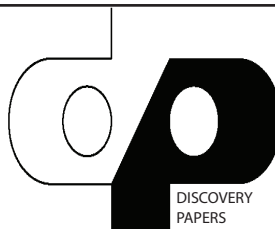


A WASTED LIFE

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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1 Samuel 31:1–131
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1 Samuel 31:1–13

I have a penchant for preaching Christ from the Hebrew Scriptures. To me, this seems especially appropriate when I'm preaching from the David story, inasmuch as David, more than any other figure in the Hebrew Scriptures, foreshadows the coming of his descendant, Jesus Christ, who is called the Son of David. The David story shapes the Christ story.

I don't want to make the error of Jesus' opponents. He told them, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). They searched the Scriptures—the Hebrew Scriptures—and missed Christ. I don't want to search the Scriptures, much less preach the Scriptures, and miss Christ.

We live in a different time from David. The most significant difference is that we live after the advent of Christ. He lived before the advent of Christ. I therefore seek to relate the David story to our time in light of the advent of Christ.

I aspire to be like Paul, a minister of the new covenant. He presented Christ, and he expected exposure to Christ to transform men and women: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Beholding is the key to transformation—beholding the glory of the Lord, that is. Where do we see the glory of the Lord? A few sentences later, Paul writes of what he and the other apostles do: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6). Paul presents Christ—"the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"—and he expects those who behold Christ to be transformed.

David doesn't save. David instructs, especially as he foreshadows his Son, but he doesn't save. Jesus saves. As the angel told Joseph, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Therefore, I search the Scriptures for Christ, and I preach Christ from the Scriptures, even from the Hebrew Scriptures, and especially from the David story, because the Spirit transforms men and women as they behold the Son of David.

An irritated woman confronted M. Craig Barnes, a pastor, after one of his sermons. She said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Is that all you know?" Barnes writes, "Had I been thinking clearly at the time, I would have said, 'It's all I know that can be of help to you.'" That's pretty much how I feel.

How come?

There's a new *Rocky* movie out, *Creed*. It's received good reviews, but I'm not going to see it, because I have no interest in watching two guys beat each other to a bloody pulp public amusement, even in a movie. I saw the first movie, though (and two guys beat each other to a bloody pulp). In that movie, Rocky Balboa, a small-time boxer who also works as a collector for a loan shark, is mocked by his trainer, Mickey, who calls him a bum. Finally, Rocky has it out with Mickey:

Rocky: "I been comin' here for six years, and for six years you've been stickin' it to me, and I wanna know how come!"

Mickey: You don't wanna know!

Rocky: "I wanna know how come!"

Mickey: "You wanna know?"

Rocky: "I wanna know how?"

Mickey: "Okay, I'm gonna tell you! You had the talent to become a good fighter, but instead of that, you became a leg breaker for some cheap, second-rate loan shark!"

Rocky: "It's a living."

Mickey: "It's a waste of life!"

Mickey thinks Rocky has wasted his life. Many people, at one point or another, wonder whether they're wasting their lives. We have the sense that we're here for some purpose, that our lives are supposed to count for something. Saul, the first king of Israel, wasted his life. How can we avoid doing the same?

The arrows find Saul

1 Samuel 31:1-7:

Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. 2 And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. 3 The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. 4 Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and mistreat me." But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. 5 And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. 6 Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. 7 And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley and those beyond the Jordan saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned their cities and fled. And the Philistines came and lived in them.

Saul has been fighting the wrong enemy. He's been pursuing David when he should have been fighting the Philistines. Moreover, instead of putting David to flight, he should have put David in charge of his forces. When David fought against the Philistines, the Philistines fled (1 Samuel 17:1, 19:8). Now, when Saul fights against the Philistines, the Israelites flee.

Among the dead are Saul's sons, including Jonathan, who had befriended David. Given the place that Jonathan has occupied in 1 Samuel, we might have expected the occasion of his death to elicit more commentary from the narrator. But Jonathan's death is reported in an understated way.

So too is Saul's predicament. The arrows of the Philistines find him, and he asks his armor-bearer to finish the job. The prophet Samuel first predicted Saul's demise in 1 Samuel 13:14. Later, when called up by the witch of Endor, Samuel envisioned the defeat of Israel, the death of Saul's sons, and the death of Saul himself at the hands of the Philistines (1 Samuel 28:19). Is this the moment that the narrative has been anticipating since shortly after Saul was anointed king?

