

## Hopelessness of a Hardened Heart

1 Samuel 31

*“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near”*

*Isaiah 55:6*

**Introduction:** There is one unavoidable reality everyone faces this morning: *death comes to us all* (outside of Christ’s return!). We can try to prolong life by eating healthy, exercise, and avoiding harmful chemicals, but we also know “...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27), and being anxious cannot add a single hour to the span of life (Matt. 6:27). Based on the overall brevity of life and our inability to gain much more beyond 80 (Ps. 90:10), Moses asked God to “teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” (Ps. 90:12)

Now, since death comes for everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, some have faced it with a sense of humor, which is how they lived life. Some ironic epitaphs have stated:

- *“Raised four beautiful daughters with only one bathroom and still there was love” - Unknown*
- *“That’s All Folks” – Mel Blanc*
- *“I told you I was sick” – British actor Spike Milligan – 1918-2002*
- *“I’m ready to meet my Maker; Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter – Sir Winston Churchill*
- *Scott Entsmingers obituary, July 4, 2013 – “He respectfully requests six Cleveland Browns pallbearers so that the Browns can let him down one last time”*

Since the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), we face death as soon as we take our first breath. People try to face death and life after with humor or some kind of pithy statements like “I’ll always be with you” or “I’ll be watching over you”, but the truth is, the prospect of death is multifaceted, since we not only die **physically** but have died **spiritually** and thus face death **eternally** – *“for the wages of sin is death”* (Rom. 6:23). Death brings a finality to this world and then we face the rest of eternity, either in life in a relationship with Christ (John 17:3) or separated from Him in eternal judgment.

This is where **1 Samuel** concludes, with the unceremonious **death of Saul**, Israel’s begged-for king who was full of promise and possessing all the qualities of what someone would expect from a worldly king (good looking, strong, tall, looks great in the uniform!), yet who fell miserably short in potential. When someone dies, we rightly memorialize them and typically a central theme will come to the surface that captures their life. We find out this person was a loving parent, or selfless neighbor, or thoughtful worker, or unexpected helper of those in need. We try to remember the good, minimize the negative, and paint a picture that honors rather than tears down. But that is not what the author of 1 Samuel does. We see Saul’s death through the lens of **brutal reality** and **tragic finality**. Saul’s life was characterized by fear and selfishness, and though there were positive events and stretches of good, his life is a picture of **hard-hearted stubbornness which led to utter hopelessness**. This morning we will look at this negative example to shine a light on the BRIGHT HOPE that is there for everyone: we have a **better king in Jesus who offers Himself as our hope in life and death**, and calls us to humble ourselves in dependency and repentance. We have the opportunity to do what Saul refused. **Isaiah 55:6-7:**

*“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;*

*let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

### **Finality of a Faithful Life (1-2)**

*Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. 2 And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down **Jonathan** and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul.*

At the same time David was liberating his loved ones and those of his men from the Amalekites, the Philistines had closed in on Saul's force in the north of Israel. The Philistines pushed up from Aphek into the Jezreel Valley, a flat plain that made open war possible. Armed with chariots (2 Sam 1:6), Israel's enemy pushed across the valley at Shunem until they had no choice but to begin a retreat, with Mt. Gilboa as the only obvious route of escape. When we think mountain, we think thousands of feet, but Mt. Gilboa was more like a big hill jutting out from the valley floor. It was here that they would have been in the reach of skilled archers, darkening the sun with a shade of arrows. As Saul retreated, all around him his men fell, including his three sons, two of whom the author did not spend much time addressing, but one who was a hero during his life, humbly trusting the Lord in his life and ultimately in his death.

The death of Jonathan moves this narrative from a total **tragedy** to one that shines light on a faithful life. If Jonathan's death seems a bit understated it's only because that is how he would have wanted it. Jonathan was a stark counter to his father Saul, exhibiting kingly character even though he was willing to give up the throne for a friend since he believed the promises of God. Jonathan showed bravery and courage by almost single-handedly defeating the Philistines in 1 Samuel 14, inspiring the whole army toward action when it had bogged down under Saul's leadership. He trusted that "*the LORD will work for us*" and "*the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel*" (14:6, 12). This led to Saul making an irresponsible vow, forcing his hand to call his men to kill Jonathan, which they unanimously refused. He also showed himself to be a **faithful friend** to David, loving him beyond himself and upholding his right to the throne (1 Sam. 18:1-4). He was David's encourager (1 Sam. 23:15-18), and pointed him back to God and His promises. Jonathan proved to be Saul's antonym, graciously giving of himself for the betterment of the rest, sacrificing himself, and trusting God's promises.

