

1 Samuel 31:1-13 | “Utter Defeat”

*Preached on June 26, 2022 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 31. *[pause]*

I want you to picture a country who has been invaded and defeated in war.

What do you picture?

I picture a war-torn country with buildings demolished and debris everywhere.

I picture the people of that country saddened, suffering, and in great agony. *[pause]*

As you look around you at that country, all that’s on your mind is utter defeat, as you see a sad and sorry state.

What was once a thriving country is now in shambles, and it’s a dismal scene.

Well-being has turned to distress.

Prosperity has turned to destitution.

Success has turned to failure. *[pause]*

And as we read 1 Samuel 31, that’s the kind of image that the story portrays.

It’s a sad chapter of the Bible, as misery abounds. *[pause]*

Let’s READ THE STORY, and I want you just to feel the weight of it all. *[read verses 1-13]*

Did you notice all of the failure-type words used in this story?

The word ‘fled’ is used three times.

‘Dead’ or ‘died’ is used about four times.

You see words and phrases such as: fell slain, overtook, struck down, pressed hard, and badly wounded. *[pause]*

Even the terseness of how this story is written, highlights how decisively Israel is defeated and Saul is killed.

This is not an equal fight that goes to the very end, this is *utter defeat*. *[pauseeeee]*

You see, what happens in this story is that Israel and the Philistines are at war.

And the author takes us right to the end of the battle, as Israel is fleeing and being killed off. *[pause]*

That is bad in itself, but then we find that Saul and his sons are overtaken.

And three of Saul's sons are killed off, including Jonathan. *[pause]*

Now stop right there.

Before going further, think about how big of a deal this was.

This is three of the king's sons killed - that's not a good thing for a dynasty. *[pause]*

Now in 2 Samuel, we find that Saul still had a couple more sons,<sup>1</sup> but this is still a big blow to the line of Saul, especially having Jonathan killed. *[pause]*

Going back to the story, Saul is found by the archers, who badly wound him.

Saul knows that the end is near, so he asks his armor bearer to kill him before the Philistines can get to him. *[pause]*

Why would he do this?

Well according to the *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, they say...

“In this period it was common for captured kings to be mutilated and subjected to a life of humiliation. Putting out the eyes or cutting off the thumbs and big toes were just a few of the procedures used.”<sup>2</sup> *[pause]*

So Saul doesn't want to go through that, but instead, just wants a quick death.

Yet there's a problem, as his armor-bearer is too afraid to do it. *[pause]*

Killing the king probably felt so very wrong to him.

He might have even thought about how big of a deal it was to kill the Lord's anointed,<sup>3</sup> and he felt like he just couldn't do it.

So Saul grabs his sword and kills himself. *[pauseeee]*

What a horrific and tragic ending to the life of Saul.

The one who showed such great promise at the beginning of his reign,<sup>4</sup> dies in this terrible and awful way. *[pauseeee]*

---

<sup>1</sup> See 2 Samuel 2:8-11 where Ish-bosheth (Saul's son) is made king of Israel. Also, in 2 Samuel 21:8 you find that Saul had two sons through a concubine, and Jonathan had a son, too (2 Sam. 21:7).

<sup>2</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1 Sa 31:3-5.

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Samuel 26:9.

<sup>4</sup> See especially 1 Samuel 11.

We also find that Saul and his sons aren't the only ones killed, for right after Saul kills himself, his armor-bearer kills himself.

Then we are told that all of Saul's men are killed and all of these deaths happened on the same day. *[pauseee]*

The Israelites living nearby witness what happens, abandon their cities in fear, and the cities are taken over by the Philistines.

So not only has the king died, the king's sons died, and the army is killed, but also, Israel loses portions of their territory.

Talk about utter defeat. *[pauseeeee]*

That's not all, though.

Like a bad day where you keep thinking the hardships are over, only for them to keep going, so the bad news keeps coming in the story.

In verses 8-10, we find that the next day, the Philistines come to strip the slain.

And they come upon Saul and his sons, whose bodies have been laying there overnight, showing how decisive this battle was. *[pause]*

They cut off Saul's head, strip his armor, and send the good news of what happened throughout their nation.

The Philistines feel like they are on top of the world.

They can't help but share the good news of such a victory, as they hang Saul's armor in one of their temples, and pin his body to the wall for all to see. *[pauseee]*

Saul and Israel are being humiliated by the Philistines.

But thankfully, the story ends on at least a *slice* of good news. *[pause]*

The residents of Jabesh-gilead hear of what happened, and they are determined to act.

But *why* do they act?