When David snuck into Saul's camp by night, he had the opportunity to run Saul through, but he refused to put his hand out against the LORD's anointed (1 Samuel 26:6-12). Likewise, the armor-bearer refuses to run Saul through, even though Saul urges him to do so. Is the armor-bearer afraid like David was afraid—to put out his hand against the LORD's anointed? Or is he just plain afraid to kill someone? The narrator doesn't say.

So what does Saul do? He runs himself through. Saul had repeatedly thrown his spear—at David and even at Jonathan, his son—but kept missing. Finally, Saul uses a weapon effectively—but only when he misuses it to kill himself instead of an enemy. Saul's armor-bearer may be afraid to kill Saul, but he isn't afraid to kill himself, so he follows suit.

Yes, this is the moment we've been waiting for. We've been waiting for Saul to die so that David could assume the throne. The narrator has prepared us for this moment, and when the moment comes, he has nothing to say about it. Why? Because such a moment deserves not prose but poetry, and the narrator leaves it to David, a poet, to capture the moment, which he does in 2 Samuel 1:17-27.

David, by the way, when he pursued the Amalekites, rescued "all" the people who had been captured (1 Samuel 30:18-20). By contrast, Saul dies, his sons die, his armor-bearer dies, and "all" his men die. The men who were not involved in the battle lose heart and high-tale it.

Saul loses everything

1 Samuel 31:8-13:

The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. 9 So they cut off his head and stripped off his armor and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. 10 They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. 11 But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 12 all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. 13 And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

Saul wanted his armor-bearer to kill him, and then he killed himself, in order that the Philistines wouldn't "mistreat" him. His plan fails: the Philistines find him and mistreat him anyway. They do to Saul what David did to Goliath, the Philistine champion. In fact, Saul also did to himself what David did to Goliath. David used Goliath's own sword to kill him, and Saul uses his own sword to kill himself. David cut off Goliath's head, stripped him of his armor, took his head to Jerusalem, and put his weapons in his tent (1 Samuel 17:51-54). Likewise, the Philistines cut off Saul's head and strip him of his armor. Moreover, they place Saul's weapons in the temple of one of their gods and put his body on display like a trophy.

This is the David and Goliath story—in reverse. Saul, the Israelite king, who was head taller than his countrymen, takes the place of the Philistine giant. As the king of Israel, Saul, a giant, should have gone against the Goliath, but he sat on the sidelines. David is fit to be king of Israel. As for Saul, he loses his kingdom, his men, his sons, his life, and finally his dignity.

The Philistines proclaim the "good news" of their victory over Saul and Israel. In their minds, their gods have defeated the God of Israel. However, our narrator might say: not so fast. For Saul's demise means David's enthronement, and though Saul has killed his thousands of Philistines, David has killed his ten thousands of Philistines (1 Samuel 18:7). The news of Saul's death is, in fact, bad news for the Philistines and good news for Israel.

The men of Jabesh-gilead, indebted to Saul because he saved their city from the Ammonites, salvage a shred of dignity for Saul by retrieving his body, along with the bodies of his sons; by burning them, perhaps to cleanse them from defilement; and by burying their bones (1 Samuel 31:1-13). Even when Saul is honored, however, David is honored right along with him. Indeed, the valiant men of Jabesh-gilead went by night to bless Saul, the LORD's anointed, but their doing so reminds us that David undertook a similar mission first. Valiantly, he snuck in to Saul's camp by night and gave him back his life (1 Samuel 26:6-12).

Closed off from God

I wonder if, like Saul, we're fighting the wrong enemy, squaring off against human foes instead of the real enemy, Satan and his armies (Ephesians 6:12). I wonder if, like Saul, we miss opportunities to enlist those who could help us in the real battle because we're blinded by jealousy. I wonder if we misuse our resources, even to the point of harming ourselves, like Saul, who misused both his spear and his sword. I wonder if, like Saul, we're failing those we have been charged with blessing.

I wonder if, like Saul, we sit on the sidelines when we should be fighting the giants in our lives. These are haunting questions, but the last chapter of 1 Samuel, and the last chapter of Saul's life, leave us with such.

Saul wasted his life. In light of the haunting questions that emerge from 1 Samuel 31, we may want to know: how do we avoid a fate such as Saul's? What can we do so that we don't waste our lives?