The death of Jonathan also gives a surprising hope in terms of the Word of God and promises of God. Remember back in 1 Samuel 28 that Samuel, conjured up by Saul but given by God as a divine message, promised Saul the day before the battle that Saul would die, along with his sons (28:19). When Jonathan fell in battle with his brothers, it was NOT because Jonathan had failed, but because Saul had, Jonathan lived his life like one who truly believed the promises of God and hope for the future: ***in my life OR death, may God be glorified!*** Jonathan's death brought glory to God, as all do who die while walking in faith. The misnomer is that if we walk in faith and believe enough, we will be **delivered physically**, and that is simply not a Biblical ideal. God *may*, for His own purposes and glory, deliver circumstantially, but He is not bound to it, like some *quid pro quo* contract. No, His ways and thoughts are not ours, but are higher than our ways and thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9) and never has to explain Himself to us in exercising His sovereign will (Rom. 9:20-23). **However**, we take solace in the fact that God will ALWAYS keep His promises, and if he even delivered on His promise about the righteous son of Saul, He will keep the rest of His promises, particularly those that are ours *in Christ*.

### Tragedy of a Hopeless Life (3-7)

*The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. 4 Then 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." But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. **Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it.** 5 And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. 6 Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. 7 And 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 real tragedy of this story and the whole book is the life of Saul. Saul had made his way up Gilboa with his armor bearer, and as the arrows rained down, he was pierced through by several, leaving him wounded and without hope of escape. Knowing the brutality of the Philistines (which we'll get to in a minute) and understandably NOT WANTING to be tortured and made sport of by his enemy, asked his armor bearer to kill him. The armor bearer, in a show of moral fidelity and conviction, much like Saul's first armor bearer, refused. In 2 Samuel 1, there will be one who tells David that *HE actually killed Saul*, desiring to curry David's favor, but David had him killed because he said he struck the LORD's anointed. So the armor bearer was *right* to refuse this last order of the king. So in an act of final desperation, Saul decided to take his own life, falling on his sword, with his armor bearer following suit.

This begs at least a statement about suicide. The Bible does not condone the taking of any life, including our own, and qualifies the taking of a life as murder. So suicide is taking the life of an image bearer of God, which is a sin. But suicide is NOT an unforgiveable sin. It DOES signal a place of desperation, hopelessness, and ultimately, a self-focus that leads to a selfish decision. Even a believer in Jesus Christ who is born again can get to a point of desperation and can in a moment of seeming desperation, make a sinful decision to take their life, but that should never be viewed as a viable or affirmed decision. Saul absolutely got to and stayed at a point of **hopelessness, and his decision was indicative of his hardened heart**, and his decision was decidedly selfish. Jonathan fought to the death, but Saul took the easy way out.

But there is something even more here in the text *by what is NOT said*. Saul did NOT cry out to the LORD, He did not seek the LORD while He may be found, did not cry out for forgiveness, or confess his unbelief, but instead held onto his stubbornly hard heart like the captain of a rowboat taking on water in the open ocean as the lifeboat was calling for rescue. Saul went down with his pithy life, unwilling to yield his life to the LORD, even as death was filling his lungs. Now, this did not mean that God would have delivered Him physically, but would have delivered him **spiritually**. This is a cautionary tale for all this morning who are holding onto their own lives and hidden sins stubbornly. There are always opportunities to turn to the LORD, until there are not. Saul's life ended, and he died in his selfishness and hopelessness. **What do we learn here?** This is where we see the book of 1 Samuel speaks from beginning to end with *bookends of hopeless situations*, with one unknown woman dealing with the pain of childlessness and mockery, and a king who had everything. One turned to the LORD in trust, the other to himself in selfishness. One was commended, one was condemned.

Remember Hannah in chapter 1? In a hopeless situation that could have filled her with anxiety, in a distressing circumstance that could have kept her bitter, and a troubled place that could have moved her **away** from the LORD, she instead moved TOWARD Him, in prayer and faith. When God blessed her with

a child, she did not bargain, but freely gave Samuel up to the Lord. Her prayer is the *antithesis* of the life of Saul: **1 Samuel 2:1-10** -

**And Hannah prayed and said,**

“My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation.

<sup>2</sup> **“There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.**

<sup>3</sup> Talk no more so very proudly, **let not arrogance come from your mouth;** for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

<sup>4</sup> The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.

<sup>5</sup> Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

<sup>6</sup> The LORD kills and brings to life;

he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.

<sup>8</sup> He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s, and on them he has set the world.

<sup>9</sup> “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail.

<sup>10</sup> The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven.

