand Israel's pathos-filled narrative about this tall king."<sup>8</sup> The New Testament tells the story of another King. At his death, his outstretched body lay desecrated on a tree. His demise was gloated over by the onlookers, but his loved ones came by night to honor his body and give it a proper burial. So moved was the Father by the death of his Son that he made sure that once the price had been paid, no one touched that body save those who loved him.

One would think that with the death of Saul, David would rush in to take the crown, but there is no joy in David's heart. To find his response to the death of his old enemy, we must look to the opening chapter of the book of 2 Samuel.

## IV. The King is Mourned (2 Sam 1:11-12, 17-27)

### (a) David Weeps

**Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. (2 Sam 1:11-12)**

What does David do when he gets the news that his rival is dead? What does he say when the event he has been patiently waiting for all these years finally comes to pass? He did not say anything. He and his men "mourned and wept and fasted until evening." And he weeps in community, with "all the men who were with him." Weeping is rather foreign to us in Christian worship, but not among the Jews. Resurrection does not obliterate pain, it transcends it. Once when I attended a service in a synagogue, the leader announced that it was time for the saying of Kaddish, and people who were hurting were asked to stand to signify that they were in grief. Tears release emotion and cleanse the soul. When you have wept sufficiently, then you can speak. To speak before weeping is inappropriate and inauthentic.

### (b) David Speaks

**Then David chanted with this lament over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the sons of Judah the song of the bow; behold, it is written in the book of Jashar.**

**"Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places!  
How have the mighty fallen!  
Tell it not in Gath,  
Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;**

Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,  
 Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.  
 O mountains of Gilboa,  
 Let not dew or rain be on you, nor fields of offerings;  
 For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,  
 The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.  
 From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty,  
 The bow of Jonathan did not turn back,  
 And the sword of Saul did not return empty.  
 Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life,  
 And in their death they were not parted;  
 They were swifter than eagles,  
 They were stronger than lions.  
 O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,  
 Who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet,  
 Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.  
 How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!  
 Jonathan is slain on your high places.  
 I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;  
 You have been very pleasant to me.  
 Your love to me was more wonderful  
 Than the love of women.  
 How have the mighty fallen,  
 And the weapons of war perished!" (1:17-27)

After David has wept, then he is able to speak. And when he speaks, poetry is the only language that is adequate to express his feelings. I think poetry distills the deepest significance of a given situation. The singing of this poem of David's transcends the pain by placing his deep yearnings on the altar of God, in the presence of the congregation. In the end we are comforted not with answers, but with worship: the presence of God in the midst of his people.

I never thought I would write poetry. As a child, I didn't read a lot. Later in life it was pain that motivated me to begin writing poetry. Following the deaths of my son and daughter, fifteen and sixteen years ago respectively, my soul could find no rest until I wrote a poem for each of them. It took all those years before I could write about the significance of those events.

We will look at David's lament in greater detail later, but for now I will make three observations on the impact of this lament on David's soul.

### 1. Pain is Intensified

First, the poem speaks of the depth of the pain that David is feeling. Actually, the recalling of the pain intensifies it. David does not hold back. He opens with the image expressed in the words, "the beauty of Israel slain on the high places." Though David cannot bear to look at this painful image for long, he sings of "the land humiliated, deprived of its pride and ornament, the dead everywhere up there. It is, however, such a terrible sight to the poet that he cannot bear this for longer than one verse."<sup>9</sup>

The pain of defeat is further intensified by the remembrance of the mood in the enemy camp, the joy and gloating which David and Saul tried to prevent, but which occurred anyway. The poem dredges up David's tears. In death, weeping is all that is left to him. So David calls on the daughters of Israel to weep. But the wounds of the soul are good, for in the multitude of tears comes cleansing, comfort and clarity, and a rare and deep holiness. David's words then open us up to another image, that of the intertwined father and son.

### 2. Death and Life Kiss

"Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in life, and in their death they were not parted" (1:23). Two men, father and son, shaped David's life. One represented life, the other a constant threat of death. In this text the two are intertwined, placed side by side in the Hebrew text. It is as if death and life kiss.

The first time these two words are placed side by side in 1 Samuel is in Hannah's poem, the text that introduces this book:

"The LORD kills and makes alive;  
 He brings down to Sheol and raises up." (1 Sam 2:6)

Death and life are inextricably linked. The last time Saul appeared in the text, God announced to him, through Samuel, whom he had raised up, that he was destined for Sheol. Now, as David is given the crown, the new king will never forget at what cost it has become his to wear—the life of the king and that of his son.

My home is filled with life today, much of it born out of memories of death. We have our adopted daughter Becky because Jessica died. Now Becky is at the age where she is ready to go off to college. This has been made possible because her great grandparents and grandparents, who are now dead, left money for her to attend college. Death and life kiss.

### 3. Love is Immortalized

"How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!  
 Jonathan is slain on your high places.  
 I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;  
 You have been very pleasant to me.  
 Your love to me was more wonderful  
 Than the love of women." (1:25-26)

David ends his poem by expressing the thought that there is but one powerful emotion that drives his soul, and that is love. He could never forget Jonathan, who immediately gave up his right to the throne when he saw the beheaded Goliath; who stood up to his father's rage and endured his wrath as the price for friendship; and who sought David out to strengthen his grip on God. But above all else, Jonathan kept his vow to David, and that vow cost him his very life. That kind of love transcends any expression of romantic love.

To our surprise, the poem is silent about a corresponding emotion toward Saul. There is no expression of hate or bitterness, only love for Jonathan. It grieves me to think that some say David is referring to homosexual love here. No, this is holy love, the love that causes us to lay hold of God in the face of adversity. This kind of love purifies us from the wounds of others, heals us from all past hurts, and becomes the new driving force in our lives. This is what happened to David. Love is what drives his soul now. This kind of love can cleanse and heal us of all the wounds we have suffered in the past. It can do more to shape our souls than anything else in life.

Now another King invites us to wear his crown. But before we begin our reign, let us pause for a moment and think of what he told us to do: "Remember My death until I come." Isn't it appropriate that we weep first? Shouldn't we sing a lament about our King, slain on the heights of Jerusalem, his desecrated body outstretched, gloated over and spat upon? Isn't his love more wonderful than romantic love? When we take our crowns, let us remember that they cost the life the King's Son. It was for this reason that Ray Stedman had inscribed on the platform at PBC in Palo Alto many years ago, the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, "You are not your own; you have been bought with a price."

“Remember My death until I come.” Let us meditate on these words as we conclude our service this morning.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 206-207.
2. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2, The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 623.
3. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 630.
4. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 627.
5. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 208.
6. Beth Shean is one the most extensive archaeological sites to visit in Israel. Archaeologists have uncovered 18 layers of cities; the most impressive is the Roman layer with its wide streets lined with marble columns, amphitheater, and the largest Roman theater in the country.
7. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 208-209.
8. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 208.
9. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 659.