

# ***“The King is Dead! Long Live the King!”***

**July 18, 2010**

**1 Samuel 31**

**Matthew 27 & 28**

**Romans 8:Selected**

**A Sermon preached by**

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How could something that started out so well, end so poorly? How could a life that once held such promise and hope, end with such tragedy and sorrow? HOW? Who knows! But it happened for Saul, the first king of Israel.

In the beginning, Saul had it all – brains, brawn and beauty. He was tall, dark and handsome. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else in Israel and was a natural born leader. Everyone liked him...and looked UP to him – both literally and figuratively. He was POPULAR...just the kind of person you knew would be a success! When he was younger, he was the kid everybody picked first to be on their basketball team. In fact, it was thought he might even have a promising NBA career ahead of him. But he entered politics instead and got himself picked to be the first KING of Israel!

And for a while, he was an EXCELLENT king...rallying and uniting the people around the idea that Israel really COULD be a nation rather than simply a collection of various tribes and families of people who just happened to be descendants of Abraham. He led the armies of Israel into battle against the Philistines and the Amelikites and the Jebusites and the Hittites and all those other “ite” countries that surrounded his tiny nation and were constantly trying to destroy it.

But then, Saul made the tragic mistake of refusing to obey the Lord. Oh, it was innocent enough, I suppose...and a little archaic when it comes to our current ideas about a loving and forgiving and gracious God. But it was the way God was perceived in Old Testament times.

Saul, you see, had fought against and defeated the Amelikites...which was good. But the problem was, you see, that God, through his prophet Samuel, had told Saul to not only DEFEAT the Amelikites, but to completely, utterly DESTROY them...killing every man, woman and child – ALL their sheep...ALL their cattle...ALL their donkeys and camels...and to not leave a SINGLE THING alive – all as God’s punishment for the Amelikites opposing the Israelites when God was bringing them into the Promised Land five generations before.

It was a harsh judgment, to be sure, but Saul carried it out, none-the-less. EXCEPT that in the process of killing all of the Amelikites and all their animals, Saul SPARED the life of Agag, the king, taking him captive...and killed ONLY the animals that were sick and old...capturing the rest of them in order to, supposedly, sacrifice them to the Lord.

Well, God was FURIOUS with Saul because Saul had not obeyed the Lord’s command. So through his prophet Samuel, God REJECTED Saul as king.

*“Which does the Lord prefer,” Samuel asked of Saul, “obedience or offering and sacrifice? It is better to OBEY God than to offer the BEST of sacrifices! Rebellion against the Lord is as bad as witchcraft (which, by the way, Saul ALSO engaged in when he consulted the witches of Endor in an effort to try and figure out how to fight the Philistines!) and arrogance is as sinful as idolatry. Now, because you have rejected the Lord’s command, HE has rejected YOU as king. The Lord will now anoint a NEW king...a man after God’s own heart...to take your place!”*

Well, from that moment on, Saul's life began to take a downhill slide. He soon ran up against a giant named Goliath, and like the rest of his men, sat trembling in his boots and wringing his hands about having to fight him...until that is, along came a shepherd boy named David...a man after God's own heart...who, though Saul didn't know it, Samuel had ALREADY anointed to be Saul's successor. Well David, the shepherd boy destined to be king, bravely faced the giant and cut him down to size and immediately became the hero of all Israel.

But then INSANE JEALOUSY became a way of life for Saul and his life soon became a sad and sorry affair. And he made himself and everyone else MISERABLE in the process. He lost his ability to rule wisely. He could no longer fight effectively. The kingdom of Israel began to crumble around him. Yet all he could think about was hunting David like an animal and destroying him. For 10 long years, Saul pursued David, but was never able to capture him, because, as the scriptures tell us, "*God did not deliver David into Saul's hand.*" But in the meantime, Israel's enemies were growing stronger and stronger.

Finally, Saul had to face reality and deal with the Philistine who were once again attacking his nation. Weakened mentally, emotionally and physically...and with his troops HARDLY prepared for battle...Saul went to face the Philistines on Mt. Gilboa. And there's where we find the pathetic tragedy of Saul's demise...the sad ending of his once so promising life. Listen to how the last chapter of 1 Samuel describes it:

*So the Israelites fought a battle against the Philistines on Mt. Gilboa.*

*Many Israelites were killed there, and the rest of them, including King Saul and his sons, fled. But the Philistines caught up with them and killed three of Saul's sons – Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchishua. The fighting was very heavy around Saul, and he himself was hit by enemy arrows and badly wounded. He said to the young man carrying his weapons, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that these godless Philistines won't be able to have the satisfaction of gloating over me before they kill me." But the young man was too terrified to strike the king. So Saul too his own sword and threw himself on it. And thus, the King died...*

Oh, but lest you think that's the end of the tragedy, let me assure you it is NOT! The next scene is even worse! The bloodthirsty Philistines then move in to brutally finish off any of the enemy who might still be alive and strip them of their weapons and any other spoils of war they might be able to carry off. And when they see the dead King Saul lying there,

*they cut off Saul's head, stripped him of his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land to tell the good news to their idols and their people. Then they put Saul's weapons in the temple of the goddess Astarte and they nailed the headless bodies of Saul and his three sons to the walls of the city of Bet Shean.*

Saul, the man who once knew the joys and blessings of the kingdom...the man who was the representative of God to the chosen people...the man who cared tremendously about his image before the people...is now dead. His body his mutilated...his severed head carried from place to place in mocking disdain...his body nailed to the city walls. What a horrible and tragic scene. When the Israelites heard what had happened to their king, they were completely demoralized, dejected and defeated. And the Philistines came in and took over the land of Israel. The Promised Land was lost. The dream was dead. All hope was gone. And so ends the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel.