**The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.”**

Each was faced with hopelessness, and the response of mind and heart changed everything. Hannah’s heart could easily have become hardened, but she turned TO the God she knew and trusted. *Which of these do you emulate? Are there parts of you that you allow to stay hardened against the LORD? Now is the time to turn, since hardening never stays static but will infect your whole life.*

### **Brutality of a False Gospel Life (8-10)**

*The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. 9 So 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.** 10 They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.*

Saul’s death simply was the picture of a total defeat. Not only did the people of Israel lose the battle, they fled the CITIES of the north, allowing the Philistines to enter in, take up residence, and loot completely. But they were not content with a simple victory, since Israel was no simple enemy. There was a deep-seated hatred in this rivalry, one that went far beyond geography and resources. No, there was a spiritual battle of worldviews and good against evil, and we’ll see a battle of *gospels, just like there is today.*

As the Philistines revisited the battle field, they found the bodies of Saul and his sons, and in an action that can only be described as vial and eliciting venomous retribution, they **cut Saul’s head off** (and most likely those of his sons) and stripped them of their armor. They then did **four distinctive things: 1) They put his armor in the Temple of Ashtaroth**, a key idol of the Philistine people, **2) They put the headless bodies of Saul and his sons on the wall of Beth-shan**, a sign of desecration and public victory (and also a place we will visit in 2025!), **3) They put Saul’s head in the temple of Dagon** (1 Chron. 10:10), which was a place where 40 years earlier the LORD humiliated Dagon when the ark of the covenant rested there

after a Philistine victory (1 Samuel 5:4). Dagon's head and his hands were cut off as God showed his power over the idols of the land. The Philistine memory was long and their anger burned volcanically. Saul's head to them was a sign of cosmic victory, one god over another. **4) They sent messengers throughout the land to carry the "GOOD NEWS" to the house of their idols and to their people** – This is hugely noteworthy as to how the author describes this event. He frames it in the same way as "good news" of the gospel would be framed, news worthy of sharing, spreading, and one that comes from deep conviction. The Philistines wanted all the land to know that THEIR GOD WON, their gospel was the best, and their way was right. This battle of worldviews goes on today, as we look around our country and the world, and reminds us of what we are called to do.

The "Philistine Gospel" is characterized by **idolatry, brutality** (especially on those who are enemies or are deemed enemies), **strife, and a seeking of happiness and meaning apart from the One True God**. The Philistines had to hold onto grudges since there was no concept of forgiveness, restoration, or reconciliation. The "PG" had to rely on their own power, ingenuity, and ability to make life work. This is exactly what we see in our world today, whether it is those trying to seize power politically, militarily, scholastically, or by protesting. This was the true failure of Saul. As king he was to fight against the Philistines militarily, but he was more importantly supposed to show the **good news of following God by being a light to the world around**.

**Isaiah 42:6-7** - *I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

**Isaiah 49:6** - *It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

Saul was supposed to lead Israel to be a light to the world around by offering something better. But he capitulated to his own idol of self, disobeying by distrusting, and turned away from the LORD. This meant that he had nothing to offer that was counter to what idols held out to the Philistines, or Amalekites, or all the other "ites" around. But if we think this was something only for OT Israel, **Acts 13:46-48** reiterates that God's desire to bring light to the Gentiles, or the world around, is STILL the goal for the church today. *What is our role and responsibility to counter the Philistine Gospel around us?* We offer something different than ANY other religion or worldview, because ours is based on the truth of God's word and the person of Jesus Christ. We can act differently because we believe differently. We are not called to BATTLE our enemies but pray for them, not DEFEND ourselves but display the truth. We are NOT HOPELESS in a world turned upside down, but believe in a true King, Lord, and Savior who turns lives right-side up. This is where our hope is found.

### **Fidelity of a Thankful Life (11-13)**

*But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 12 all 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. 13 And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.*

In the midst of the hopeless scene, a group of faithful, thankful servants proved themselves. Forty years earlier, in Saul's high point as king, God worked through him to save the people of **Jabesh Gilead** from

the **Ammonites** (1 Sam. 11). In a show of valiant bravery, a group traversed the nearly 20 mile one-way journey to Beth-shan, took the mutilated bodies of Saul and his sons down, burned them (which was counter to the Law, but brought swift purification), and buried the bones. Even in Saul's life of a hardened heart, God did good things. Even in the midst of total defeat, faithfulness still rules the day, and offers a thread of hope that was to come, as David will come on the scene in full force.

**Conclusion:** Hard-heartedness is all too real, and hopelessness is far too common. When we try to change our hopelessness by changing circumstances, our order is reversed. Saul should and could have cried out in humility, repented freely, and found the freedom of forgiveness, but he chose stubborn selfishness instead. So let me encourage all of us with the words of the writer of Hebrews who gave this cautionary command:

**Hebrews 3:12-14** - *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be **hardened by the deceitfulness of sin**. 14 For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."*

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."*