

## Week 16: *The Contrast Continues: Saul's Death*

### Hook



**Main Point: A godly person shows respect even to those who mistreat them.**

In today's lesson, David learns of King Saul's passing and he has some choice words about the man – shockingly, they are all kind. It's hard to paint Saul in a positive light, but David finds a way.

Break into small groups and choose one of the characters from the list below. Take a few minutes as a group to build a case as to why their character is the real hero of the movie in which they appear. Choose a class member to be the judge, and allow each group 45 seconds or less to present their argument. Task the judge with determining who made the most convincing pitch.

Scar from *The Lion King*

Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*

The hunter from *Bambi*

Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*

Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*

Cruella Deville from *101 Dalmatians*

**RECAP:** In this section of our study (weeks 8–17), David was still the run from Saul. It's a long period in our study and in the text because it was a long period in David's life—eight years. The text will continue to contrast Saul and David, showing David's integrity and trust in the Lord. For the last few weeks, the lessons have alternated between David's story and Saul's story leading up to this battle between the Israelites and the Philistines. We saw David navigating how to remain loyal to his covenant with the Philistine king while remaining faithful to God, while Saul spiraled further into evil out of fear of the Philistines and a lack of trust in God. This week, we will finally see the deaths of Saul and his sons, including Jonathan.

It is during this time that David wrote most of the psalms that are labeled in relation to particular events in his life (Psalm 56, 34, 57, 142, 52, 63, 54). Other psalms may have been written during this time as well, but they are not specifically labeled as such. This season of David's life, particularly, taught him to lean on God as his refuge and fortress.

## **Week 16: David: The Contrast Continues: Saul's Death**

### **Book**

**Main Point: A godly person shows respect even to those who mistreat them.**

#### **1 Samuel 31:1–13 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Saul finally died in fear just as he had lived in fear.

**Q: What was Saul afraid would happen to him if the Philistines got to him?**

**Q: Why was Saul's armor-bearer too frightened to do what Saul asked of him?**

For the last few chapters, the story has alternated between what was happening with David and what was happening with Saul. In the last lesson, David was sent away from the battle, back home to Ziklag, where he found that his city had been attacked. The story now returns to the battle David had left. This was a battle between the Israelites and the Philistines but not just one army against another; it was the one Israelite army against all the Philistine armies combined. The story doesn't share any details of the battle. In fact, it starts at the end, with the Israelites fleeing the Philistines. Beginning the story this way gives us a sense that the battle was over before it even began, that the Israelites never really stood a chance.

The battle was fought in the Jezreel Valley, northwest of Mount Gilboa. The Israelites were massively outnumbered, and the Philistines had greater technology, including iron chariots. The Israelite forces gave up and fled up into Mount Gilboa, going uphill where the chariots would have a harder time maneuvering. But the Philistine soldiers followed and slaughtered them on Mount Gilboa. The text specifically tells us that Saul's three sons, including David's close friend, Jonathan, were struck down by the Philistines. Then the army focused on pursuing Saul himself. The text specifies that the archers went after him; the bow was the ideal weapon to use against a fleeing army.<sup>1</sup>

Some translations say Saul was "badly wounded" by the archers, and others say he "quaked with fear" of the archers, based on two Hebrew words that have the same consonants, but different vowels. Either way, the focus is on Saul's fear of what the Philistines would do if they found him alive. Saul's fear was a recurring theme throughout his life. He based most of his decisions on fear – to his own demise. In most of the stories, Saul's fear was based on his lack of trust in God, but in this situation, ironically, he was finally trusting what God had told him earlier through Samuel, that he and his sons would die in that very battle (1 Samuel 28:18–19).

Saul asked his armor-bearer to kill him so the Philistines would not be able to do it and mistreat his body. He may have meant torturing him before killing him, but most likely, because of the order of the sentence ("thrust me through, and [then] mistreat me"), he was trying to prevent what actually did end up happening to his body (31:9–10). Saul's

hope was that his armor-bearer would kill him and bury his body in a respectful way, but his armor-bearer was also greatly afraid and refused, so Saul killed himself. But instead of taking Saul's body off to bury it, the armor-bearer also killed himself, leaving them all vulnerable to the Philistines. Leaving a corpse unburied was a horror in the ancient world, but Saul's body was also disfigured and dishonored even more by being decapitated and then displayed on the wall of their city. Putting his armor in the temple of their god would have symbolized their belief that their god was stronger than Israel's God, since they had won the battle. But God had already proven that belief wrong when He supernaturally knocked over the idol of Dagon when the ark of the covenant was in their temple (1 Samuel 5:1–5).<sup>2</sup>

