

Only Visiting This Planet

1 Samuel 31:1–13 (ESV)

The Death of Saul

“¹ 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. ³ 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.

“⁸ 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 Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. ¹¹ 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.”

Introduction

So ends 1 Samuel. Saul and his sons are gone. The throne is empty. David, well loved by Israel, respected by his enemies, has been prepared by God to take the throne of Israel. He will become the most important king not only in Israel, but in the history of the earth. All that happened in first Samuel lead up to David’s great reign.

The reason David’s reign is more important than any other has nothing to do with the amount of land he would conquer, nor his riches, nor even his great wisdom. His son would outdo him in all three. The reason David’s reign matters most is because God chose David to be the father of the human King who would reign forever. God established David’s throne to be not temporary, but eternal.

Early in his reign as king, God sent Nathan to declare this word to David:

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a

*house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. **And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.**”*

(2 Samuel 7:12–16)

David’s house, or family, and his throne, shall be eternal. How can this be? It can be because Mary, the mother of Jesus, would be his granddaughter. Jesus would be his great grandson. Jesus, by dying on the cross for the sins of the world, and by rising from the dead, would become the first man with a body that would live on for eternity. Furthermore, all authority in heaven and earth were given to Him by God. The family of David is eternal because of Jesus. Jesus is the King of all Kings, and will rule the new earth and all things, eternally. The throne will never be taken from David. Jesus, the Son of David will rule forever.

The same could not be said of Saul. Saul’s lost God’s favor, God’s Spirit, and any hope of setting up a royal dynasty.

The Common Place: Death

Saul died. He becomes an after-thought on the field of history.

He had been great in his day. His nation had celebrated him. His enemies had feared him. He had wealth, good looks, power and fame. He had everything that the most ambitious people want the most. In the end, he is chased down by Philistines after watching his three sons die. His body lays dead in the dirt overnight. Then, soldiers find him, strip him, cut his head off, and nail him to a wall.

We could argue that he deserves it. He had been a faithless king. He had disobeyed God. He had mistreated his own family and friends. He had caused the slaughter of many innocent people. It is about time he got what he had coming.

But he was not the only one to die that day. His son, Jonathan, was also slain. He had been a pure-hearted man. He lived as one who trusted God. He had fought on the side of good. He had supported God’s true king, David. What was the reward for his goodness? He was run down by Philistine soldiers and destroyed. Now he is gone.

As David’s son Solomon would write a few decades later:

“The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!”

(Ecclesiastes 2:14–16) (ESV)

And if these two men were not recorded in this Book, we would not even know their names. In fact, there are many who died in that same battle whose names we do not know. Their lives are not even an afterthought. No one knows their names, and no one thinks of them at all. Their lives, valuable in their own eyes, are worth no more than a few grains of dust that sparkled for a moment in the sunlight, and then dropped to the mud. They are forgotten. They are gone.

Two hundred years ago you had relatives who were alive and thriving on the earth. They had smiles and tears. They did evil and the did good. They had dreams, emotions, passions, and dreams. They had skills. They had beauty or they didn't. Today, all their thoughts are dead. You don't know them. You don't know what kind of people they were. All their deeds have faded. No one remembers them. All their days have disappeared as if they had never been. The same will soon be true of you. As the scripture says:

“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.”
(Isaiah 40:6–7) (ESV)

Our lives are last summer's blades of grass when they finish. People posture and compete and think they make themselves great, but they are no more than dirt waiting to fertilize the earth. Many spend all their days fighting to make a life that is happy and safe and good. Through many ups and downs, they do not get their perfect life. Instead, they, and all their hopes and dreams, fade away, fading even from memory.

I am not describing some abstract philosophy. What I am describing is reality. No matter how lofty our thoughts and ideas, all of us will be quickly reduced to compost. As Jonathan the good, and Saul the faithless hung together, fastened to a wall, rotting in the sun, their fates were sealed. If a soldier fought for Saul, or fought for Jonathan, or fought for David, their fates were the same: in victory or defeat, all sunk back into the earth and were forgotten.

How We Should Live

Since these things are true, how should we respond?

Serve the King who overcame death.

Serving Saul or Jonathan might be nice while it lasted, but all the benefits stopped at death. Serving David, no better. But serving Jesus has eternal rewards. Saul was fastened to a wall and died in shame and that was all. Jesus was fastened to a cross, died in shame, but rose in glory. His shame was not His own. He, after all, was righteous. He was more righteous than Jonathan. He was holy and without sin. The shame He bore as He was stripped, beaten, and nailed to the cross was yours. He died to accomplish salvation for you. So, if you follow Him with your life, when you die, like Him, you will find life. You will one day rise as He rose. And He will reign forever, never to die. And you will be there also, with Him.

It is time to follow Jesus. You could follow yourself, but you don't even know where you will be going in a year, nor if you will get there, nor if it's a place worth going. And anyway, you end up back down, eyes closed, facing the bottom of a head stone. You could follow another earthling whose ideas you admire, but he isn't going anywhere either. Instead, follow the King. Jesus.