Well if you remember from 1 Samuel 11, Saul delivered them from the Ammonites when no one else would.

Now, in thankfulness and loyalty to Saul, they courageously go at night, retrieve Saul's body and his sons bodies, and give their bones a proper burial. *[pauseeeee]*

*What a gruesome and awful story, but what does it show us? First, it shows us...*

## I. The utter ruin of rebellion against God.

As we went through the story, we felt the weight of ruin, that's for sure.

But what caused Saul to end in such a way?

Was it mere coincidence? Was it God just being mean to Saul?

No, it was because of Saul's rebellion against God. *[pause]*

In 1 Chronicles 10, it gives almost the same recounting of Saul's death, and it ends with this summary of *why* he died in this way.

It says, "So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance.

He 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."<sup>5</sup> *[pause]*

This is the ruin of rebellion against God: death. *[pause]*

We see this throughout Scripture.

Adam and Eve sin and what's the result? They die, for God told them that they would surely die.<sup>6</sup>

In Numbers, the people grumble against God, and God declares that they will die in the wilderness.<sup>7</sup>

In Acts, Ananias and Sapphira lie about how much they gave and are struck down by God.<sup>8</sup>

And in Romans, we are told that "the wages of sin is death."<sup>9</sup>

Sin deserves death, so that's why we see the result of sin being death in Scripture. *[pauseeee]*

Sin is self-destructive.

There's this story in the news a while back of a "woman who set a world record while playing a convenience store video game.

After standing in front of the game for fourteen hours and scoring an unprecedented seven and a half million points in the game...the woman was pleased to see a TV crew arriving to record her efforts for posterity.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 10:13–14.

<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 2:17.

<sup>7</sup> See Numbers 14:29, 26:65.

<sup>8</sup> See Acts 5:1-11.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 6:23a.

She continued to play while the crew, alerted by her fiancé, prepared to shoot.

However, she was appalled to see the video screen suddenly go blank.

While setting up their lights, the camera team had accidentally unplugged the game, thus bringing her bid for ten million points to an untimely end!

The effort to publicize her achievement became the agent of her ultimate failure.”<sup>10</sup> *[pause]*

Isn't that just like sin?

In our efforts to seek our own happiness and joy apart from God, those very efforts lead to our ruin.

Like Adam and Eve, and like Saul, we think that by rebellion we are gaining something better for ourselves, only to shoot ourselves in the foot. *[pause]*

We think that lying will help us get that higher job, only to be caught in our lie, and fired.

We think that looking at those inappropriate pictures will feel so good, and it does briefly, but then we feel the guilt, regret, and shame - we are caught and it ruins our marriage. *[pause]*

All you have to do is live long enough and you become aware of people who seemed like they had so much going for them.

But because of some constant sin in their lives, they have wreaked havoc on their lives.

Their marriage is in shambles, they mess up their career, and their reputation is no longer a good one. *[pauseeee]*

Sin is self-destructive.

Saul in disobedience was trying to get his own way, but lost the kingdom because of it.

Saul in jealousy was trying to protect his throne, but made things worse.

Saul in seeking a medium was trying to protect his life, but sealed his fate. *[pause]*

And our lives may not end in such an extreme way as Saul's, but in what ways have you seen the self-destructive, ruinous character of sin in your life?

Maybe it's when you want your own way at home, but this causes a fight between you and your spouse.

Or maybe it's when you keep doing everything to please other people and seek their approval, only to feel regret as you have done something that you never thought you would do.

---

<sup>10</sup> Source Unknown. Found at: [http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/self\\_defeat.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/self_defeat.htm).

Sin destroys and ruins, no matter what form it takes in our lives, for that is the result of sin.

*[pause]*

This reminds us that seeking life and joy outside of God are always hopeless attempts.

It is in Christ alone that we find life and joy because He is the source of life and joy.

To go outside of Him is to reject the Life-giver and Joy-giver. *[pauseeee]*

Saul's life seemed so promising, I mean he had all the things that the world looks for in a leader, as he was tall and handsome.

He even started off on the right foot, but everything went downhill once he went outside of what God said. *[pause]*

And let me tell you: you may have great potential, good looks, and what looks like a promising future, but you will squander it all if you choose self over God.

What truly matters is your relationship with God.

You probably won't end up slain on the battlefield like Saul, but there are consequences of choosing sin. *[pause]*

There are the immediate consequences of choosing sin which are seen in how sin doesn't satisfy, and it ruins relationships and causes division.

But then there are eternal consequences of choosing sin and rejecting Christ, which is separation from God eternally in Hell. *[pauseeee]*

Sin is not worth it! It causes ruin wherever it's let go! *[pause]*

We have such a light view of sin.

