PREACHING *the* WORD

2 SAMUEL

YOUR KINGDOM COME

JOHN WOODHOUSE

R. Kent Hughes
Series Editor

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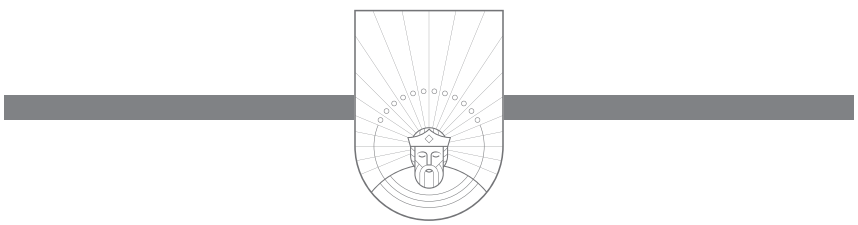

JOHN WOODHOUSE

R. Kent Hughes
Series Editor

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For
Elisabeth & Andrew
Luke & Victoria
Anne & Adrian
Susan & Jason
much loved fellow servants of the King

And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

2 SAMUEL 7:16

Contents

A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one's sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one's hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God's Word. This means that as we stand before God's people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God's Word, but God's actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God's smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be "the bringing of truth through personality." Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, "Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes

out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation." When a preacher's *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: "I thought you do not believe in the gospel." Hume replied, "I don't, but he does." Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

Introduction

Kingdom Matters

2 SAMUEL AND MATTHEW 6:9, 10

David is one of the most important figures of world history. This assessment, and the reasons for it, will emerge in the course of our study of the account of his reign through the pages of 2 Samuel. In general terms, however, the claim can hardly be doubted. In cultures that have been touched by his story, David has captured the imagination of great artists, sculptors, and writers. From children's storybooks to (perhaps the most famous representation) Michelangelo Buonarroti's *David*, this man is remembered and recognized by people of many backgrounds over 3,000 years after he lived.

A large part of the reason for this is the remarkable account of his life and reign found in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. The story is captivating. In one of the world's finest pieces of narrative literature, the greatness and the weaknesses of this man's life are portrayed in vivid and gripping detail. This remarkable literary work has made David known to the world and provided the basis for every other representation of him. David's impact on human history, thought, and culture has been, directly or indirectly, through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

However, we miss the significance of David almost entirely if we do not take careful note of the fact that his story belongs to the whole Bible story. While David, the man and the king, is as interesting as almost any great figure of human history, this is magnified many times over when we understand that he is a major figure in the history of God's purposes for the whole world. Again this fact, and its importance, will be elaborated as we see the narrative of 2 Samuel unfold.

As a great and significant historical figure, David can be (and has been) viewed from many different angles.[1] Each of these may or may not have a convincing claim to yield true insights into the importance of David. However the perspective from which to properly and fully understand David is that of Christian faith.[2] While this claim might sound puzzling (or even offensive) at first, it follows simply from recognizing that the whole Bible story (in which David's story is set) culminates in the news about Jesus Christ

(importantly introduced in the first sentence of the New Testament as "the son of David," Matthew 1:1). Those who believe this message are in a position to understand the importance of David as the Bible presents him, rather than arbitrarily taking his story out of this context. In the pages that follow we will repeatedly consider the importance of David for those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that David should be of interest only to Christian believers. On the contrary. But the biggest reason that David should interest believer and unbeliever alike is that his story illuminates the most important story in the history of the world—the story of Jesus Christ. David's story is an essential part of the story of Jesus Christ. Even a person who does not yet believe that story deserves to understand it.[3]

In the course of listening to the story of David in the book of 2 Samuel we will discover many facets to the way in which this story illuminates the story of Jesus and the life of faith in him. The central idea is the kingdom of God. David's story and Jesus' story are about the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God?

The Kingdom and Jesus

Jesus taught his disciples to pray for this kingdom:

> Our Father in heaven,
> hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come,
> your will be done,
> on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9, 10)

This is an astonishing prayer. That *God's kingdom* would come means *God's perfect will* being done here on earth as it is in Heaven. The kingdom of God is God's own rule, his reign over all. We are praying for a kingdom of goodness, glory, righteousness, grace, peace, blessing.

Christian believers pray "Your kingdom come" (v. 10) because we believe the promise on which this prayer is based. The promise has come to us from Jesus Christ, who began his public life "proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). "The gospel of the kingdom"[4] (or in Christian vocabulary simply "the gospel") is the news ("gospel" means "news"[5]) about God's kingdom made known by Jesus. His message was, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He taught about what the kingdom is like (see Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 18:23; 22:2; 25:1) and about "enter[ing]" the

kingdom (Matthew 18:3; 19:23, 24; 21:31; 23:13; cf. 25:34; John 3:5). This kingdom was his constant theme (see Acts 1:3) because it is *his* kingdom (Matthew 16:28; Luke 1:33; 22:29, 30; John 18:36; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:11; Revelation 11:15); he is its king (Matthew 21:5; 25:34; Luke 19:38; John 12:15; 18:37; Acts 17:7; Revelation 17:14; 19:16).[6]

The Kingdom in Christian Experience

This kingdom is therefore the theme of the Christian message (see Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). The kingdom is central to the Christian experience: we have been transferred to, are being called into, and are receiving the kingdom (Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; Hebrews 12:28). We are looking forward to this kingdom (2 Timothy 4:1, 18; 2 Peter 1:11) and to the day when Christ "delivers the kingdom to God the Father" (1 Corinthians 15:24).[7]

Furthermore the kingdom defines the Christian mission. Just days before his death Jesus said to his disciples, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). Those engaged in the task of making known the news of the kingdom are "workers for the kingdom" (Colossians 4:11; cf. Revelation 1:9).

