

# 1 Samuel 29:1-31:13

## Introduction

We've come to the end of 1 Samuel. Last week we finished on a cliffhanger. If this was Eastenders, it would have been one of those 'Doof Doof moments', when the drumbeats are heard, and the theme tune starts playing.

I discovered online that people keep count of the 'Doof Doof moments' for each member of the cast. There's an annual count. I stopped watching Eastenders a long time ago, so the character names didn't mean much to me on that one. But people also keep count of the total number of 'Doof Doof moments' each member of the cast have had since they arrived on the show. At the top of that list was a name I *did* recognise. The person who's had the most 'Doof Doof moments' is, of course, Phil Mitchell. No great surprise there.

Well, this *isn't* Eastenders, but David certainly had his own 'Doof Doof moment' last week. And we're re-joining the story this week. If you remember, the Philistines were gathering their forces to fight against Israel. And Achish has told David that he's coming along. He's even made David one of his own personal bodyguards. David's going to war with his enemies against his own people.

But I've called our first heading: a lucky escape.

## A lucky escape?

Look down with me at the beginning of chapter 29.

**The Philistines gathered all their forces at Aphek, and Israel camped by the spring in Jezreel. As the Philistine rulers marched with their units of hundreds and thousands, David and his men were marching at the rear with Achish.**

This is David's worst nightmare. He's trapped because of his own poor decision-making. He seems to have only two options. Betray his own people and forfeit his kingdom. Or betray Achish and forfeit his life. How many nights must he have spent tossing and turning, trying to think of a way out. What was he going to do? He must have been kicking himself.

But then David and his men come to the attention of the Philistine commanders. And, unsurprisingly, they don't trust him. They don't want him there. They question his involvement. Achish puts up a bit of a fight defending him. But the Philistine commanders are insistent. They want Achish to send David away. And Achish gives in. He tells David to go home.

It must have been music to David's ears. He needed a way out. And now, he's been *handed* one on a plate. And best of all, he hasn't had to do anything! The Philistine commanders have done it all for him!

Of course, David feigns disappointment. ‘What have I done?’ he says. ‘Why can’t I go with you?’ It’s all an act! We *know* that, even if Achish doesn’t. Achish even compliments David: ‘...**you have been as pleasing in my eyes as an angel of God,**’ he says. He clearly doesn’t know what David’s been up to behind his back. And Achish is adamant. David must turn back and return to Ziklag. We can just imagine David’s response. He couldn’t show it. But inside he must have been doing somersaults! Yes! Lucky boy!

Or is he?

God is barely mentioned in these verses. Yet, surely, it should be obvious that there’s no luck involved. This is God’s handiwork. Once again, God has quietly intervened to protect David. And that’s how God works.

He can do the big flashes of lightning and voices from heaven thing. We read about it in the Bible. But even when he doesn’t – which, let’s be honest, is our normal experience - even when there are no flashes of lightning and voices from heaven, God is there. He quietly cares for us. Often, it’s only when we look back that we can see it. But he’s always present, through all the twists and turns of life. And part of the joy of the Christian life is realising that to be true. Part of the joy of the Christian life is not that God announces his involvement in our lives with a loudspeaker, but that he allows us to discover his quiet care of us as we look back and reflect.

And, when we see his hand at work, how often we discover that his ways are full of surprise and wonder. Who would have guessed that God would save David *this* way? Through the Philistine commanders? Well, we might have done... because he’s used David’s enemies to rescue him before. But we never tire of it. It’s brilliant!

It doesn’t guarantee that God will do the same for us. When we get ourselves stuck in a hole of our own making, through our own foolishness and poor decision-making, there’s no guarantee that God will dig us out of it. He might allow us to endure the consequences of our poor decisions to teach us things through them. But this tells us that he *can* dig us out of trouble if he chooses. He has innumerable ways – wonderful and surprising ways – in which he can rescue his people. He can even use our enemies as our rescuers. There is no mess so big that God’s can’t get us out of it, if he so chooses. And that should cause us to praise him.

So now David and his men head back to Ziklag. And I’ve called our next heading: The king who gives.

### The king who gives

Chapter 30 begins by telling us: **David and his men reached Ziklag on the third day.**

It was long, tiring journey. They must have looked forward to relaxing with their loved ones again when they got home. But their good mood is quickly dispelled when they discover what's taken place in Ziklag. The town is destroyed. Their wives and children have been taken captive. Everything's gone. First there's weeping. Then grief gives way to anger. David's men turn against him. They even talk of stoning him.

There are times when it seems like it's one thing after another. You think things can't get any worse. Then they do.

When Jesus said, 'In this world you will have trouble,' he wasn't joking! He didn't say it quietly, under his breath. He didn't put it in small print at the bottom of the page. He said it loud and clear. In this world, God's people will have trouble. And sometimes those troubles seem overwhelming. Sometimes it seems as though it's just one thing after another. God is honest with us about that in the Bible. But God also tells us in the Bible that we can depend on him. We can trust him even when our troubles seem overwhelming.

And that's what David does. Once again, the pressure is on. Action is needed. But this time, rather than rushing in, David looks to God. At the end of verse 6, we're told: **But David found strength in the LORD his God.**

Previously, Jonathan had helped David to find strength in God. He had done that by reminding David of God's promises. Perhaps this time David reminds *himself* of God's promises. And he calls for Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod, so that he can enquire of the Lord.

Should he pursue the raiding party, he asks.