Jabesh-gilead was the town Saul had rescued from Nahash the Ammonite at the beginning of his career (11:1–11). They also had a family connection to Saul's tribe of Benjamin. Going under cover of night to rescue the corpses would have been a very dangerous mission, but the valiant men of that city braved it because of their loyalty to Saul.<sup>3</sup> Cremation was not a common practice of the Israelites, but it was used because the bodies had already started to rot.<sup>4</sup>

So Saul reached a sad and dishonorable end, and his noble son, Jonathan, with him. Saul's story is a sad one, but it shows us what happens when a leader operates out of fear instead of trusting God. This was Israel's first king after the theocracy became a monarchy, but now God would show them what could happen when a man after His own heart became king. The great failure of Saul's leadership set up a strong contrast to the success (though not perfection!) of David's reign.

**Q: Why do you think the Bible includes stories of people with serious moral failures, lack of trust, and even people whose lives ended in ruin? How can these stories encourage us? What can they teach us? What do they tell us about God?**

**Q: What have you learned about fear and trust through these lessons? How is God speaking to you about trusting Him more?**

## **2 Samuel 1:1–16 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** David honored Saul even though Saul had treated him so badly.

**Q: How was this messenger's version of Saul's death different from the account in 1 Samuel 31?**

**Q: How is David's interaction with the messenger related to his sparing Saul's life on an earlier occasion?**

In our Christian Bibles, this story is the beginning of the book of 2 Samuel, but in the original Hebrew Bible, 1 and 2 Samuel are a single book. The Christian Bible separates the story here to make the first book the story of Saul's reign and the second book the

story of David's reign. Though it's the opening story of 2 Samuel, this story is really a continuation of 1 Samuel, and it's meant to be read this way. The story flips back to David, back in Ziklag, after he had struck down the Amalekites for attacking his city.

The story opens with a messenger coming to tell David about Saul's death. It's significant to notice that this messenger was an Amalekite, the very people David had just destroyed. His version of events is very different from the story of the previous chapter, which some scholars think means the book of Samuel was compiled from several different sources with conflicting accounts of events, but it is much more likely that this Amalekite messenger was just lying to David. Now that Saul and Jonathan were dead, this man assumed David would become the new king and thought taking credit for killing Saul would put him in David's favor.<sup>5</sup>

But his story was suspect. He just "happened" to stumble upon Saul leaning on his spear but not yet dead? The fact that he had Saul's crown and armlet means he probably found Saul's body after he had killed himself but before the Philistines found it the next day (1 Samuel 31:8). But instead of burying Saul's body out of respect like he should have, he saw an opportunity for himself, grabbed the crown and armlet, and took off to report the news to David, hoping to get some sort of reward. But he didn't realize David would not be happy to hear he had killed Saul.<sup>6</sup>

His lie backfired and David had him executed for putting a hand against "the Lord's anointed," using the same language he had used when he refused to kill Saul, even when his advisors thought the opportunity to do so must have been God's delivering Saul into his hand. This reaction reemphasizes the fact that David would not ascend to the throne through disloyalty or rebellion against God's chosen king and further solidified his identity as a man after God's own heart. The punishment may seem harsh to modern readers, but David's words that the messenger's blood was on his own head and that his own testimony betrayed him means David was only carrying out the appropriate punishment – execution – for killing the Lord's anointed (Joshua 2:19; 1 Kings 2:32). Even though Saul had tried to kill him many times, David honored Saul by executing the one who claimed to have killed him. But David's loyalty to Saul wasn't really about Saul; it was about his loyalty to God and his trust in God's plan and timing.<sup>7</sup>

**Q: How can we have consistent, longsuffering loyalty to God and patience for His timing and His plan to come to fruition?**

**Q: In what ways is God calling you to show honor and loyalty to Him in your life?**

## **2 Samuel 1:17–27 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** David mourned for Saul even though Saul had mistreated him.

**Q: How is David's description of Saul in this lament different from what we have seen?**

As readers of this account, we have known about David's great musical skill since he first came to the palace to play for Saul in 1 Samuel 16, but this is the first time we have seen his skill as a songwriter. The text says this song is recorded in the Book of Jashar ("the upright one"), which was a non-biblical collection of Hebrew military poetry, songs and possibly other sayings that would have been familiar to the original readers. It is also mentioned in the short poem in Joshua 10:12–13 that the Book of the Upright contained things that were taught to the people (1:18).<sup>8</sup>

This song reveals a deep, personal love for Jonathan, as we would expect, but also an authentic love and respect for Saul. It paints an idealized picture of Saul's kingship (1:22) and Saul and Jonathan's friendship (1:23). But that's what eulogies typically do, isn't it? When we speak at someone's funeral, we tend to paint a rosy picture. But even with the idealism, we get a sense that David was authentically lamenting Saul's death. He loved Jonathan, and they had dreamed of ruling Israel together (1 Samuel 23:16–18). But he had also authentically loved Saul as a father figure and never wanted things to end the way they did. David honored the Lord's anointed with a song that the people of Judah would learn and sing for generations to come. With all his faults, Saul was the first king of Israel and should be commemorated in Israel's history.

