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The End of an Era

1 Samuel 31:1-13

The Thirty-Third Sermon on First Samuel

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In life, whenever we experienced the end of something, there is typically some level of sadness. Even if a loved one dies, who has lived well and we are confident knew the Lord, we are sad because we miss them. When the cycle of a two term President ends, we look back and remember good times and bad. When our favorite sports team or band ends its run of greatness, we long for the glory days. Yet, ends also inevitably lead to a beginning, don't they?

That's what we have here before us at the end of 1 Samuel. I've mentioned before that Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were not divided into first and second books until much later, so that means 1 Samuel 31 really is not the end of a book, but then end of an era that gives way to the beginning of another. 1 Samuel as we call it gives way to 2 Samuel, and that's where we're going next as a church in our morning service next Sunday, Lord willing. As we come to *The End of an Era* with Saul, Notice three things with me:

1. *A Tragic End*
2. *A Promised End*
3. *A Renewing End*

May the Holy Spirit write these words upon the tablets of our hearts!

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A Tragic End

First, the end of Saul's era is *a tragic end*. As we pick up here at verse 1, don't forget what had led up to this point, making his death so tragic. Despite Israel's sinful desire in demanding a king like the nations (ch. 8), the Lord gave them Saul, a handsome and tall man (9:2). He was chosen by God to deliver his people from the Philistines. He was anointed by Samuel. He did not want this honor, as he hid behind the military equipment when Samuel came to proclaim him king (10:20–24). Then he defeated the Ammonites (ch. 11). From then, though, it's been once step closer to death and tragedy in every story.

We see that in several intriguing ways here. The word “fall” is used in this chapter three times: **Saul took his own sword and *fell upon it*** (v. 4), Saul's armor-bearer ***fell upon his sword*** (v. 5), and **when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons *fallen on Mount Gilboa*** (v. 8). Later in 2 Samuel 1:19 and 1:27 it's used again. Why is this important? How does this illustrate the tragedy that's was Saul's life? It links him to Eli, who earlier in chapter 4 “fell” to his death because of his inability to control his sons' using the Ark in battle (4:18). So Saul's fall is linked back to the fall of Eli.

The tragedy of Saul is also seen in comparing the results of his era with the era before him. At the beginning of the book we recall that the Philistines were ruling over and ravaging the Promised Land. Saul, with Jonathan and David's “help,” has been defeating the Philistines and reconquering the Land. But now at the end of Saul's life the Philistines are retaking lands within the Promised

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Land: **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** (v. 7). We're going back to where we started.

The tragedy of going back is also seen in what happens to Saul after his death. Remember back in chapter 5 that after the Philistines captured the Ark they put it in the temple of their god Dagon. Eventually they found Dagon with his head cut off, prostrate before the Ark of the Lord. Like the Lord cut off their god's head, so now the Philistines **cut off [Saul's] head** (v. 9), the leader of the Lord's people. And like the Ark was housed in Dagon's temple, here at the end of Saul's life his weapons are housed in an idols' house again: **They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan** (v. 10).

But what about his actual death? The tragedy of Saul is summed up so sadly in his suicide—his killing himself. This is such a difficult subject emotionally and spiritually, and because it is I need to deal with it with you. There are four suicides in Scripture: Saul mentioned here; Judas, who hanged himself after betraying the Lord (Matt. 27:5); Ahithophel, David's advisor who conspired with David's son, Absalom, against David and afterwards hanged himself (2 Sam. 17:23); and Zimri, who reigned over the northern kingdom of Israel for seven days and killed himself by burning his house down (1 Kgs. 16:18). I want to say this about suicide. Is it a sin? Yes, just like all intentional murder forbidden by the sixth commandment. It

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is the unpardonable sin that if you take your own life in this way you go to hell? No, Scripture never says that. The only unpardonable sin is unbelief. So what does this mean for how we deal with suicide? First, recognize that because of our fallen condition, some people struggle with this just like any other sin. Second, there is hope for the suicidal. If you are struggling this morning or if you know someone who is, please come talk to me or to any other Christian here. Jesus knows your struggle because he became a human being like you and was tempted in every way for you. Jesus offers abundant life and joy for those who come to him in their struggle.

A Promised End

Our second point is much briefer: the end of Saul's era is *a promised end*. Go back to chapter 28. Saul didn't trust the Lord so the Lord rejected him. And in his time of need his only course of action was to consult the forbidden witch at Endor. The Lord miraculously sent Samuel back to Saul to tell him this: "the LORD will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines...The LORD will give the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines" (28:19). And what do we read in our story in verse 1: **Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.** Again, Samuel said to Saul, "and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" (28:19). With me, where? In the grave of death.

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The Lord promised, or better, threatened that Saul and his sons would die. If you are here today and have not given your life to Jesus Christ I need to warn you that God has appointed the day and the hour of your death and after that comes nothing but judgment. To you, brothers and sisters, let me say that this is a wake-up call if you are spiritually slumbering. This is your alarm! Do not hit snooze! Wake up and serve the Lord! The Lord is coming quickly; what do you want him finding you doing? If you have eternal life and know that when you die you will be with the Lord, how are you living today with that knowledge?

A Renewing End

But our story doesn't end in tragedy and warning. Finally, we see here that the end of Saul's era is *a renewing end*. It's always awe-inspiring to see the devastation left by a volcano. But what also fills you with wonder is the new life that comes after. Devastation leads to regeneration. The ashes of death become the soil of new life. Saul leads to David.

You see, the Lord kept his word to cut off Saul and his line. But think of this: if the Lord keeps his word in the judgments he sends, how much more so does he keep his word in the promises he gives? If Saul's death was certain, how much more so the new life of Israel through David? The explicit words and deeds of the Lord here concerning Saul have an implicit thrust forward concerning David.

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As well, what is so fascinating about our narrator's way of writing is that while this is happening to Saul, David was defeating the Amalekites in chapter 30. Remember what I said before about the chronology of the last few chapters. They don't happen one chapter after another. In fact, the narrator rearranges what happened chronologically to make a point theologically. And so the grammar here of verse 1 in Hebrew that is translated as **now the Philistines were fighting against Israel**, is such that it's jumping into the midst of another story. The Holy Spirit is saying, "As Saul was coming to an end, there was a new beginning with David." And while there was grieving and fasting for the next week over the end of Saul (v. 13), joy was on the horizon.

Saul was Israel's "christ," their anointed one. But he died and he did not rise again. Saul's end cried out for a new beginning. And that beginning came in David. But as we will see, we have to always remember as we read of the Lord's mighty deeds in the Old Testament, that all these were just temporary deeds; these were all just partial deeds. Saul, David, Solomon, and the list goes on, all cried out for the Lord himself. And the Lord has come! And the Lord is coming again! Amen.