

“Your Splendour Lies Slain”

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Continuing a series *A King for God's People*

1st Samuel 31:1 – 2nd Samuel 1:27

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You can see the Scripture reading by clicking [here](#).

All good things must come to an end.¹ Bad things too. Also, the not-so-clear, shades-of-gray, bit-of-good and bit-of-bad things that are most things, and people. Everything and everyone ends. Like King Saul.

We've been looking at this story, *A King for God's People*. Israel wanted a king, because everyone else had a king. What would your mother have said to that sort of argument? God knows what mom knew. “Everyone” does not make it right. Besides, God does not call God's People to be like everyone else. But they insisted. So God gave them King Saul.

Saul wasn't all bad. He did fall into a bad habit, however, of doing things his way, not God's. He became paranoid and delusional. (Power does things to you!) Especially about Dave his top general, who had medals across his chest, whose Twitter account was bursting with followers, and who had the love of both Saul's daughter Michal and his son Jonathan.

Saul grew convinced Dave was out to get him (though he wasn't). Dave had to run for his life. Others came with him. But even with his own private militia, Dave spent his time hiding from Saul, not fighting him. Dave would not harm his king.

While all this was happening, Israel was being mortally threatened by the Philistines. Instead of that, though, everyone was consumed by the scandals and strife flowing from their unstable leader. (Sound familiar?)

II

It got so bad, Dave actually went to the Philistines — the enemy — for protection. Dave showed up in Gath — yes, Goliath's hometown — asking for shelter. Instead of killing Dave on the spot, they let him stay! Eventually he built nice place down in Ziklag along with his men and their families.

Eventually, the Philistine armies marched up along the coast. They headed for the Jezreel valley. It connects the lowlands along the coast with the valley of the Jordan River inland. If they held the Jezreel valley, the Philistines could then sweep down and squeeze the Israelites in the middle. It was a big threat!

¹ This phrase probably originated from Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, written in the late 14th century. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troilus_and_Criseyde

Dave offered to help . . . his new Philistine friends! Against his own Israel! But the Philistines made him stay back to Ziklag. Which was a good thing.

Saul hustled his army to meet the threat. It was bad! The Philistine army was massive. It had chariots, the battle tanks of the ancient world, which gave it a huge advantage on the open plain. That was scary enough. Then a psychic told Saul that the next morning would be his last.²

Give him credit for courage. He still went into battle, fighting to the end. Retreating up Mount Gilboa, his forces in flight, his sons — including Jonathan! —dead around him, Saul finished himself off with his own sword.

The splendour of Israel lay slain. The king for God's people was dead. Jonathan his heir was dead. Israel's armies were running away. And Dave was still far away in Ziklag.

III

So that's Saul, finished. He had some victories. His main job, however, was dealing with the Philistines, yet things were worse than ever. Israel's position was precarious. His greatest asset, Dave, Saul had turned against. Doing that, he had divided the people. Saul himself was divided against God: sometimes faithful, sometimes not.

The job of king was too big for Saul. He was out of his depth, in skill, character, and wisdom. Maybe the job itself was the problem. How could he be a king like all other kings — that's what his people wanted — when his people was unlike any other? Israel already had a ruler. They were God's People. God had created, crafted and called them to be different, to give themselves completely to God and God's ways, so that from them could spread faithfulness to the whole world. How can someone else rule — a king like Saul — when God is sovereign? There is a built-in contradiction in this whole idea of a king for God's people. Saul couldn't handle it, and in many ways it destroyed him.

But Dave, waiting down in Ziklag. . .? We know where this is leading. Saul has been keeping the throne warm until Dave's turn. Much earlier in the story, we learned that God has chosen Dave! (Then again, God also chose Saul, so don't assume Dave will work out.) Still, the page is ready to turn.

In Ziklag, Dave has no idea what has happened to Saul. He doesn't know about his dear friend Jonathan, either. He does know that his days of hiding and running are over, that the path is clear for him to return home, take the throne and embrace his God-given destiny.