Christian believers are therefore kingdom people. We receive the kingdom of God by humbly coming under the royal rule of Jesus Christ. We pray for the coming of God's kingdom (just as we pray "Come, Lord Jesus," Revelation 22:20). We are committed to the task of proclaiming the news of his kingdom to all people everywhere.

This way of speaking, thoroughly Biblical as we have seen it to be, can be difficult for us. It is certainly awkward for our contemporaries who may be seeking to understand the Christian faith. These days most of us have little, if anything, to do with kings and kingdoms. We may be aware that historically these ideas can have terrible associations. Kings have been tyrants. Monarchies have become acceptable in today's world only when transformed into a largely ceremonial and symbolic role, as we see in Britain's "constitutional monarchy." Even then many (in countries like my homeland of Australia) long to be rid of such archaic forms with their associations of privilege, power, and worse. Only a short time ago (in historical terms) the people of the United States of America fought a bitter eight-year-long war to gain independence from a king and declared, in an apparent repudiation of the very idea of kingship, that "All men are created equal."[8]

We, for whom kings and kingdoms are at best strange ideas, may well

ask, what is the *kingdom* of God, for which Christians have been praying for 2,000 years, and of which the New Testament says so much?

The Kingdom of God: The Bible's Theme

The Bible's answer to that question is astounding. On the one hand, the kingdom of God is what the history of all things has been about. On the other hand, the kingdom of God is the ultimate solution to all of the world's troubles.

However, this kingdom is not a human achievement. Human activity, political or otherwise, will never establish God's kingdom. Indeed the Bible's promise, and the Christian hope, is that this kingdom will come *despite* the weakness, foolishness, and wickedness of human efforts. The kingdom of God will come as God's gift, not our accomplishment.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, he was not introducing a new idea. Indeed, his message was that the time for the kingdom was "fulfilled" (Mark 1:15). That is, the long-expected time had come. This expectation was created, in no small measure, by the story of David, the king who had reigned over Israel 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Our reading of 2 Samuel will help us understand the expectation that makes sense of Jesus' announcement.

The kingdom of God can be rightly seen as the theme of the whole Bible. The idea is not limited to the actual expression.[9] God's kingdom is both his *rule* as king (in this sense "kingdom" means "king*ship*") and the *realm* that is under his rule. To say that the theme of the Bible is the kingdom of God is to recognize that the Bible is about God's rule and the bringing of all things under his rule.

David's Reign and the Bible's Theme

Before we begin to read the story of David's reign it is important to see that it is, in a significant sense, pivotal in the Old Testament's presentation of the kingdom of God. At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that everything in the Old Testament before David (Genesis to 1 Samuel) is leading up to his reign, and everything after David (1 Kings to Malachi) looks back to David's kingdom and confirms the expectation that this was the beginning of something of monumental importance for the whole world.

In brief, the Bible's story prior to David's reign may be summarized as follows: God created all things by his sovereign will and word (Genesis 1, 2). His kingdom is seen in creation itself.[10] However, humankind repudi-

ated God's good and wise rule, and the goodness of the whole creation was disrupted by this upheaval (Genesis 3—11). And yet, despite humanity's corruption, God promised to yet bring blessing to the world through a nation descended from Abraham (Genesis 12—50; especially 12:1–3), a nation in which his rule would be honored.[11] He redeemed this nation from bondage to another king, Pharaoh of Egypt (Exodus—Leviticus) and brought them into the land he had promised Abraham (Numbers—Joshua). Sadly, this nation repeatedly turned away from God (Judges), ultimately demanding a human king so that they could be like the pagan nations around them rather than the people over whom the Lord God was king (1 Samuel 8:4–8; 12:12, 17, 19). Astonishingly God gave them the king they asked for (1 Samuel 8:22), but he refused to forsake the people he had made his own (1 Samuel 12:22). They could have their king only so long as both king and people followed the Lord (1 Samuel 12:13–15). Saul was that king (1 Samuel 10:1, 24; 11:15). But he failed to fulfill the condition of his kingship (1 Samuel 13:13; 15:10, 17–23; 28:17–19). When God rejected Saul, he promised that he would provide a different king, one of *his* choosing (in this sense "a man after *his* [God's] own heart," 1 Samuel 13:14), and therefore "better" than Saul (1 Samuel 15:28). This king was David. In contrast to Saul, he was not chosen *by the people for themselves* (1 Samuel 8:18; 12:17, 19), but he was a king provided *by God for himself* (1 Samuel 16:1).[12]

As the book of 2 Samuel begins, therefore, we may anticipate that God's king will at last rule over God's people in God's way. In David's reign, in other words, we expect to see the kingdom of God. Up to a point, that is what we will see. However, too soon we will find that even David failed to be the righteous and faithful king we have been led to expect.[13]

After David's death, and after the brief period of glory in the early part of his son Solomon's reign, the kingdom that had been David's disintegrated. The books of 1 and 2 Kings tell the story. Where then, we reasonably ask, is the kingdom of God? What has become of the promises that supported its expectation? The answers to these questions come through the prophets who appear during and after the collapse of the kingdom that had been David's. Their message includes the clear promise that the hopes that had rightly become attached to David will yet be realized. For example:

> Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 33:14, 15)[14]

We have therefore seen that the story 2 Samuel tells is central to the Bible's message. God is the King. He is at work in the history of the world establishing his kingdom. As we hear of David's remarkable reign, we will see this purpose of God taking shape. We will more clearly understand what Jesus meant when he announced, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). More than this, we will know more deeply what it means to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10).

Part 1

THE KING IS DEAD

2 Samuel 1

1

A Dead King, a Victorious King, and a Time of Waiting

2 SAMUEL 1:1

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag.

