

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 9/9/'18) **"HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN!"** (1 Samuel 27-31)

Introduction Do you like happy endings? I do, but not if they don't fit what has gone before. This morning we come to the end of 1 Samuel, and the end of the story of Israel's first king, and I'm afraid it's not a happy ending. Nor would a happy ending have fitted. It wouldn't have fitted historical accuracy, nor would it have fitted the trajectory of Saul's life. Characteristically, the Bible requires us to face the unpalatable truth of Saul's death. And, I believe, it offers us the opportunity to learn from it. But it also shows us that there is a place for showing respect for the dead. And a place for mourning the dead, even when their lives give us little reason for glad remembrance.

Learning from Saul's Tragic End: Part One (1 Samuel 28:3-25) The first few verses of this passage briefly describe the difficult situation in which Saul finds himself. **Read 28:3-6.** Saul here, as often before, faces the threat of the Philistines. And as often before, he is looking for guidance concerning what he should do. But this time this guidance is not forthcoming. Once he would have turned to Samuel, but Samuel is dead. So he thinks of God's guidance through dreams, but no dream is given. He also thinks of the Urim and Thummim. We don't know much about these, but they were clearly objects used to ascertain God's will, probably by a process of casting of lots. It seems that a question was asked, which could be answered with "yes" or "no", or receive no answer. And here Saul receives no answer. There was also the possibility of guidance by a prophet. But no prophet spoke for God, or at least none whom Saul trusted. Facing this dilemma, Saul seems to have regretted his earlier action of expelling the mediums from the land. When he expelled them, Saul no doubt believed that his action would please God, but now God seems to be silent, and Saul feels differently. He found what many of us have found, that it is easy to act on the basis of godly principle when all is well, but in hard times it is tempting to abandon principle and do whatever we think will work. So Saul in desperation looks for the very kind of person whom he had driven out of Israel, for a medium who will consult the dead. His attendants tell him that they know of such a woman at Endor, and they take him to her. Saul asks her to bring up the spirit of Samuel. He can't have the living Samuel, so he hopes that the dead Samuel will guide him. And the medium then sees an old man in a robe, and Saul is convinced that it is Samuel. The narrator is not interested in the questions which a modern reader wants to ask about what exactly is happening. We're not told whether the medium is genuinely able to bring up the spirits of the dead, or whether God does something here beyond her ability, although her crying out at the top of her voice might suggest that she is surprised by what happens. Nor does the narrator state categorically that this really is Samuel, although Saul is clearly convinced, and this is not called into question. What the narrator is interested in is the exchange between Saul and Samuel. **Read 28:15-19.** Saul perceives that God has withdrawn his favour from him, but he shows no awareness of the reason for this, which is to be found in his own disobedience. He had presumably hoped for an encouraging message from God, but he hears only final words of judgment. There is no encouragement for Saul, because he has not repented of his disobedience. The passage ends with an account of the meal which Saul and his attendants shared with the medium. This meal dramatizes the fact that Saul, in his desperation, has entered into close association with someone whose way of life is contrary to God's declared will.

Learning from Saul's Tragic End: Part Two (1 Samuel 31:1-7) I now intend to move directly to the end of Saul's story. But I should note in passing that the two intervening chapters focus on David, and his experience of God's favour stands in contrast with the experience of Saul. Here is the record of Saul's death. **Read 31:1-7.** Saul's story began so well. He was an impressive figure, and Samuel declared him to be God's choice to be Israel's first king. He even began his reign well, enjoying victory and showing generosity toward his opponents. But he did not continue well. He failed to obey God, and looked for alternatives to such obedience. This culminated, as we have seen this morning, in his turning to a medium for guidance, thus going against God's will and even his own actions in God's name. Not only does his life end in defeat by the Philistines, but it also ends in suicide and in disaster for the people whose king he has been. Saul has failed terribly, not because he was not a gifted man and effective military leader, but because he was not thoroughly committed to being God's man and God's leader. We need to remember Saul whenever we are tempted to turn aside from God's way, and choose a way which looks easier or more in line with our own ideas of success. But this is not the last word about Saul, either in the biblical record or in my reflection on that record. I want to finish by looking at several responses to the death of Saul.

Responses to Saul's Tragic End: Part One (1 Samuel 31:8-13) First we have the Philistines. **Read 31:8-10.** The Philistines show neither mercy nor respect. This was not remarkable in ancient warfare, nor is it in much modern warfare. Ruthless hostility toward living enemies is often carried through toward the dead, and the bodies of dead leaders are treated with disrespect in order to humiliate and intimidate their surviving followers. But the fact that it is unremarkable doesn't make it right. I believe that it has been said that one measure of a civilisation is how it treats its dead. If so, surely a higher measure is how it treats dead enemies. At a more personal level, it speaks to us about how we should treat not only the dead, including the dead who have ended badly, but about how we should treat the living who are guilty of behaving badly. **Read Galatians 6:1.** This is the Christian standard. Second, we have the people of Jabesh Gilead. **Read 31:11-13.** These people don't simply shake their heads over the behaviour of the Philistines, and congratulate themselves on being superior to them. They take action to reverse the disrespect of the Philistines, and to honour both Saul and his sons in death. Of course, they would have faced a harder test if a Philistine king had fallen into their hands. One test for us as Christians is again how we treat living people whom we don't like. Or who have wronged us. At the level of society, are we prepared to show respect and good will toward groups of people who make us uncomfortable or with whom we disagree? It is fine to disagree, but Christians must do so with respect and in love. If not, how can we hope to introduce such people to Jesus Christ?

Responses to Saul's Tragic End: Part Two (2 Samuel 1) Finally, we have the response of David, as recorded in the first chapter of 2 Samuel. As I mentioned in our first week on 1 Samuel, 1 and 2 Samuel were originally a single book, so there is no sharp break between 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1. In 2 Samuel 1 we are provided with three windows into David's response to Saul's death. First we have the report of Saul's death by an Amalekite, and David's reaction to his report. The Amalekite comes bearing Saul's crown and arm band, and claims to have killed Saul, although at his own request. In the light of the previous chapter,

his version of events is probably not entirely accurate, but it reveals his expectation that David will be pleased by his claim. Instead, David condemns the man for having done what he himself refrained from doing, for having raised his hand against the LORD's anointed, and he executes him. So David publicly refuses to praise his enemy's killer. But there is more than this. Before condemning the Amalekite, David responds in another way to the news of Saul's death. **Read 1:11-12.** David, along with his men, immediately mourns in a fashion normal in their culture. Then this chapter ends with David's more formal mourning for Saul and Jonathan, with a lament composed to be performed and preserved. This was read aloud earlier in our service. So what can we take from this chapter of Scripture? I believe that it says to us that mourning is important, both informal mourning and more structured public mourning. It is good for us to mourn over the death of those who are important to us, and it is good for us to share in the mourning of others. Moreover, it is not only the admirable and successful for whom we should mourn. David mourned for Saul as well as for Jonathan, and we can fitly mourn for those whose lives have ended badly as well as for those whose lives have ended well. And when a faithful follower of Jesus dies well, we have cause to celebrate, but such celebration should not make us feel inhibited from mourning. It is healthy to give expression to our sense of loss, and good to stand with others in their loss.