God says yes and tells him he'll be successful.

So, there's no time to rest. David sets off with his 600 men. 200 of them are too exhausted to cross the Besor Valley and must be left behind. The remaining 400 continue the chase.

But the raiders could be anywhere! Where should they look for them? Where do they even start?

As it happens, they come across an exhausted Egyptian in a field. He's the abandoned slave of an Amalekite. In fact, one of the very Amalekites who raided Ziklag. What a piece of luck!

But, of course, it isn't luck. Again, quietly and unannounced, this is God's handiwork.

Once he's been revived, the Egyptian leads David and his men to the Amalekites, who are busy partying. And David and his men rout them. They recover everything. Nothing is missing. They rescue their wives and children and bring back everything that had been taken.

It's a great day. What a relief!

But then an argument breaks out. Certain troublemakers don't want to share the plunder with those who were left behind. Their rationale is that *they* were the ones who recovered it, so *they're* the ones who get to keep it. We worked for it. It's ours.

David sees it differently. Look at verse 23.

**David replied, 'No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the LORD has given us.'**

They haven't *recovered* it. The Lord has *given* it to them. It's a *gift* of God's grace. And it's to be enjoyed by all. And not just the 600 men with him. David also sends some of the plunder to the elders of Judah; **to those in all the other places where he and his men had roamed.** And he sends it with a message: **'Here is a gift for you from the plunder of the LORD'S enemies.'**

Here is a king who defeats God's enemies and shares the spoils with God's people. He brings the gifts of God's grace to others. Back in chapter 8, Samuel had warned the Israelites that a human king would take, take, take. But David is God's king who gives, gives, gives. It's a preview of what God's coming King will do. Jesus is *the* King who gives, gives, gives completely. When he comes, he gives *himself* on the cross for his people and defeats our greatest enemies: sin and death. And having risen from the grave, he shares the gifts of God's grace with all who come to him in faith.

Once again, David's providing a picture of what Jesus will do. Saul, on the other hand, provides a different picture. And 1 Samuel ends with his demise.

I've called our final heading: the death of Saul.

### The death of Saul

In chapter 31, we're taken back to the battlefield. Look at verse 1.

**Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell dead on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.**

Saul asks his armour-bearer to finish him off. But the armour-bearer is too terrified to do it. So, Saul falls on his own sword. And then the armour-bearer does the same. It's a terrible defeat. Saul and his sons all killed... including Jonathan, who remained faithful to his father to the very end.

And then we're told how the men of Jabesh Gilead, which Saul had rescued from Nahash the Ammonite, came to recover their bodies, and give them a proper burial.

In many ways, it's a terrible ending.

1 Samuel began with the Philistines gathering at Aphek to fight against Israel. And it ends with the Philistines gathering at Aphek and defeating Israel. It began with no king. It ends with a dead king. The Israelites had wanted a king like the nations around them who could lead them into battle. Yet despite *getting* the king they wanted, the book ends with the defeat they feared. Saul's reign has been futile. It reveals the futility of disobeying God and resisting his purposes.

When we first met Saul, we had high hopes for him. We were told that he was a head taller than anyone else in Israel. He looked the part! Yet the warnings had been there from the opening chapters. Remember Hannah's prayer. She said, '**[The LORD] humbles and he exalts... It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the LORD will be broken.**'

And when he became king, Saul's trajectory was downwards. He refused to listen to God. He disobeyed God by failing to destroy the Amalekites. He resisted God's purposes by pursuing David and trying to kill him. He became increasingly paranoid and isolated. And here in chapter 31 that downward trajectory ends in death.

His suicide is symbolic of his reign. No one had taken his throne from him. The Philistines didn't end his reign. David didn't end his reign and refused to do so even when he had the chance. Saul has ended his reign himself. His ruin was the result of his own failure to be humble before God. He had made God his enemy.

It serves as a warning to each of us. This is where human rule, or self-rule, will ultimately lead.

Yet this book doesn't end without hope. It's a tale of *two* kings. The other king is God's king, who brings God's rule to his people. When we first met him, he didn't look much like a king. He was from humble beginnings, the youngest and smallest of the sons of Jesse. But *his* trajectory has been upwards. David isn't perfect. But he has depended on God. God is with him. And as the book ends, he is poised to reign.

David is an example for us to follow. He teaches us how to live rightly before God, in humble dependence on him. And as we've seen many times during the past few weeks, he points us forward to the greatest king of all... to Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

So, as we come to the end of the book, the question we must answer is what kind of king we will follow. Which kingdom do we want to belong to?

The kingdom of the world is characterised by human rule. Self-rule. Those who belong to this kingdom refuse to listen to God and resist his purposes. They live for themselves. They may appear to prosper for a while. But ultimately, they are destined for ruin.

God's kingdom, on the other hand, is ruled by God's king, Jesus Christ. Those who belong to his kingdom listen to him and obey him. They live each day in close relationship with him and depend on him. His kingdom may appear to be small and of little consequence in the eyes of the world. But in the end, it will triumph.

Two kingdoms. Two different trajectories.

The challenge of 1 Samuel is to know which kingdom you belong to and which king you follow.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, the kingdom of your Son may not look much in the eyes of the world today, yet you have told us that it is his kingdom that will ultimately triumph. And his kingdom is full of goodness and grace. He is a king who gives, gives, gives. So please help us to follow him day by day, trusting in his cross, and delighting in his loving rule. We ask it in his name. Amen.