1:1

THE BOOKS WE KNOW AS 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel tell the story of the first two kings of God's Old Testament people, the nation Israel.[1] Saul's reign occupied the last couple of decades of the second millennium BC.[2] The tragic story is told in 1 Samuel. It is a story of monumental failure, ending with Saul's violent death by his own hand (1 Samuel 31). Then David reigned for the first forty years of the first millennium BC.[3] He was to be remembered as Israel's greatest king. The brilliant but complicated story of his extraordinary reign is the subject of 2 Samuel.

The whole story is about leadership—Israel's longing for leadership they could trust, how and why Saul failed them, how and why David did so much better but also failed.

The opening words of 2 Samuel mention three events that, as we will see, turn out to have very great consequences for the whole world:

(1) The death of Saul (v. 1a).
(2) The victory of David (v. 1b).
(3) Two days that changed everything (v. 1c).

The fact that few today are even aware of these events underlines the importance of hearing the message of the book that begins in this way. The story of King David has more to teach us than almost any other human life in the history of the world. There is a reason that Jesus Christ was known as the son of *David*.

The Death of Saul (v. 1a)

"After the death of Saul" (v. 1a) would make a fitting title for the book of 2 Samuel.[4] There is evidence that the two books of 1 and 2 Samuel may once have been considered one.[5] Certainly they tell one continuous story.[6] However, it is clear that the story has two distinct parts, and Part Two is about what happened "after the death of Saul" (v. 1a).[7] The break between 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1 is appropriate and significant.[8]

Saul's death (and the manner of his death) was the culmination of his tragic life. It marked the end of what might be described as a failed "experiment" in Israel. Saul had been appointed king by the prophet Samuel, in obedience to God (see 1 Samuel 8:22; 9:16; 10:24; 11:14, 15). However, this had been the Lord's response to the insistent demand of the people for a king because they wanted to be "like all the nations" (1 Samuel 8:20; cf. 1 Samuel 8:5). They wanted the security that the leaders of other nations seemed to provide. They were in effect rejecting God as the one who could deliver them. In response to this faithless demand God did two things.

First, he gave them what they had asked for. Ironically Saul's very name meant, "Asked For."[9] Therefore Saul was "the king whom *you* have chosen, for whom *you* have asked" (1 Samuel 12:13); "*your* king, whom *you* have chosen *for yourselves*" (1 Samuel 8:18).

Second, God set the terms by which Saul would reign. The Lord had no intention of abandoning the people he had made his own (1 Samuel 12:22). He would *not* allow them to become "like all the nations" (see Exodus 19:4–6, 1 Samuel 8:20). They could have the king they "ask[ed] for" (and perhaps they would learn their lesson, see 1 Samuel 8:9–18), but the king would be chosen by God and reign on conditions set by him: he and his people must "fear the LORD and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD" (1 Samuel 12:14). In other words, God would allow his people to have the king that they asked for, only so long as both king and people lived in obedience to God.

Saul was also therefore, in this sense, "him whom *the Lord* has chosen" (1 Samuel 10:24). He was, in this context, "the LORD's anointed" (see 1 Samuel 2:10; 10:1; 12:3, 5; 15:17; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23).

And so Saul became the God-appointed king of his people Israel, with all the solemn responsibilities this entailed (see 1 Samuel 10:25; 15:1).

The death of Saul was therefore terrible. Death is always terrible, but this was the death of one who had been the Lord's anointed king. At the same time it was the end of one in whom the people had once placed such high expectations, such hopes.

Saul died because he failed to fulfill the conditions God had placed on his kingship. Saul "did not obey the voice of the LORD" (1 Samuel 28:18; cf. 15:1). 1 Samuel 13 and 15 tell the story. It was a catastrophe (see 1 Samuel 13:11a, 13; 15:11, 19, 22, 23, 26). Only a king who was fully and perfectly obedient to God could reign over the people whose true king was God himself (1 Samuel 8:7; 12:12). Saul's death was God's judgment on his disobedience (1 Samuel 28:16–19).

At the same time Saul's ugly death was dreadful proof of the people's foolishness in desiring a king "like all the nations" (1 Samuel 8:5). In human terms, Saul had once appeared to hold great promise as a leader (1 Samuel 10:23, 24). He had the qualities Israel was looking for in a leader. What hopes had once rested on Saul! The people wanted a king to "go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Samuel 8:20). The Lord himself had said, "He shall save my people from the hands of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 9:16). And in fact he accomplished quite a lot (see 1 Samuel 11:1–11; 14:47, 48). In the end, however, the Philistines defeated Saul and drove him to suicide (1 Samuel 31). He died a failure. It is not difficult to imagine an Israelite in those days lamenting, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

The book of 2 Samuel opens with the implied question, what will happen "after the death of Saul" (v. 1)? If Saul could not secure Israel's life, what hope was there?

The Death of Saul and the Death of Jesus

A thousand years later there was another death that appeared to have similarities to the death of Saul. Like Saul this man had been known as "the Christ" (in Hebrew *mashiakh* [Messiah], meaning "anointed one"). Certainly some who had believed in this man *did* say, when he died, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). Jesus' shameful, humiliating death (so like Saul's in this respect; see especially 1 Samuel 31:8–10) dashed

the hopes of those who had believed in him, just as the death of Saul had shattered his followers (see 1 Samuel 31:7).

Certainly some saw Jesus' terrible death (like Saul's) as God's judgment on him (see Deuteronomy 21:23), and they were not entirely wrong (see Galatians 3:13). They drew the apparently reasonable conclusion that his death (like Saul's) marked his disqualification from being the Messiah he had claimed to be (see, for example, Mark 15:29–32). In the days immediately following his crucifixion, the death of Jesus raised the same question as the one posed by the death of Saul: What will happen *after the death of Jesus*?

