

Whose Victory? **1 Samuel 29:1-31:13**

Where do you look for hope when things look hopeless? Sometimes our personal worlds seem to come crashing down around us.

- Serious illness.
- Terminated relationship.
- Financial ruin.

Whatever the cause, we just seem utterly overwhelmed. Life as we've known it has come to an end. How can we face tomorrow? Where will we find hope?

- In the risky trial drug that no one's sure about?
- In yet another relationship?
- In a gamble on a risky investment?

And what if it's not just our personal worlds – what if it's the real world that comes crashing down?

- A worldwide recession?
- A catastrophic war?
- A big natural disaster?

Where then will we look for hope?

- The economic gurus?
- The political peace brokers?
- The disaster relief agencies?

At the end of today's passage, Israel's in that sort of situation. She's a defeated nation. Many of her people are scattered. Her king's dead. Where can she find hope? How can she face tomorrow? Perhaps she could turn to God. But God's the One who said this would happen. We saw that last week. 28:19 – through the dead Samuel He says:

- Saul and his sons will die.
- Israel will be scattered.
- And it will happen tomorrow.

Tomorrow's here. And it's happened – just as God said. No surprise there. Israel faces a dilemma. Where can she turn for hope? When we get to 1 Samuel 31, is there any reason to hope?

David's Dilemma

Last week, we left both David and Saul facing serious dilemmas. Both dilemmas involved the Philistines. Both dilemmas involved an upcoming war between Israel and the Philistines.

David's dilemma involves being conscripted into the Philistine army. He did such a good job convincing Achish he'd truly defected, that Achish wants him as his body-guard in the upcoming war. Fortunately for David, the other Philistine leaders don't share Achish's enthusiasm. They, of course, haven't had the relationship with David.

- They haven't seen David's prowess.
- They haven't heard David's tales.
- They haven't received David's tribute.
- They haven't had the wool pulled over their eyes.

They're still a bit suspicious. They're concerned they might get a sword in the back while they're face-to-face with an Israelite soldier. After all, it's not really that long since David left home. He's still got Israelite blood. He might be getting homesick about now – and what better way to move back home than with a few Philistine scalps. Wasn't there some story about him winning the king's daughter by disposing of 200 Philistines? And who's to say he's not a plant anyway? Maybe he's a Mossad agent working under cover. Maybe he's been sending reports

back to Saul each month.

Achish breaks the bad news to David and David gives one last academy award winning performance. Instead of simply accepting his good fortune, he protests his dismissal. His protest is full of possibilities.

- It may be he's after further information. Maybe he's worried the other Philistine lords have discovered what he's really up to and wants to find out if they've said anything to Achish.
- It may be he planned to fight for Israel. In verse 8, he speaks of the enemies of my lord the king. Achish thinks he's talking about Israelites. But it's ambiguous. David may be talking about God's enemies.

I said *fortunately for David* before – but that's the world's thinking. This is God's providence. God removes David from the scene of battle. God removes David from fighting against Israel. God removes David from the possibility of killing Saul in battle. God works behind the scenes to rescue David from his own cleverness. If these Philistine lords didn't trust David in battle, why would they trust him enough to send him back to their own towns while the army's away up north? It'd seem safer to execute him. As we've seen before, God gets David out of an impossible situation – not because of David's goodness, but because of God's faithfulness to His promise.

Yet, David finds his difficulties aren't yet finished. After making the long trek back home – it takes them more than two days – he finds he and his men don't have homes and they don't have families. While they've been away playing soldiers, the Amalekites have raided Ziklag.

- They took the women and children captive.
- They destroyed the town with fire.

The narrator emphasises the devastation by repeating it – verse 3 basically duplicates the information of verses 1 and 2. In between, there's this one statement of hope:

They killed none of them, but carried them off as they went on their way.

David and his men don't know that – although the lack of bodies at Ziklag perhaps gave them some hope.

Still, David's men talk of stoning him – verse 6. They hold him responsible.

