



## **Studies in the Life of David**

Text

First Samuel 31:1-13

Topic

Not wanting to be captured and tortured by the Philistines,  
a wounded King Saul falls on his own sword

Title

*"The Sword In the Saul"*

### Introduction

The expression, "fall on your sword," has the modern figurative meaning of taking personal responsibility for a group action gone bad. It originates from the literal practice of committing suicide by falling on your sword. Some say it is the Anglicized version of the ancient Samurai custom of committing suicide by disemboweling yourself. We say *hari-kari* because of an 1856 article in *Harper's Magazine* that misspelled the words! It's *hara-kiri*.

"Falling on your sword" has come to describe something noble, something honorable, something to be admired.

King Saul fell on his sword. He did it to avoid being captured and tortured after he led Israel to a miserable defeat at the hands of the Philistines. His actions were anything but noble, honorable, or to be admired.

Saul was called by God to be the first king of Israel. It was a high calling. He walked unworthy of his high calling.

Surrounding Saul's unworthiness are a few individuals who walked worthy of their high callings.

- Saul's three sons walked worthy of their calling by submitting to their father even though it cost them their lives on the field of battle.
- Saul's armor bearer walked worthy of his calling by falling on his own sword once he determined Saul was dead.
- The valiant men of Jabesh Gilead walked worthy of their calling by risking their lives in Philistine territory to retrieve Saul's body and give him a proper funeral.

All this talk of walking worthy and unworthy of their callings reminded me of the verse in Ephesians (4:1) that encourages us, as New Testament Christians, "to walk worthy of the calling with which **you** were called..."

From looking at the characters in our text we can learn some things about finishing strong by walking worthy of our high calling as believers in Jesus Christ.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Don't Want To Finish Wrong By Walking Unworthy Of Your Calling, and #2 You Do Want To Finish Strong By Walking Worthy Of Your Calling.

#### #1 You Don't Want To Finish Wrong By Walking Unworthy Of Your Calling (v1-10)

When we talk about our "calling" as believers in Jesus Christ, we simply mean that as saved individuals we are to walk, to conduct ourselves, in ways that are worthy of the name of Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean we are to be perfect or that we never fail or fall short. It does mean we press-on in our walk knowing that God, Who began a good work in us, will complete it.

Within your "calling" as a Christian are your specific roles and responsibilities. Things like husband, wife, parent, child, employee, employer, citizen, church member, etc. It is in those roles and responsibilities where we determine whether to walk worthy or unworthy.

Saul was a saved man whose further calling was to be Israel's king. He failed. Let's see what we can learn from his failure.

1 Samuel 31:1 Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.

Take a quick look back over the recent history of Saul's monarchy. He had become obsessed with defeating David. All of Saul's energies and resources were dedicated to that one pursuit. I think we can therefore conclude that he gave little thought to guarding against and preparing for war with the Philistines.

There are many things that can distract you as you are walking with the Lord. Some of them, perhaps most of them, are not sinful in and of themselves. But are they helpful spiritually? Do they build others up? Do they further God's work on the earth?

If not, they may lead you to walk in a manner unworthy of your high calling simply by competing for your time and resources. Seek first the kingdom of God. Saul did not, but you and I can.

1 Samuel 31:2 Then the Philistines followed hard after Saul and his sons. And the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons.

We'll talk about the valor of Saul's sons under our second point. For now we would note that Saul's unworthy walk had devastating effects on his children.

The world wants to destroy your family. But if you will focus on your family God will give you the tools to build it, to protect it. You **can** have a successful marriage. You **can** train up your kids in the way they should go, and when they are old they will not depart from it.

1 Samuel 31:3 The battle became fierce against Saul. The archers hit him, and he was severely wounded by the archers.

The New Testament compares some of the devil's attacks against us to "fiery darts" (Ephesians 6:16). We are able to quench them by taking the shield of faith.

Saul had long ago quit walking by faith. He navigated the world by his own wisdom and wiles. Even if you're not in sin, be careful of trusting in your own wisdom. Wait upon the Lord. Walk by faith.

1 Samuel 31:4 Then Saul said to his armorbearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me." But his armorbearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword and fell on it.

1 Samuel 31:5 And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him.

We'll have more to say about this faithful armorbearer. We're focusing on Saul. His solution to the defeat he had brought upon Israel and himself was suicide.

Saul was the king of Israel. He ought to have taken his stand and fought to the end. Instead he ended the fight.

Suicide is not the unpardonable sin. It is all too possible for a believer to get so depressed that in a moment of disobedience they take their own life. I'm not excusing it, only explaining it.

A Christian can commit a kind of spiritual suicide without taking their own life. You do it by taking your own life into your own hands. You self-murder your marriage, or your family, or your job, or some other responsibility, by ignoring clear biblical principles. Take your stand on biblical principles and fight on to the end.

1 Samuel 31:6 So Saul, his three sons, his armorbearer, and all his men died together that same day.

1 Samuel 31:7 And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, and those who were on the other side of the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them.

Saul's choice to walk unworthy of his high calling affected every Israelite. **So do your choices affect every believer.** Christians are compared to building blocks in a building. We're compared to the parts of a human body. We're connected. We complete each other. Walk unworthy and the building or the body will suffer.

1 Samuel 31:8 So it happened the next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

1 Samuel 31:9 And they cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and sent word throughout the land of the Philistines, to proclaim it in the temple of their idols and among the people.

1 Samuel 31:10 Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

Saul ended-up conquered by his enemies with his flesh on display. **It's representative of exactly how he had lived!** He had early on in his walk been conquered by his flesh. In every episode you see his flesh on display as he yielded to his carnal, base nature.

By way of application, there is an obvious one and a more subtle one.