The Victory of David (v. 1b)

Let's return to the question raised by Saul's death, 1,000 years earlier. It will be answered by the whole story that the book of 2 Samuel has to tell. However, in the opening words of the book the answer is signaled. Alongside the death of Saul, the first sentence of 2 Samuel sets a very different event in the life of another man, to whom our attention is now drawn: "David had returned from striking down the Amalekites"[10] (v. 1b).

Anyone who has read 1 Samuel (and every reader of 2 Samuel should have done that first) knows that the earlier book has told the story of Saul and his failure. But alongside that tragic account there has been the beginning of another story, the story of David. David was introduced in 1 Samuel 16, immediately after Saul's calamitous act of disobedience in 1 Samuel 15, and his story could hardly have been more different from that of Saul.

After Saul had decisively failed to be the fully obedient king he was required to be, David had been chosen by God to be king over Israel. However, the Lord's choice of David was different from his choice of Saul. This time it had not been a response to the rebellious demand of the people, but, as Samuel put it, "According to *his own heart* the LORD has sought *for himself* a man."[11] That is, this time God was not giving the people what *they* had asked for, but out of God's own good will ("his own heart" 1 Samuel 13:14)[12] God was choosing a man for his own purpose ("for himself"). This was the essential difference between Saul and David, and the reason that David was a "better" man than Saul to be Israel's king (1 Samuel 15:28). Saul was the kind of king the people wanted so they could be like the nations around them. David was chosen out of a very different purpose—God's own heart.

Although David did not become king immediately, his story from 1 Samuel 16 on displays his superiority to Saul. He was more successful in fighting Israel's enemies (see 1 Samuel 17; then 18:5, 7, 14, 15, 30). This was because "the LORD was with him" (1 Samuel 18:14b) in a way he was

evidently not with Saul (see 1 Samuel 16:13, 14). He repeatedly displayed faithfulness and righteousness of character and conduct (1 Samuel 26:23), while Saul was utterly unreliable and downright wicked (1 Samuel 24:17). This, too, must be seen as a consequence of the Lord's favor resting on David (rather than the basis for this fact).[13]

The last five chapters of 1 Samuel interweave the two contrasting stories of Saul and David in a way that suggests that the events described in each narrative were happening at about the same time.[14] As the terrified Saul approached his final confrontation with the Philistines (see 1 Samuel 28:15), and at last took his own life on Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31:4), David (for rather complicated reasons, see 1 Samuel 27, 29) was three days journey away, to the south, smashing Amalekites (1 Samuel 30:1, 17–20).

The death of the king and the terrible defeat suffered by Israel at the hands of the Philistines up north was devastating. We are told that the Philistines proclaimed the "good news" of their decisive triumph throughout their land (1 Samuel 31:9). An observer could be excused for failing even to notice what was happening with David, far away to the south. In any case it would have been difficult to think that whatever was happening down there near Ziklag could have any bearing on the dismal future now faced by the vanquished people of Israel.

By setting the death of Saul alongside the victory of David over the Amalekites in 1:1[15] the writer has signaled three things.

First, the death of Saul (monumentally tragic as it was) and the resounding defeat suffered by Israel at that time was *not the end of the story*. At the same time there was a victory. The victory may have been hardly noticed at the time, but it was the hope of Israel's future.

Second, the victorious one was David, the one about whom 1 Samuel has already said so much. Any hope in Saul was now gone. The hope of Israel now rested in David. Not all Israelites yet realized or accepted this, and there were understandable reasons for that. However 2 Samuel opens by drawing our attention from *Saul* and his final failure to *David* and his distant victory over Israel's enemies.

Third, nothing could better represent David's greater credentials for reigning over Israel than the fact that the enemies he had defeated were, of all people, the Amalekites.[16] The Amalekites had played an ominous role in the life of Saul. On the one hand we have been briefly told that during his reign Saul "struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel" (1 Samuel 14:48). However, on the other hand it was precisely Saul's failure to obey a command of God *with regard to the Amalekites* that was central to his failure as

king (1 Samuel 15; see especially vv. 2, 3, 5–9, 18, 19, 32, 33). Indeed Saul was told, the night before he died, "Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD and did not carry out his fierce wrath *against Amalek*, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day" (1 Samuel 28:18). But at the very time Saul died *because of his failure to deal with the Amalekites*, David had been "*striking down* the Amalekites." The verb is vivid and might remind us of the same Hebrew word used rather often of David's military successes, particularly against the Philistines (1 Samuel 17:26, 35, 36, 46, 49, 50, 57; 18:6, 7, 27; 19:5, 8; 21:9, 11; 23:2, 5; 27:9; 29:5; 30:17). It is the same word that was used of the Philistines' violence against Saul's sons on Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 31:2). However, it is also the word that was used to describe what Saul *should* have done to the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3) and what he incompletely did do (1 Samuel 15:7).

Therefore, if the book of 2 Samuel is going to answer the question, what will happen "after the death of Saul?" (1:1) the first hint is that: (1) the death of Saul was not all that was happening on that dreadful day: there was a victory being won, even if it was unnoticed by most; (2) the victory was being won by David, the one who had been chosen by God to be a better king than Saul; and (3) the victory was in fact reversing Saul's momentous failure.[17]

David's Victory and Jesus' Victory

A thousand years later, when Jesus died a death surprisingly like the death of Saul, the truth was that on that day: (1) a victory was won, even if it was unnoticed by most (Colossians 2:15); (2) the victory was won by the one chosen by God to be king over all, "great David's greater son"[18]; and (3) his victory was in fact reversing humanity's momentous failure (see, for example, Romans 5:19).

The great difference between the questions, what will happen after the death of Saul? and what will happen after the death of Jesus? is that the answer to the latter does not require us to look away from Jesus and his death to another king. In this case it was the one who had died who won the victory, and he did so in the very act of dying.

Two Days That Changed Everything (v. 1c)

The third element in 1:1 is a reference to the period of time after David had won his victory, but before the news of Saul's death had reached him: "David remained two days in Ziklag" (v. 1c).