- He took them and their families to Ziklag.
- He took them on their excursion with the Philistine army.
- He left the town with insufficient defences.
- He lost their families.

At this point, the narrator tells us:

But David found strength in the LORD his God.

It's a contrast with Saul. Saul, in his time of distress, turns to a forbidden medium.

This is the first time in this whole story – since David *thought to himself* back in 27:1 – that the narrator speaks of David turning to God. In one sense, God's been absent from the narrative. The only time He's been mentioned is by the Philistine, Achish – who effectively takes an oath in the covenant name of Israel's God in 29:6 and talks about David being like an angel of God in 29:9. On both occasions, Achish is wrong – because he's hoodwinked by David's deceptions. But there's no talk of David consulting God or David relying on God's word or David following the path God laid out for him.

Yet, as we've seen God isn't absent. None of it takes the sovereign God by surprise. None of it stops the sovereign God fulfilling His purposes. None of it stops God keeping His promise to David. He still gets David out of the impossible situation. He still protects His anointed king.

Yet, there are still consequences for David.

- His town's burned.
- His family's captured.
- His band of merry men is distinctly un-merry.

And at this point, we're told David turns to God – he strengthens himself in God. What's involved in this? The text doesn't say – and it's easy to read our favourite theology or personal experience into it. For example, Ralph Davis highlights three things he thinks it's not:

- It's not religious magic – it's not a quick fix or treating God as your personal genie or cuddling Jesus as your comfort bear.
- It's not simply venting and letting go emotionally – there's nothing wrong with honesty before God, but in itself that won't strengthen you.
- It's not expressing anger and holding those responsible accountable – that's what David's men did and the text doesn't tell us they strengthened themselves in God.

He highlights those three things because they're wrong methods some people advocate in certain circles today. At other times, people have advocated other wrong methods. If you worked at it a little while, you could probably add to his list – ways people try to box God in and tell God the formula He has to use and have God get them out of messes on their own terms, rather than truly treat Him as boss and submit to Him.

I take it what David did was something similar to what we find in many of his psalms.

- He reminds himself of who God is.
- He reminds himself of what God says.

God is God. He's sovereign. He works out in history His purposes. Nothing can stop Him. Nothing can withstand Him. He's almighty – which is to say His power and His abilities are way beyond what we can imagine. He works to His timetable, not ours. And God had made certain promises to Israel – and He promised David he'd be king. If David looked back over his life at this point, what would he see?

- A lot of problems and difficulties and hardships as Saul hunted him down.
- A lot of things different from the way he'd choose to run his life.
- Several seemingly impossible situations where it appeared his time was up.

Who had all the power? Who had all the resources? At the human level, Saul. Yet, God had kept him safe so far – not comfortable, but safe. God's promise – yes, it still awaited fulfilment; it still awaited David to actually sit on the throne – but it wasn't defeated. From the human perspective, the odds against it were astronomical. But when you put God and God's purposes into the picture, everything changes. The difficulties haven't gone away, but they're viewed from a different perspective.

David then enquires of God – via the priest and the ephod. He asks if he should pursue these Amalekites. He asks whether he'll defeat them. He asks whether he'll succeed in rescuing any captives. God gives him positive answers to his questions. And that's how it turns out as you read through chapter 30.

What are we to learn from this? Who's the hero of the story? David? David's the one who faces the tough situation with his men. David's the one who leads them up against the Amalekites. David's the one who orchestrates the overwhelming victory. David's men – the ones ready to stone him – end up saying in verse 20:

This is David's plunder.

But David's not the hero. He comes out smelling like roses, but that's not his doing. David gets himself into this mess.

- His thinking leads them into Philistine territory.
- His thinking gets them marching against Israel.
- His thinking leaves their families open to capture.
- His thinking results in his men wanting to kill him.

God's the real hero. Despite David's clever stupidity and intelligent deceptions that result in disaster, God steps in and rescues him – and for most of it, He does it before David even bothers to ask. Why?