We view it so lightly, as if it's not *that* big of a deal, but what a difference it would make in our lives if we saw how it causes such ruin. *[pauseeee]*

So then what hope do we have when it comes to the eternal consequences of sin? Christ!

Through Christ's death on the Cross paying the penalty for our sin, we can be forgiven so that we don't have to face the eternal consequences of our sin.

If you have never repented of your sins and turned to Christ, then do that this morning.

See the ruin of rebellion against God, and the hope of Jesus' sacrifice! *[pauseeee]*

But let's say that you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and you say, "I know I won't face the eternal consequences of sin, but what hope do I have to stop looking to sin at times, thinking it will bring good things?"

The answer is the same: Christ!

He empowers us and motivates us to turn from sin, and to seek his ways.

He has freed us from sin's hold on us, so that we can resist sin through the power of the Spirit.

He gives us what we need as we look to Him to battle sin in our lives. *[pause]*

As you can see, Christ is always the answer to the ruin of sin.

Will you see the ruin of rebellion, as you remember Saul's life, and will you see the hope and life-giving power of Christ? *[pauseee]*

*In this story, I see one more main theme come forth, and it's...*

## **II. The utter reliability of God's promises.**

Now you may be wondering what the connection of the reliability of God's promises is with this story.

And the answer is this...

Just turn back a couple chapters in your mind and you will see the connection.

Back in chapter 28, Saul sought out a medium, and through this encounter, Samuel spoke God's Word to him.

And do you remember what he said? "The Lord will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me.

The Lord will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines."<sup>11</sup> *[pause]*

That promise came to fulfillment perfectly in our chapter in front of us this morning.

The Lord said that Saul and his sons would die in battle on this day, and it happened.

Even the army being given into the hand of the Philistines came true.

God's Word of judgment was carried out to the last detail. *[pauseee]*

So as you can see, 1 Samuel 31 was not some curveball in the plan of God, but it was the very plan of God itself. *[pauseee]*

It's so easy for us to see dark moments in history as outside of God's purview.

We may even wonder, "Is God doing anything?"

---

<sup>11</sup> 1 Samuel 28:19.

But throughout Scripture, time and time again, the Lord shows us that He has purposes for everything that He does.

He is fulfilling His promises. *[pause]*

Though it looked bad to Israel, God was removing the king over them that was disobedient and ungodly, and was replacing him with a man after His own heart.<sup>12</sup> *[pause]*

Through the darkness, God was doing something good for Israel, fulfilling His promises, and we must also understand that reality.

Just because something is hard and doesn't look too good doesn't mean that God's not doing something good through it.

So we need to change our mindsets about hardships and dark moments, and trust our reliable God! *[pause]*

What if every hardship we went through we said to God...

“Lord, this is hard, and it doesn't feel like anything good will come out of it, but I know that Your promises will come true and somehow, somehow you will work all things together for good.”<sup>13</sup> *[pauseeee]*

You know, 1 Samuel 31 is a dark and grim account.

The king of Israel is dead, some of his sons have been killed, the army of Israel has been defeated, and territory has been given up.

Someone who is only looking at 1 Samuel 31 could be led to think, “Is there any hope in this darkness?”

But not all hope is lost!

If you've been following along in 1 Samuel, you know why!

Because judgment against Saul was only *part* of the promise that God made.

He would take the kingdom from Saul and kill him, but he would also give the kingdom to someone else, someone better, someone who was a man after His own heart - David.<sup>14</sup>

And this David is on the rise, and he's a brave, Spirit-filled, godly leader. *[pause]*

---

<sup>12</sup> See 1 Samuel 13:14.

<sup>13</sup> An allusion to Romans 8:28.

<sup>14</sup> See 1 Samuel 13:14, 15:28, 28:17.



While the Philistines were gloating, feeling on top of the world, they would soon be squashed by David.<sup>15</sup>

There may have been darkness in 1 Samuel 31, yet it was only the darkness before the dawn of David's reign. *[pause]*

And really, if you think about it, this pattern reflects what Christ would do and be.

Our world before Christ was like 1 Samuel 31: there was death and darkness.

And if you look at the dark world filled with condemned sinners, one may wonder, "Is there any hope?"

But that darkness was only the darkness before the dawn of Christ's coming.

For though sin and darkness reigned, all hope was not lost, for the son of David, Jesus Christ, came!

And he died on the Cross, what a dark moment, for like the Philistines rejoicing before David's rise to power, so at the Cross, Satan was rejoicing before Christ rose.