And yet...AND YET...here's the thing to remember...though Saul and dead and Israel was defeated and all seemed lost...God had NOT abandoned his people! God's salvation still awaited! God's victory was still to come! There was still one waiting in the wings would snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat. God's salvation would come in the form of DAVID, who, because he was "a man after God's own heart" could become a far GREATER king than Saul ever DREAMED of being and bring Israel far greater GLORY than anyone ever thought possible. God's representative...the King...may have been dead. But GOD was not dead. God's way would YET win out. The King is dead...LONG LIVE THE KING!

A thousand years later, God's way in the world once again seemed defeated. The one in whom the people had placed their hopes and dreams for a better day...the newly hoped for "king of

the Jews” was dead...his body not hung upon the walls of Bet Shean, but upon a cross outside the walls of the city his ancestor David had founded 10 centuries before. He was thought by some to be the long awaited Messiah...the one who would throw off the oppression of another conquering power and once again restore the fortunes of their once great land. He had taught...loved...healed...forgiven...accepted...comforted...shown mercy...offered compassion...given hope...restored confidence...dared to dream dreams. And once again, the enemies of God killed him...piercing him through with a spear...even as he hung dying on the worst form of torture they could possibly imagine. A sadistic, bloodthirsty lots, those Romans. And when his followers saw and heard what had happened to their king and master, they, like the Israelites a millennium before, were demoralized...dejected...defeated.

But once again, God REFUSED to be defeated! God REFUSED to abandon God’s people. God’s salvation still awaited! What was thought to be the defeat of not only hopes and dreams, but LIFE ITSELF, on the harsh cruelty of the cross and in the stark reality of a cold, dark tomb became the very tools God used to bring about the victory! God RAISED the one who was dead to life...and THROUGH HIM...offered life to ALL who would receive him as the Lord and Savior of THEIR lives. No GOD was not dead. God’s way would YET win out. The King is dead...LONG LIVE THE KING!

Two thousand years hence, there are surely times in OUR lives today when WE TOO feel utterly demoralized...dejected...defeated – lost...alone...and with hope. The enemy simply becomes too strong for us and we are overrun. Maybe it’s the loss of a beloved loved one...the diagnosis of an illness for which there seems no cure...the affects of age which no amount of doctoring can overcome. Perhaps it’s the breakup of a treasured relationship we thought would last forever. Maybe it’s the disappointment of a lost job...a lost friend...a lost dream. Or maybe it is some particularly difficult time through which you are walking...as if you are making your way through the valley of the shadow of death with little hope of ever finding your way out. WhatEVER it is, WE TOO know the feeling of being defeated...demoralized...dejected.

But as has ALWAYS been the case throughout God’s dealings with God’s people...God DOES NOT abandon us. Even as God was with Israel to offer new hope in the form of David after Saul was killed...even as God was with Jesus’ followers after Jesus death to offer them new life in Christ’s resurrection...SO ALSO is God with US...even when the enemies of life overtake us and WE TOO feel defeated and destroyed. God is HERE to give us comfort and strength...hope and joy...compassion and love. We are NOT left alone in our despair. God COME to us...both through the power of the Holy Spirit...AND through the strength of God’s PEOPLE (“*Angels among us!*” as Aaron Taylor sang so beautifully about last Sunday!) who stand beside us and with us in our time of need...and who, sometimes, hold us up and keep us going when we simply canNOT stand alone. There is NEVER a time and NEVER a circumstance – no matter HOW POWERFUL the enemy...no matter HOW DARK the night...no matter HOW TERRIBLE the defeat – when God is not with us. As David, the Psalmist, himself wrote in the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

*No matter what may happen...*

*No matter how much our world may seem to be falling apart around us...*

*No matter how much the foundations of our lives may be crumbling under our feet...*

*The Lord our God is with us!*

*The God of Jacob...and Saul...and David...and Jesus is our refuge and our strength...  
our promise and our hope!*

The Apostle Paul, who was ALSO well acquainted with disappointment and defeat, echoed the same sure faith and certain confidence when he wrote to the often persecuted...often oppressed...often defeated church at Rome – that group of struggling Christians who knew their share of hopelessness and despair:

*What then can we say? If GOD is for us, who can EVER be against us?*

*Who shall separate us from the love of God? Can trouble do it...or hardship...*

*or despair...or defeat...or disease...or even death? NO! In ALL of these things, WE*

*have the victory through him who loves us! For I am sure...convinced...ABSOUTELY POSITIVE...that NOTHING...NOTHING we face in life can EVER separate us from the love of God as that love has come to each and every ONE of us through Christ Jesus, our Lord!*

Oh, the King may be dead...but LONG LIVE THE KING!

When I was a kid and would hear that expression in a movie or on television or something, I would often wonder what it mean. One day, when I got a little older, my dad explained to me that it was an expression of faith and confidence and hope that was used when the king or the leader of a country would die and a new king or leader would be chosen to replace him. Yes, the king was dead. But the people were NOT without hope, for a new king had been crowned. So long live the king!

How appropriate an expression for the Israelite people when King Saul, their first king, died. Yes, the king was dead. But the situation was NOT without hope, not by a long shot! GOD was still with them. And waiting in the wings was God's salvation...God's hope. King David had been chosen and anointed and was God's answer to their despair. So long live the king!

So also is the expression appropriate anytime WE, as God's people, face disappointment, defeat and despair. The king may be dead...the battle may be lost...the hope may seem to have vanished...the victory may seem like a far off dream. BUT ALL IS NOT LOST! GOD is in control! And GOD is with us ALWAYS!

**REMEMBER** that! And from that sure and certain assurance, draw comfort and strength and hope and joy for the living of your days...both now and forever more!

The King is dead! Long live the King!

Amen!

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