² Saul sought wisdom from God, but heard nothing. So in disguise, he paid a visit to a woman in the village of Endor who, apparently, could communicate with the dead. Endor had remained Canaanite after Israel came into the land, and this sort of divination was part of Canaanite spirituality. However, Saul had banned such things, realizing that they go against the ways of God. Still, in his moment of desperate he turned to this woman in Endor. See the account in 1st Samuel 28:3-25.

Imagine when Dave finds out!

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same. They mourned and wept, and fasted until evening for Saul and for his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. . . . David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said:

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!

Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,
the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

You mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
nor the sword of Saul return empty.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
In life and in death they were not divided;
they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you with crimson, in luxury,
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

IV

When he finds out, what does Dave do?

He falls apart. And he leads his people in an outpouring of sorrow.

He is broken for Jonathan, his dearest friend, soul-mate and ally.

And, Dave is broken for Saul. Yes, Saul! Saul, who was out to get him. Saul, who schemed to destroy him. Saul, to whom Dave had given himself loyally. Saul, who repaid Dave with terror. Dave is not putting on a show, faking tears for the press. He is broken. Dave grieves, heavy and hard, for Saul.

We see no rush to “move on.” Dave does not scramble to turn the page . . . to his page. Dave won't let anyone cry, “The king is dead! Long life the king!” When someone moves to rush the crown onto his head, Dave violently puts a stop to it.³

Dave's grief is personal, especially for Jonathan. His grief is also national. The splendour of Israel lay slain. The nation must grieve before anything new can truly begin.

V

This is a big year for Canada, the 150th birthday of our confederation. We want to celebrate, and there is much to be glad for.

We also know that grieving is important to our story.

Last month, we marked the 100th anniversary of the battle for Vimy Ridge. It was an occasion to grieve the 3,600 killed in those days and the many more who suffered wounds. Our story includes suffering, and we grieve for that.

What else must we grieve for?

Have we grieved — really grieved — that Canada's national story includes taking homes, and resources, and culture from this land's First Peoples? Canada tried to destroy them: sometimes physically, more often economically, culturally and spiritually. Has Canada

³ News of Saul and Jonathan's deaths was brought to Dave by an Amalekite (enemies of Israel, whom Dave had just been fighting). He claimed to have been at the battle, saying that he stumbled across a mortally-wounded Saul and, at the king's plea, mercifully killed him. He brought Dave the symbols of royalty: Saul's crown and arm-bracelet.. The Amalekite's story differed significantly from that narrated in 1st Samuel 31:1-6. I believe the Amalekite was looting on the battlefield after fighting had ended, or perhaps serving in the Philistine army. He somehow got his hands on some of Saul's items, and spirited them down to Dave. He apparently presumed that Dave would rejoice at receiving these powerful confirmations of his his royal legitimacy, and been grateful to the Amalekite for ending Saul's life. If so, the Amalekite direly misread Dave's character and motives, and proved to be fatally incorrect. See 2nd Samuel 1:1-16.

grieved that? Have we? I wonder, because it is still happening.

Are there “Davids” for our time, who will lead us in tears? We don’t need promises on campaign trails, nor apologies that end once the words are spoken. Without more, those are insults, not leadership.

How can we move to a new future together, all the people’s of this land? Not unless we face the past, including the times when our splendour has been slain. Not unless we grieve, not with words only, but with meaningful actions too. Not unless we join our tears to those that already water the soil on which we step.

VI

When Dave grieved for Saul, he pronounced the place where the king had fallen to be cursed. *“Let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!”* Mount Gilboa it was. And to this day, there is something like a wound that runs down its slope, a scar left barren and growthless.

The story of *A King for God’s People* continues, with all it’s complexity and messiness. Much joy will come. But Saul . . . let’s not forget him. Amen.