Ziklag had been the starting and end point for the Amalekite conflict

referred to in the previous phrase (see 1 Samuel 30:1, 26). Through a rather strange sequence of events Ziklag had been given to David by the Philistine king Achish (1 Samuel 27:6).[19] We need not rehearse here all that had happened at Ziklag (although the reference is certainly meant as a reminder of the story in 1 Samuel 30). We are simply told that David remained there for two days before the next major event occurred.

These two days would have been days of suspense for David. He knew that far to the north the Philistine forces had massed to fight against Saul and Israel. But he did not yet know the outcome. They were two days in which we (the readers) know that the old king had died, but the one we expect to become the new king did not yet know this. They were two days in which there was in fact "no king in Israel." This was the situation that had prevailed immediately prior to the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel (see Judges 21:25). In these two days Israel returned in this regard to the situation with which the story that had led to Saul's appointment had begun. The difference now was that David was waiting in Ziklag.

As we read the Gospel accounts in the New Testament, it is interesting to notice that after the death of Jesus there were two days in which the future was uncertain—at least to those who were afraid and waiting for they knew not what. It was on the third day that the next major event occurred. The New Testament writers understood that Jesus' resurrection "on the third day" had been anticipated in the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:4). It is not unreasonable to suggest that the two days between the death of Saul and the emergence of David "on the third day" (2 Samuel 1:2) was a part of the pattern.[20]

The question for which we have been prepared by the opening sentence of 2 Samuel is, what happened on the third day after the death of Saul? When leadership like Saul's had finally failed, what hope was there? These questions will be answered in the pages that follow.

2

Who Says Crime Doesn't Pay?

2 SAMUEL 1:2–10

TWO CONTRADICTORY VIEWS of life are captured in the sayings "Crime doesn't pay" and "Who says crime doesn't pay?" The first sounds noble, good, and wise. It recognizes the bitter fruit that doing wrong can produce and warns would-be perpetrators to think again. "Crime doesn't pay." The second, however, reflects realistic observation of life—crime often *does* pay. "Who says crime doesn't pay?"

Which do you believe—really? And why?

There is ample evidence to support the second perspective. Few really believe there is nothing to be gained from criminal activity. Otherwise by this time most intelligent criminals would have learned the lesson. However, all over the world, in every nation and people group, every city and village, crime continues to be part of life. Those who engage in unlawful activities believe they will benefit. It is far from obvious that they are wrong.

Of course they are *sometimes* wrong. Some criminals are caught, some crimes fail in their intentions, some wrongdoing has unexpected dire consequences for the perpetrator. But this does not gainsay the fact that we live in a world where crime often *does* pay very handsomely indeed. "Crime doesn't pay" sounds good, but it also sounds more like wishful thinking than persuasive truth.

Those responsible for crime prevention in any community have the unenviable task of persuading would-be criminals that the potential penalty for unlawful behavior and the risk of being caught outweigh the potential

benefits. "Crime *probably* will not pay" is a difficult message to convey and is never completely successful.

Perhaps we could defend the view that "crime doesn't pay" by arguing that such benefits as may be attained through crime and misdeeds are superficial and short-lived and do not offset the damage that will be suffered one way or another by the wrongdoer, whether or not their offenses ever come to light. Over time the advantages of ill-gotten gains can be seriously diminished by a troubled conscience, an increasingly flawed character, a tarnished reputation, an inability to earn trust, or ongoing fears of being exposed. However, this is also a difficult argument to sustain effectively. Crime continues the world over because at least some people estimate that the intangible downside is worth it: crime can pay *enough* to make the pain (such as it may be) worthwhile. So it is widely believed.

I suspect that few readers of this book are criminals (in the usual sense of that word). However, what if we include all forms of wrongdoing? Consider some of the wrong things you have done recently—an untruthfulness, a less-than-kind action, a broken promise, some selfish and inconsiderate behavior, some good you could have done but didn't. Many of us will be able to think of more serious wrongs that we have committed. Perhaps no one else knows of the misconduct. Here is my suggestion. In every case you did the wrong thing because you believed that you would derive *some* benefit from doing it. In other words, all of us who do wrong of *any* kind (that is, all of us) actually believe that *doing wrong* (at least sometimes) *does pay*. We believe that we can gain pleasure, prosperity, security, status, power, or some other advantage by doing the wrong thing. Otherwise we would never do it. "Who says crime doesn't pay?"

What do you think it would take to persuade us to think differently? How different would our lives be if we *really did believe* there is nothing to be gained by doing wrong?

Second Samuel begins with a remarkable incident in which someone was convinced that crime would pay. He sought to gain from a lie and a more dramatic act of which we will hear. He was wrong. He made a terrible miscalculation. His experience holds the key to one of life's most important lessons.

We have already been reminded (1:1a) that Saul, Israel's king, had died. This happened on Mount Gilboa, where the Israelites had suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Philistines, long-time bitter enemies of Saul and the Israelites. The detailed account of what happened has been provided in 1 Samuel 31.

At the time of Saul's death David was about a three-day journey to the south, in the town of Ziklag (1 Samuel 30:1).[1] Ziklag was the town that had been given to David in the rather complicated circumstances described in 1 Samuel 27 (see v. 6). While Saul's forces had been suffering the Philistine assault to the north in the vicinity of Mount Gilboa, David and his men had been rather busy down south in Ziklag. They had been pursuing and dealing with the Amalekites (1:1b) who had earlier destroyed the town of Ziklag and "taken captive the women and all who were in [Ziklag], both small and great" (1 Samuel 30:2a). David had now returned to Ziklag, having rescued and recovered all that the Amalekites had taken (1 Samuel 30:18), and had been there for two days (1:1c).