David used beautiful poetic imagery to paint an idealized image of Saul and Jonathan even though this very book tells us the truth about who Saul was and what he did. David wasn't whitewashing history – the true account was also being recorded. He was eulogizing someone he loved and respected as the Lord's anointed. David called Saul and Jonathan "Israel's glory" (1:19) and repeatedly called them "the mighty" (1:19, 21, 22, 25, 27). He exaggerated their speed and strength – swifter than eagles and stronger than lions (1:23) – their success, and the wealth Saul brought to Israel (1:22, 24), but it is true that Israel had great success under Saul. He won many battles and expanded their territory. They gained wealth, power and land during his reign, though not as much as they could have had if he had listened to God's direction.

Even with all he had been through with Saul, David chose to honor him with a glowing eulogy. He didn't jump at the chance to finally take the throne for which he had waited so long, a throne he was promised by God as a young lad. Instead, he took the time to properly honor Saul even though many of his friends and allies may have said Saul didn't really deserve it. Even in his final treatment of Saul, David remained a loyal subject, above all reproach in his honor of Saul. No one would be able to accuse him of doing anything underhanded to gain the throne. He would assume the throne only with integrity and honor in the Lord's timing.

**Q: How does David's kindness to Saul make you feel? Does it feel unfair or unhealthy to you? What advice would you give to a friend who was treated this way by his father-in-law?**

**Q: How does Jesus tell us to treat those who mistreat us? (Think about the specific wording of His teachings.) How can we love those who persecute us without allowing ourselves or our children to be in toxic situations?**

**Q: How is God calling you to love difficult people in your life? How can you do that in humility and service, like Jesus, while keeping healthy boundaries?**

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### **Took**

**Main Point: A godly person shows respect even to those who mistreat them.**

The first patent for a wheeled suitcase was filed in 1970 by American tourist Bernard Sadow. He came up with the idea as he was lugging his bags through customs while vacationing in Aruba. It was a simple design; four casters and a strap for pulling. In 1987 Robert Plath, Northwest Airlines pilot, took the idea to another level. He positioned his luggage upright, added to wheels to the bottom and a collapsible handle at the top, and thus the first Rollaboard suitcase was born.<sup>9</sup>

What a revolution! Traveling with luggage was cumbersome for all of history until someone decided that things should change. The solution seems so clear now.

For most of us, it's difficult to behave lovingly toward someone who has wronged us. We'll get hurt, vent to friends and family, and even perhaps find a way to get even. This fleshly pattern drains those around us, often compounds our problems and provides no kind of Christian witness. But that's just the way life is.

However, imagine a life in which you didn't simply respond emotionally when you're slighted. Think about what stability that would bring to your work, marriage and parenting. It could be a gamechanger for you! But how does a revolution like that happen in your life?

For a believer, the answer is as simple as casters on a suitcase – the power of the Holy Spirit at work within you will produce self-control. Self-control is the last Fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5 and is a quality that is attainable through the work of God in you.

**Q: What are the benefits of self-control when enduring unkind treatment?**

**Q: If the Holy Spirit is the One to produce self-control in your life, what role do you play in the process?**

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** In what ways do you struggle with knowing how to relate to people who mistreat you? Think through Jesus' teachings and His example of how He treated those who abused and mistreated Him. Think about specific people in your life. How is God calling

you to love them without allowing them to hurt you? What would it look like for you to love them the way Jesus loves you? What boundaries do you need to set for yourself?

**PRAY** for God to give you a heart like His for those who do not treat you with the kindness and respect you deserve. Pray for Him to give you love for your enemies and wisdom about how to relate to people with healthy boundaries.

**ACT:** Love your enemies. Choose one person in your life who has been especially difficult to love. Ask God how He wants you to reach out to them in love. You may need to love them by praying for them from afar and not actually interacting with them. Or maybe He will direct you to reach out in forgiveness and reconciliation. Or something in between. Whatever God calls you to do, do it this week.

**NEXT TIME in *The Life of David*:** Next week, we'll finally move out of this period of David's being on the run from Saul and see him take the first step toward becoming king of all Israel, being crowned king of Judah.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

<sup>2</sup> John H. Walton, Victory H. Matthews, Mark Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Westmont, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1–2 Samuel, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

<sup>7</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> <https://invention.si.edu/roll-aboard>