- Is it because of David's cleverness?
- Is it because of David's goodness?

No – it's because of God's promise. It's because God had Samuel anoint this man the future king of Israel. And so David says in verse 23:

No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the LORD has given us. He has protected us and handed over to us the forces that came against us.

And doesn't that remind you of the gospel? Who are we? Essentially, we're stupid rebels. I mean, what person in their right mind would go up against God? That's got to be one of the most ridiculous decisions ever – to think a mere creature could successfully rebel against its Creator.

But that's what Adam and Eve did. And it's what we joined when we came on the scene. We continue this craziness. But, despite that, God acts for us.

- As soon as it happened, He promised to do something through woman's seed to fix things up.
- Indeed, as we read the New Testament, this was a decision God made even before He created.
- And God continued to work to bring about His promise – to rescue us from our rebellion.

And what did we do?

- Did we recognise our rebellion for the great evil it was and give it up?
- Did we take steps to discover what God really wanted of us and try to do that?
- Did we even recognise our inability and cry out to God for rescue?

The gospel is God's work. It's God being for us even while we were God's enemies – even when we weren't interested in fixing things up with God.

And it continues to be God's work. What's God's promise to us? That, at the end, He will present us faultless and blameless in His sight – that we'll be purified of all taint of sin and made fit citizens of His kingdom. How's God doing with that in your life?

- There are lots of twists and turns along the journey.
- There are hardships and difficulties along the way.
- There are times when we're not particularly cooperative with what He's doing in our lives.
- There are times we think we know better than Him and go our own way and get ourselves into all kinds of mess.

Will God give up on us? No – the promise is there and God will keep His promise.

Do I understand how that will work? Not much. As I look at my own heart and see how deep sin runs – the wrong thoughts and wrong attitudes that seem so constant – I wonder how I could possibly ever be free of them. I know I can't do it. I don't have the ability in myself. And I begin to wonder if even God can do it. It seems such a big job. Yet, I know God has made improvements.

- And I know God even uses my mistakes and my rebellion to achieve His good purposes for me.
- I know God won't give up on me.
- I know God will keep His promises.

That's how God reveals Himself in this situation with David. He continues to work for David's good despite what David himself does. That's the sort of God He is. That's the assurance His people have.

That doesn't mean we can use that as an excuse – simply say:

God'll work it all out in the end and He can do that no matter what mess I make of it in the meantime, so it doesn't matter what I do. I may as well go out and sin to my heart's content. It won't defeat His purposes.

That misses the point.

- God is perfectly good. And what God wants for us and what God tells us is also perfectly good. Why would we want to swap the perfectly good for anything else?
- Secondly, sin is deceptive. At its heart, there's always a lie – it may be mixed with a good deal of truth, but it always contains a lie. Why do we want to swap what is true for what is false?
- Thirdly, sin has its own bitter consequences – we hurt others and we hurt ourselves. Sure, God can

still use that hurt to achieve good – but the hurt itself remains evil and wrong. Would you think it OK for someone to murder your spouse on the basis that God will use that for good?

- Fourthly, there's a contradiction there. We say we agree God's good. We say we want to live in a place of perfect goodness. How can we then say we want to do something that's not good? How can we say it's a good thing to obey God if we think we'll actually get a better outcome in the long run through disobedience?

Sure, God's sovereignty is such that He uses all things in our lives – even evil and wicked things – to achieve His good purposes for us. That's a great encouragement. But it's never an excuse to do evil and wicked things. Just because God brought good out of David's decision to head to Philistia, doesn't excuse David. After all, who's in the better position – the reformed drug-addict who's gone through all the mess caused by drugs and all the pain of withdrawal in the rehab program, or the person who never took drugs in the first place?

Saul's Dilemma

In chapter 31 we come back to the resolution of Saul's dilemma – the issue that troubled him so much that he disobeyed God's clear word and went off to a medium. In one sense, this dilemma was resolved in chapter 28. God's word comes to him through the dead Samuel:

The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines.