To appreciate what happened next we must remember two things about David. First, he was fully aware of the conflict far to the north (see 1 Samuel 28:1, 2; 29:1–11). He had left that scene just before the hostilities had begun. Second, he did not yet know the outcome. Specifically he had not yet heard the news of Saul's death. During the two days he waited in Ziklag he was, no doubt, anxious to know how the hostilities to the north had gone.

The narrative now invites us to join David in Ziklag. We will see:

(1) What happened "on the third day" (v. 2).
(2) The man's story (vv. 3–10).

What Happened "On the Third Day" (v. 2)

> And on the third day, behold, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. And when he came to David, he fell to the ground and paid homage. (v. 2)

The arrival of this man that day in Ziklag was surprising, perplexing, and ominous. He is neither named nor identified in any other way (yet). Who was he? Where had he come from? Why had he come to Ziklag? What news did he bring? The answers to these questions were far from obvious to anyone witnessing the scruffy stranger's entrance into the ruined town of Ziklag that day.

The narrator tells us that the man came "from Saul's camp" (v. 2). Literally the text says, "from the camp, from with Saul." Two things are important to note about this piece of information.

First, since it is the narrator who tells us this, we understand that it is true.[2] This is perplexing for us as we read the account. We have heard in 1 Samuel 31 (again from the narrator, and therefore authoritatively) what happened to Saul. The only persons whom we know were with Saul at the

end (three of his sons and his armor-bearer) had died on Mount Gilboa along with Saul (see 1 Samuel 31:2, 5). Who, then, was this man who came (literally) "from with Saul"?

Second, the text subtly suggests that "from the camp, from with Saul" is not only information provided to the reader by the narrator, but also *how David saw this man* as he arrived in Ziklag. The word "behold" in verse 2 represents an idiom in Hebrew that, in this context, seems to focus our attention on the described scene *as it would have appeared to David* and those with him in Ziklag that day.[3]

This suggests that as he waited for two days in Ziklag (1:1c) David was on the lookout for news "from the camp, from with Saul." The urgency of the difficulties that had faced him on his return to Ziklag (1 Samuel 30:1) would not have diminished his apprehension about the outcome of the conflict with the Philistines that he had left behind only a few days earlier. The disheveled man who arrived on the third day was immediately (and rightly, the narrator has confirmed) assumed by David to have come with news of "the camp of Israel" (v. 3), and especially of Saul.

However, David could not have known for certain that this was the case. In recent times he had been living a dangerous double life. To all appearances he had become a trusted servant of the Philistine king Achish (1 Samuel 27:12). This, however, was a deceit. David had been driven to the land of the Philistines to escape Saul's murderous plots against him (1 Samuel 27:1), but there he had duped Achish into trusting him, while in fact never ceasing to serve the interests of the people of Israel (see 1 Samuel 27:8–12). Therefore it would have been conceivable that the man who arrived on the third day had come from the *Philistine* camp with news for the supposed trusted servant of Achish about how the battle had gone *for the Philistines*. Indeed it would have been reasonable to assume this because Achish and the Philistines knew that David had returned to Ziklag (1 Samuel 29:4, 10, 11).

However, David appears to have seen the man who arrived in the light of his own real concerns, which were for the Israelites and for Saul. He saw the man as he hoped he was: "from the camp, from with Saul."

The appearance of the man who arrived was ominous. "Clothes torn and dirt on his head" (v. 3) signaled bad news. These were conventional expressions of mourning. On a much earlier occasion a man looking just like this had come from another battle between the Israelites and the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:12[4]). He was the "man of Benjamin" (1 Samuel 4:12) who brought the terrible news to old Eli in Shiloh that the Israelite forces had been crushed, Eli's sons had been killed, and the ark of the covenant

had been captured by the enemy. This news had killed Eli (1 Samuel 4:18). The scene in Ziklag many years later is reminiscent of that day in Shiloh.[5] We (who have read 1 Samuel 31) know that a man who came to Ziklag from "with Saul" would be bringing news as devastating as the news brought similarly years before to Shiloh.

We will soon have reason to question the genuineness of this man's expressions of grief.[6] For the moment we see him as David saw him—one who appeared to be bringing bad news from the battlefront.

The scene creates a puzzle that must have perplexed David as much as it should bother us who are hearing the account at this point. Who could this man be, bringing news from the conflict in the north to David here in Ziklag? Those who supported David were there with him in Ziklag (see 1 Samuel 27:3; 29:11; 30:1, 18, 19). Those who had stayed with Saul, loyal to their king, knew that David had earlier fled from the land of Israel. They had heard that he joined the Philistines (1 Samuel 27:4). How could they have known that David was now in Ziklag? Who was this man, and why had he come to Ziklag?

The man's actions when he approached David were extraordinary. "He fell to the ground and paid homage" (v. 2c). While this may not be entirely unambiguous,[7] in this context we (the readers) must see this man (genuinely or otherwise) acknowledging what we know, namely that David is now the king. We might compare the similar act of Abigail, who certainly understood David's future (see 1 Samuel 25:23, 28–30). Indeed there have been many in the story so far who have recognized that David would succeed Saul as Israel's king (see this idea develop through 1 Samuel 18:3, 4, 7, 16, 30; 20:15, 16, 31; 21:11; 23:17; 24:20; 26:25; 28:17). It will be some time before all in Israel acknowledge this fact (5:1–3). However, on that day in Ziklag the man who came to David seemed to understand. This adds to the mystery. Who was he—apparently the first person to bow before the new king?

Again we will shortly have reason to doubt the integrity of the man's bowing before David. Indeed we will come to see him as "nothing but an insincere flatterer."[8] At this stage, however, we see him as David saw him—a surprisingly subservient individual about whom there are many questions.

The Man's Story (vv. 3–10)

The story now unfolds as David proceeded to ask the man a series of these questions, and the man responded.