But then once He rose, it was all over, as King Jesus' work defeated the enemy. *[pauseeee]*

You see, like 1 Samuel 31, judgment is only part of the story, for there's hope out of the darkness in Jesus.

For the promised King and Deliverer was NOT like Saul.

He wasn't disobedient, filled with jealous, sinful rage, or self-centered.

Instead, he was humble, obedient, loving, and good: all to perfection.

Unlike Saul, he didn't take his life, but "gave his life as a ransom for many."<sup>16</sup> *[pauseeee]*

God is utterly reliable and so therefore His promises are utterly reliable - that is something you should remember when you lie down and when you wake up.<sup>17</sup> *[pause]*

For us, as sinful and flawed people, we break promises for various reasons.

Some break promises *on purpose*, others break promises *by neglect*, and still yet also we break promises *unwillingly* because of situations outside of our control...

...But the Lord never breaks even one single promise! *[pause]*

He doesn't break a promise on purpose, for He is a God of love and truth.

---

<sup>15</sup> See 2 Samuel 8:1.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 10:45 (italics is mine).

<sup>17</sup> An allusion to Deuteronomy 6:7.

He doesn't break a promise by neglect, for He never forgets what He has promised.

And He doesn't break a promise unwillingly, for all situations are under His control.

His Word is utterly reliable. *[pauseee]*

And as we think about God's promises, usually our mind first goes to the promises of blessing and life.

And those are important, good, and trustworthy!

But if we believe in God's promises of life and hope, then we must consequently believe in God's promises of judgment. *[pause]*

How can we say that He's reliable when he tells us of the promise of Heaven, but not reliable when He talks about Hell?

How can we say that He's reliable when he talks of eternal life, but not reliable when he talks of eternal punishment?

The same God who promises blessing promises judgment, and both are trustworthy. *[pauseee]*

Here in this chapter we see the Lord's promise of judgment against Saul fulfilled.

God does not lie, He does not mispeak, or bluff.

If He says He will do something, then He will do something.

Once He said that Saul would die the next day, nothing could change it, for His Word is utterly reliable.

No amount of strength or strategy from Saul could prevent it.

When God speaks judgment, then get ready for judgment. *[pauseee]*

Why is this so important to know?

Because God speaks judgment to those who do not believe in Christ.

In John 3:18, the Bible says, "whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." *[pause]*

If you have never believed in Jesus Christ, then take heed of this.

God's Words of judgment are reliable.

If you have not believed in Jesus, *you are condemned.*

Like Saul, God's fulfillment of His words of judgment will come down upon your head.

But there's good news!

God's promise of life provides the way out of that promise of judgment.

John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Because of this promise then, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned."<sup>18</sup> [*pauseeee*]

His promise of judgment is reliable, but his promise of life is just as reliable.

So that means if you believe in Jesus Christ as the only way to be saved, then as he has said, "Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life."<sup>19</sup>

You don't have to doubt it or question it, but it's utterly reliable. [*pauseeeeeee*]

Like God's promise of judgment upon Saul was only part of the promise, for he promised to raise up David...

So also, the promise of judgment is only part of the promise, for He promised life out of that judgment through Jesus Christ. [*pauseeee*]

God's promises are utterly reliable, so let's take heed of what He says, no matter what it is, and cling to them by faith. [*pause*]

*This story teaches us that...*

**Sin brings destruction, but there's hope in Jesus!**

Saul's example reminds us of the ruin of rebellion against God - it's not worth it, no matter what sin tries to promise.

But thankfully, there's a way out of the ruin of rebellion - Jesus Christ. [*pause*]

Through His death on the Cross, and our simple belief in His work on our behalf, we escape the eternal ruin of sin.

For Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, and where "condemned" was once stamped on our file, so now "not condemned" has forever taken its place.

Praise the Lord for His matchless grace!

We don't have to face the promise of judgment like Saul did!

There's hope in Jesus! Turn to Him to be saved! [*pauseeeeeee*]

---

<sup>18</sup> John 3:18a (underline is mine).

<sup>19</sup> John 3:36a (italics is mine).

But let's say you are someone who believes in Jesus Christ.

You will never face the eternal ruin of sin, praise God, but what about the temporary ruin that sin causes?

Certainly, you won't reach perfection on this side of heaven...

...But by looking to Christ for the power and help, you can start to see a harvest of righteousness and peace, rather than the ruin of sin in your life the more and more you look to Him.<sup>20</sup>

There's hope in Jesus no matter who you are! So will you turn to Him each day?

---

<sup>20</sup> See James 3:13-18.