We already know what will happen because God's told us

what's going to happen.

Yet, chapter 31 details how it does happen.

- Saul dies.
- His three sons die.
- The army flees before the Philistines.
- The people abandon their towns and flee.
- The Philistines put the trophies of battle in their pagan temples.

It's a pretty depressing chapter – in some ways, a hopeless chapter. Israel felt hard-pressed in her environment. She particularly felt the threat of the Philistines. She came up with her own solution – her own way for dealing with this perceived threat. She put aside God's kingship and demanded a king like the nations. This is the result. This is the fruit her rebellion bears.

- Her king like the nations is dead – killed by his own hand on the field of battle.
- The Philistines – the threat the king was supposed to solve – are now a bigger problem. They control more of Israel than before Saul.

Two things provide some relief from the gloom. One is the actions of the people of Jabesh Gilead. They act to lessen Saul's dishonour. They were the people Saul rescued when he first became king – back in chapter 11. It was the great start to Saul's reign. Now, at the end, they risk their own personal safety to honour Saul in his death.

The other bright note is David.

- Back in 2:10, Hannah's song spoke of God's king.
- Back in chapter 12, Samuel told Israel how the kingship could work – as long as both the king and the people paid attention to their true King (namely,

God).

- Back in chapter 16, Samuel anointed David – the one God chose to be His king.

God's still got David up His sleeve as it were. Israel's played her cards – and lost. That doesn't mean God's out of options – or that God's lost. He's been preparing His king through hardship and suffering and difficulties. And chapter 30 shows us David acting as God's king.

- When faced with crisis, he finds strength in God.
- When faced with God's enemies, he follows God's instructions and wins victory.
- When faced with quarrels about how the plunder is to be divided among his own men, he does the God-like thing – he shares it graciously with all.
- He's not a king who takes for himself – rather he shares the plunder of God's enemies with the towns of southern Judah.

It's the way God's king should act. We've expected Saul's death ever since chapters 13 and 15 – when Saul failed to pay attention to God's word and Samuel announced the kingship would be taken from him. Saul's death doesn't come as a surprise. But Saul's death is not God's final word. God has His king ready and waiting to sit on the throne. There's still hope for Israel. Yes, the outward situation looks very bleak. The world as they knew it was turned upside-down. But God's still working at His purposes – and His king's ready and waiting.

Hope for the Hopeless

This is central to the Bible's story. We humans strut around this earth as if we own it – as if we're in control. We do it on a big scale – but we also do it as individuals.

- We decide how we want to live.

- We decide what's right for us.
- We decide what we want to get out of life.
- We decide to indulge ourselves.

And we set up our lives accordingly – just like everyone else around us.

But it's not our world. It's God's world. And it's foolish to forget that – worse than foolish, it's rebellion. And that's the real issue humanity's faced ever since Adam and Eve. It's far worse than a serious illness or a terminated relationship or financial ruin. It's far worse than a world recession or a catastrophic war or a big natural disaster. It's something that should cause a sense of hopelessness – for there's nothing we can do to fix the problem. We're rebels and we deserve judgment as rebels.

But God acted. God did something about it. God sent His King.

- Not David. He suffered the same disease as the rest of us. He too went his own way instead of God's way. We saw that in his decision to go to Philistia. David's only the forerunner of the real King.
- That King is Jesus. He perfectly followed God's way – always. He lived under God's rule – even to the point of suffering our judgment as our substitute. He did that so we may be forgiven. He did that so we could stop being rebels. He did that so we could have hope.

And thus our hope is always to remain in God. Sure, we may go through times when our world comes crashing down around us. That may happen to us more than once. But we must remember this reality. God has sent His King. His King rules – even in the middle of what we

perceive to be disasters. His King has secured our future – not in the dreams of this world, but in the certainty of God's coming kingdom.