Question 1: "Where Do You Come From?" (v. 3)

David's first question was to confirm his first impressions: "David said to him, 'Where do you come from?'" (v. 3a). David had no evidence yet to confirm that the man had come from Saul's camp. From David's point of view it was still possible that the man had come from the Philistine lines, or perhaps from somewhere else altogether.

The man's reply did a little more than provide the confirmation David sought. "And he said to him, 'I have escaped from the camp of Israel'" (v. 3b). "From the camp of Israel" (v. 3) would have answered David's question and, as the narrator has informed us in verse 2, done so truly. But what did he mean that he had "escaped"? The obvious meaning is that he had come "from the camp of Israel" (v. 3), having escaped *from the Philistines*. However, by saying, "I have escaped *from the camp of Israel*," the stranger (perhaps unintentionally) made a connection with the man to whom he had come. For a long time now David had repeatedly "escaped" from Saul (see the refrain-like occurrences of the Hebrew verb in the story of David's flight from the threats of Saul—1 Samuel 19:10, 11, 12, 17, 18; 22:1; 23:13; 27:1[9]). The man who had now come to David had, he said, "escaped" from Saul's camp. Was he subtly putting himself on David's side of any breach that there might still be between David and "the camp of Israel"? He, too, was an escapee from the sphere of Saul's influence.[10]

The important and obvious point is that David's first impressions were confirmed. The bedraggled man was indeed from the Israelite camp and therefore could be expected to have news of the conflict.

Question 2: "How Did It Go?" (v. 4)

David's second question was therefore predictable, expressing the concern he must have had since leaving the vicinity of the dreaded engagement some days earlier: "And David said to him, 'How did it go? Tell me'" (v. 4a).

"How did it go?" (more literally, "What was the situation?"[11]) is precisely the question old Eli asked the messenger in that earlier encounter at Shiloh (1 Samuel 4:16), of which we have already been reminded. We are probably right to see a parallel between the devastating news brought on these two occasions. Each signaled the end of an era of leadership in Israel. Eli's period as judge ended that day years earlier (see 1 Samuel 2:31; 4:18). David's echo of the question that had been asked on that day will bring the news of the end of Saul's reign as king.[12]

The mysterious messenger responded with the news he had brought:

"And he answered, 'The people[13] fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead'" (v. 4b). As on the earlier occasion at Shiloh (see 1 Samuel 4:16), the messenger's news unfolds one piece of information at a time, moving toward what will be the climactic news for David.[14] First he reported the rout: the people fled. Second, he told of the large death toll: many are dead. Third, he gave the most significant news of all: even Saul is dead. And, fourth, as though he knew something of David's particular concern, he added: Jonathan, Saul's son, is also dead.

All of this we know to be true because the narrator has recounted these things in 1 Samuel 31. Certainly the messenger reduced his report to essentials. For some reason he did not mention the deaths of two other sons of Saul (1 Samuel 31:2). This suggests that his news had been given a particular emphasis. Saul and his heir apparent ("his son," v. 4) were dead. It may also suggest that the messenger knew something of the remarkable and important relationship between David and Jonathan (most recently see 1 Samuel 23:16–18). In any case the fact that the deaths of Abinadab and Malchi-shua were not considered to have the same urgent importance as the facts reported does not undermine the complete truthfulness of the report to this point.

It was, of course, momentous news. For a long time David had known that Saul's day would come. He had said, "As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish" (1 Samuel 26:10). Now all three of these things had come to pass in the one event. David had also known that Saul's death would usher in his own succession to kingship over Israel. Although we have not heard as much from David's lips, it has been said again and again by others, usually in David's hearing. David had only ever disagreed with those who anticipated his reign in the question of how it would come about. Repeatedly he had insisted that he would not be the one to raise his hand against Saul. The news that Saul was indeed dead was the most important news David could hear.

Question 3: The Full Story (vv. 5–10)

David was no fool. Was there something about this man's manner that suggested a lack of integrity? Perhaps there was an incongruity between the expressions of mourning (v. 2) and the way in which he conveyed the news of the Israelite deaths (v. 4). Did he sound as if he thought he was bringing *good* news? That is how David will recall this moment some time later (see 4:10). Whatever the reason, David considered that the man could not be taken simply at his word. So David's third question pressed the young man

for more details: "Then David said to the young man who told him, 'How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?'" (v. 5).

The narrator focuses our attention on the man's activity in telling David his story. He is described (literally) as "the young man[15] who was telling him."[16] The messenger will be referred to in precisely this way three times (see also vv. 6, 13). The man's telling is the focus of attention. We know that so far his telling has been truthful. But how could David know this? That was David's question, and we will see he was shrewd to have asked it.

The Young Man Was There (v. 6)

"The young man who was telling" David these things responded to David's question with much more detail. His reply begins to answer some of the questions that his arrival in Ziklag raised but also presents us with further perplexities. His response, like his initial report, unfolded step by step. This is how it began:

> And the young man who told him said, "By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and there was Saul leaning on his spear, and behold, the chariots and the horsemen were close upon him." (v. 6)

The young man was claiming to be an eyewitness to the events he was telling.[17] While he had not yet given David evidence that this claim was true, we (the readers) have good reason to believe him. His report is very close to the truth as we know it from 1 Samuel 31, and it is difficult to know how anyone who had not seen these things could have known the details.

First, Mount Gilboa was indeed the location of Saul's death (1 Samuel 31:1). We may be a little puzzled at how the young man "by chance happened" to be there.[18] "Does one accidentally stumble onto a battle field while the killing is still going on?"[19] Be that as it may, such questions are hardly enough to dismiss the credibility of this witness.