Live a thankful and good life before God.

God gave Solomon wisdom from heaven. Solomon tackled the issue that all people died and came to nothing. His conclusion? Live a good and simple life before God.

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.” (Ecclesiastes 9:7–10)

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14)

Enjoy whatever days of life you do get. Be thankful to God for all that He has given you. And live this short life fearing God and walking in His ways. Why? Because even though man will forget all that you do in this earth, God will not. He records all things, good or evil. Ever deed, every intention.

Life is short, but it is a gift. Live well.

Weigh all things against eternity.

Larry Norman wrote a song many years ago that had these lyrics:

*“You think it's such a sad thing when you see a fallen king
“Then you find out they're only princes to begin with
“And everybody has to choose whether they will win or lose
“Follow God or sing the blues, and who they're gonna sin with
“What a mess the world is in; I wonder who began it
“Don't ask me, I'm only visiting this planet.”*

This sentiment is right on. You live this short life either as a resident of earth or as one who is only visiting this planet. Which one is you? Peter says that Larry Norman has it right:

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when

they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:11–12)

We are to live a life constantly remembering that we are only strangers here, but the day is coming when the eternal King will return. We live with a light to that day.

Only do things today that you will be proud of when the King returns.

What do you have to change? What do you have to repent of? Your campus pastor will be leading you in prayer to God in a moment. First, I want to give you an update on something we are doing as a church with an eye to the return of the Lord.

NEXT

A year ago we launched an initiative called NEXT. We had come to a point in ministry where it became clear that we were out of resources and out of margin. In order to do more, we called on all of us to be more generous with our giving of earthly wealth towards this common ministry that we all share.

(I realize that there are many people here who were not here a year ago when we began this initiative. You may want a more detailed explanation, and you may have questions. For that reason you should be receiving an invitation to a special meeting just for those who have come to Harvest in the last year. We will share a meal and more information with you there. I hope you will attend.)

For those who have been here since we began the NEXT initiative, I want to give you a brief update of how we are doing a year in.

A year ago, we asked you to help push the boundaries we have in three main areas: We wanted to be able to send more missionaries and gospel workers into the field, we wanted to increase the staffing of our church to build the infrastructure we have and we wanted to improve and expand our facilities. We aimed to do this by essentially doubling what we normally give to Harvest over two years from around \$2 million to a little over \$4 million. Here are the results a year in.

1. Giving

A year into our NEXT initiative, we are mostly on track to reach our overall goal. What that looks like in our cash on hand is this: a year ago, we had a checking account that enabled us to do ministry week to week. Every week we applied the offerings to what was spent and came in just above even. Beyond that, we had 150k in what we called an “emergency fund.” As of our latest figures, we have the following: (these are from March 21)

Checking	\$178,090.22
Emergency Fund	\$180,857.77
Holding Account	\$421,591.05

2. Sending

We had no margin for investing in missions further. But because of your generosity, we have been able to do the following:

- Add a Prism worker.
- Commit to being the sending church for the Halls.
- Help plant Redemption Church in Lower Burrell.

3. Staffing

Our staffing has not gone exactly as we had planned. The launch of Redemption Church cost us a campus pastor and some future leaders. That said, God has blessed us with:

- Drew, the tech guy.
- Carly, the worship leader and administrator.
- Elizabeth Harvey, day-care ministry.
- Still needing a campus pastor, and we'll be looking ahead for another (fifth campus).

4. Structures

- If you have kept in touch with Big Fred's Bytes and weekly announcements you know we have made many improvements to our worship spaces, including the updating of our technical equipment and facility improvements. I'm not going to list them all now.
- We hope to tackle the long overdue updates at the Kittanning campus.
 - Office is central to the campuses and must be updated. Ministry and meeting space is maxed out.
- We have not yet committed to construction starting, but we hope God will do that. Our increased bank accounts have improved our standing with the banks and have also allowed us to hire some architects and builders to evaluate potential upgrades.
 - We would like to create a new worship space for weekend worship (600 seats).
 - Allow us to repurpose the current sanctuary, kitchen, etc.
 - We would like to expand and centralize administrative space.
 - Allow us to also upgrade restrooms (and add more), add a café area.
 - We would like to expand ministry and classroom space.
 - For use in adult education, meetings and other ministry purposes.
- We contacted Nello Construction months ago and began working with them.
 - They were very helpful in initial planning and prototype drawings.
 - We have decided that any building that actually happens will be done with a company from Butler called Thomas Construction.
 - Currently getting bid-ready specs.
- Before we build anything, we will communicate actual drawings, plans, numbers and the rest.
- We do not expect that the NEXT initiative money will fund all these changes, but without NEXT we would not be in position to even discuss these improvements.

5. IT's not about the building — it's about the ministry...

- We have added a Prism worker. Perhaps Hamish's connect card. Easter 40 people raised their hands.