Saul closed himself off from God. He was flawed, as are we all. He was broken, as are we all. He was fearful, as are we all. In his flaws, brokenness, and fears, he closed himself off from God. He compensated for his shortcomings, he defended himself, and he deflected blame. He did everything an insecure person can do except for the one thing he needed to do: he did not open himself to God. True, his heart was a mess. But that wasn't his problem. His problem was that he did not let God into the mess.

Augustine was resistant to God for the longest time, he writes in *Confessions*, because "I did not wish to observe myself."³ Do we wish to observe ourselves? Do we wish God to observe us? When Augustine finally saw "how vile I was, how twisted and filthy,"⁴ he turned to God. He let God into the mess.

Open yourself to God

If we don't want to waste our lives, what should we do? Open yourself to God. Come clean before him with your flaws, brokenness, and fears. Don't hide anything. Be honest with God. David, in contrast to Saul, opened himself to God, flaws, brokenness, fears and all. He let God in:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!
(Psalm 139:23-24)**

The name Jacob means "Heel Grabber," "Supplanter," and "Deceiver." Jacob, in fact, lived up to (or down to) his name, and he deceived his father by pretending he his brother in order to get a blessing. God sent Jacob into exile, and into the clutches of Laban, so that he could see who he was. It took him twenty years, but when Jacob wrestled with God, though he did not know it was God, and God asked him what his name was, he finally answered "Jacob." He opened himself to God; he came clean; he came out of hiding. What did God do? He blessed him and gave him a new name: Israel. (Genesis 32:24-32)

Envision God singing to you in David Wilcox's song "Hard Part":

*I see the look that's in your eyes
That says "I must keep most of me inside
'Cause you'd never love me if I didn't hide
the secrets of my heart"*

*Well I'm not here for the surface stuff
I just get bored with all that fluff
So show me the edges even if it's rough
And let the real love start*

*You think your shame and deep disgrace
Are more than I can bear
But you can go to your darkest place
I will meet you there*

*And I'm strong enough to take it
And I know what you've been through
You've got a whole heart
Give me the hard part
I can love that too⁵*

Offer yourself to God

Open yourself to God, flaws, brokenness, fears, and all. Let the real love start. Then what? Offer yourself to God, knowing that he accepts you and will use you for his perfect purposes. In Romans 6, Paul commands us to offer ourselves to God (Romans 6:13, 19). Offer yourself to God, once, twice, a thousand times, today. One of my practices is to offer myself to God at the beginning of the day. Then the day is his.

Sometimes, especially in the Silicon Valley, if you're not doing something that others consider great, you may feel as if you're wasting life when, of course, you aren't. Whenever you wonder whether you're wasting your life, or whether you're not making the most of it, simply offer yourself to God. Then do you know what it is—this haunting question about whether you're wasting your life? It's not your problem anymore. It's God's problem. When you offer yourself to God, then you know the question of whether you're wasting your life is his problem. And you're free. Offer your life to God. He won't waste it.

Good news of great joy

The Philistines, when they defeated Israel, sent messengers throughout their land to carry "the good news" (the gospel) to their people. The messengers preached the gospel—their gospel. A thousand years later, an angel, a messenger of God, approached some shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock and announced,

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

The gospel of the Philistines—their victory over Israel—was not such good news after all. In fact, it was bad news even for them, for the death of Saul meant the advent of David. On the other hand, the gospel of Jesus Christ—his victory over evil—is good news for "all the people," Philistines included.

The world is a mess. The church is mess. Every church is a mess. What can I do? I can't clean up the mess. This I can do: I can preach Jesus into the mess. Is your heart a mess? Especially in light of the advent of Christ, who assures us of God's forgiveness, open yourself to God and offer yourself to God.

You've got a whole heart. Give him the hard part. He can love that too.

As we come to end of 1 Samuel, we also come to the end of Saul's reign and to the end of Saul himself. The narrative has made us wait a long time for the reign of David. We're almost there.

Endnotes

¹ M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 93.

² *Rocky* (Metro-Goldwin-Mayer Studios, 1976)

³ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.6.17.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Wilcox, "Hard Part" (Gizz Da Baboo, SESAC, administered by Michell Ma Soeur, SESAC, division of Soroka Music Ltd., and John Whalen.)