- The obvious application comes from passages like Galatians five where we are told to *not* walk in the flesh. Some of the works of the flesh are then listed: “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like...” We are to understand that things like this have been crucified at the Cross and we no longer need to yield our members, our bodies, to them.
- The more subtle application also comes from a passage in Galatians. It's chapter three, verse three, where the apostle Paul asks us, “having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” In context he was talking to believers who wanted to adopt rules, rites, rituals, diets, dress, and days as their means of walking with Jesus. We can still do that today if we're not careful.

Saul had a high calling. He walked in a manner unworthy of his high calling. He finished wrong. What about us?

#2 You Do Want To Finish Strong  
By Walking Worthy Of Your Calling  
(v11-13)

Several key characters in this chapter distinguished themselves by walking worthy of their calling. It cost them dearly in this life. It establishes up front that if we want to walk worthy and finish strong there is a cost, a sacrifice, but the reward is worth it.

1 Samuel 31:2 Then the Philistines followed hard after Saul and his sons. And the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons.

Here's the situation. Because of his gross disobedience your dad has been rejected by God as king. He's often troubled by an evil spirit sent by the Lord. He's spent many years trying to hunt down and murder the man God had anointed to be the next king. He's neglected his responsibilities as king, including preparing for war against the Philistines. The night before the big battle he was out consulting a medium.

Would you have fought next to him, risking your life? These boys did and because we are sure that Jonathan, at least, was a man led by God, we must conclude it was the worthy thing to do.

Their calling was to submit to their father and to submit to their king. Taking Jonathan as the example, we see that they never submitted to anything sinful. Jonathan never cooperated with Saul in trying to kill David. But in every other area he submitted - even though we would say that Saul was not worthy of being submitted to. That, however, was not their call to make as his sons; it was God's.

In your home, or on the job, or even in the church, you might think you are being asked to support a Saul-like person. Look past the person to your calling, to your responsibility, and do it as unto the Lord. It probably won't cost you your life per se, but it will require that you die to yourself in this life expecting to be rewarded in the next. Don't bail on the situation. Finish strong.

1 Samuel 31:4 Then Saul said to his armorbearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me." But his armorbearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword and fell on it.

1 Samuel 31:5 And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him.

Armorbearers were not just weapon's caddies. They were seasoned warriors. Think Secret Service in terms of their loyalty.

Saul's armorbearer disobeyed him. That's because what Saul was asking him to do was beyond wrong. No one was to kill God's anointed king. It showed tremendous respect for the office and for God, Who had established the office.

We've already seen this lesson in Saul's sons, that we must do what is right according to the Word of God and when someone asks us to do something sinful, we must refuse.

There's another lesson. Armorbearer's understood that whatever happened to their master happened also to them. If the king died on the battlefield, the armorbearer died, too.

I have no opinion on whether it was right or wrong for him to fall on his sword. It's what was expected of him. I'm more interested in what we can glean from the armorbearers death.

The armorbearer identified with Saul in his death. Saul died so he also died with him.

Jesus died on the Cross. It was necessary in order for Him to take upon Himself the punishment and penalty for the sins of the human race.

There is a remarkable spiritual identification that takes place when you become a Christian. Because Jesus died, and you believe in Him, God says that you died with Him.

Your flesh was crucified there at the Cross. Everyday you are going to be asked to die to self, to recognize that your flesh has been crucified.

Not just asked but empowered. You see, you not only died with Jesus; you rose from the dead with Him. It means the power of His resurrection is available to you so that you may, in practice, yield to the Spirit of God rather than to your flesh.

You don't fall on a sword. You bow down and kneel at the foot of the Cross, reckoning yourself dead to sin and alive to God. To the extent you do so, *you can't help but walk worthy of your calling.*

A third set of individuals in this chapter walked worthy.

1 Samuel 31:11 Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul,

1 Samuel 31:12 all the valiant men arose and traveled 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.

1 Samuel 31:13 Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

Forty years prior to this Saul had rescued Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites. Regardless the terrible king he had become, the men of that city risked their lives to retrieve the mutilated remains of the king of Israel and give him a proper burial.

The Jews didn't normally cremate. In this case it was probably to hide the mutilation. Notice although they cremated the bodies, they buried the bones.

I get asked all the time about whether it's OK to be cremated. One argument against it is that the Jews were meticulous in burying their dead and even when they cremated someone, like Saul and his sons, they buried their bones. It seems a strong argument against cremation.

The Jews were uniquely associated with their Promised Land. Joseph, for example, wanted the Jews to take his bones with them from Egypt to be



buried in the land. So it wasn't just burial that was on their minds; it was burial **in the land** promised them by God.

I submit for our consideration that as a people *we have no land!* We are looking for the city whose builder and maker is God, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem that will come down out of Heaven. I see no prohibition to cremation. To me, it's an individual decision.

Back to the men of Jabesh Gilead. They risked their lives to enter hostile territory to correct the dishonor done to Saul and his sons.

We are, by definition, *always* in hostile territory. The devil is the god of this world. Every worthy step we take is a risk out in the world.

What about the mutilated bodies? Is there some lesson there for us?

Jesus was mutilated by beatings and the plucking out of His beard. His was a cruel, shameful, criminals death in which He was put on public display.

When you and I walk worthy, pressing forward for the high calling, nonbelievers don't see the Lord as Someone mutilated, murdered, and to be ashamed of. They see Him alive and providing you with power to live life as God intended it to be lived.

Consider these further exhortations from the Word to walk worthy.

1 Thessalonians 2:12 ... walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Colossians 1:10 ... walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Philippians 1:27 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ...

Concerning what it means to walk worthy one author makes it simple when he says, “Act in a way that fits the great value and glorious nature of God and the Gospel and your calling.”

God’s Word is His enabling. You and I can walk worthy; we can finish strong.

*Let’s do it!*