It is certainly believable that he saw "Saul leaning on his spear" (v. 6). We know that Saul was badly wounded (or greatly distressed[20]) by the Philistine archers (1 Samuel 31:3). The plausible image of Saul leaning on his spear is a reminder to us (as it may have been to David) of the role of that spear in Saul's life, especially in his hostilities toward David. Saul and Jonathan were the only Israelites (at one time at least) to have a spear (1 Samuel 13:22). The spear was often in Saul's hand; it was almost his badge of office (1 Samuel 18:10; 19:9; 22:6; 26:7). David had quietly stolen the spear once, without harming Saul, as a bold demonstration of his faithfulness to

Saul (1 Samuel 26:11, 12, 16, 22, 23). Twice Saul had hurled that spear at David himself (1 Samuel 18:11; 19:10) and once at Jonathan because of his friendship with David (1 Samuel 20:33).[21] This detail of the young man's testimony enhances his credibility.

If we were particularly suspicious we may have some questions about the claim that "the chariots and the horsemen[22] were close upon him" (v. 6). We heard only of archers in 1 Samuel 31:3, and there are reasons to think that chariots, while effective in the valley of Jezreel just to the north of Mount Gilboa, would not have been able to negotiate the more rugged terrain of the mountain itself. However, this is to claim to know too much. We do not know exactly where on Mount Gilboa this scene was located, nor the details of the topography. Furthermore archers are known to have operated from chariots. The apparent conflict between the man's testimony and the narrator's account in 1 Samuel 31:3 is no more than the variation we would expect from independent eyewitnesses who each provide different details of a complex scene.[23]

So far neither we (the readers) nor David have any reason to doubt "the young man who was telling" all this. It sounds as though the young man was indeed a witness to the events reported in 1 Samuel 31.

The Young Man Was Called by Saul (v. 7)

At this point, however, his story takes a turn that could only be noticed by those who (unlike David) have already heard what really happened on Mount Gilboa. In 1 Samuel 31 the narrator tells us how the exhausted, and possibly wounded, Saul called on his armor-bearer to finish him off (1 Samuel 31:4a). If we suppose (as seems reasonable) that the young man telling the story now to David was there and witnessed that dreadful conversation, listen to how he now twisted it. He purported that the conversation in question had taken place not with Saul's armor-bearer but with himself—and that it went rather differently.

He continued his tale: "And when he [Saul] looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, 'Here I am'" (v. 7). So he not only witnessed the events on Mount Gilboa (he says). He was close enough to have spoken with Saul himself.

David had no reason to doubt he was telling the truth. But we do. In the context of what really happened as it has been narrated in 1 Samuel 31:4, 5 it is difficult to imagine how the conversation claimed by the young man could possibly have taken place.[24]

The Young Man Was an Amalekite (v. 8)

According to the story the young man was telling David, Saul then asked the question that has been important since the man arrived in Ziklag but is as yet unanswered: "And he said to me, 'Who are you?'" (v. 8a). Who indeed? Who could have been there on Mount Gilboa but not known to Saul? Saul's question suggests that the man was not one of the king's servants.[25] Presumably he was not a Philistine. Who then?

The answer the young man claimed to have given to Saul is astonishing: "I answered him, 'I am an Amalekite'" (v. 8b).

Imagine the shock for David at this reply, and also for Saul (if it had actually been made to him). David had just finished "striking down the Amalekites" (v. 1b). They had destroyed his town of Ziklag and dragged off all the women, children, and possessions. Now (and only now) he and we learn that the mystery man who had arrived in Ziklag was (or claimed to be) an *Amalekite*!

The narrator has carefully kept this piece of information from us all until this point, just as the man himself had kept it from David.[26] Now that it is out, more questions are raised. An Amalekite! Any impression we may have been forming that the man was a credible witness must now be rethought.[27] In Bible history the Amalekites had long been hostile enemies not only of the Israelites but of Israel's God.[28] What was an Amalekite doing on Mount Gilboa, and what was he doing now in Ziklag? Why was he bringing this report to David—the man God had chosen to be *his* (that is, God's) king? What was he doing prostrated before David? An Amalekite!

We have reason to doubt that this man ever, in fact, spoke to Saul. But we cannot miss the impact that the words "I am an Amalekite" (v. 8) *would* have had on Saul had they been spoken as claimed. The previous night Saul had been told the terrible reason that he had lost the kingdom and would die in the battle with the Philistines the next day. It was "because you did not obey the voice of the LORD and did not carry out his fierce wrath against *Amalek*" (1 Samuel 28:18). The Amalekites had been at the center of Saul's downfall. Saul's decisive act of disobedience had been his failure to do what God had told him to do to the Amalekites. The full account is in 1 Samuel 15. What an irony it would have been for Saul, in the last moments of his life, to be face-to-face with an Amalekite![29]

The Amalekite is a profound symbol, on the one hand, of the failure of Saul and, on the other hand, of the promise of David. The Amalekites represented opposition to God's will (see Exodus 17:16).[30] Saul had failed to carry out God's judgment on Amalek (1 Samuel 15) and therefore had proven him-

self to be unacceptable as king over God's people (see 1 Samuel 15:23, 26, 27; 28:17–19). David had dealt with the Amalekites just as he had dealt with Goliath (1:1b; 1 Samuel 17:50). There is something strangely fitting, therefore, about an Amalekite bringing the news of Saul's death to David.

Let's pause for a moment and see if we can piece together what must really have happened on Mount Gilboa. Why did the young man choose to disclose his surprising identity at *this point* in the story he was telling?

It seems clear (as we have seen) that he really was on Mount Gilboa and that he did witness what happened to Saul, at fairly close quarters. He was close enough to observe the conversation that did take place between Saul and his armor-bearer. He saw, and possibly understood, the armor-bearer's refusal to accede to Saul's request to end his life (1 Samuel 31:4). The armor-bearer had refused because he "feared greatly" (1 Samuel 31:4) the request Saul had made of him. Things might have gone rather differently, however, if Saul had made his request to an Amalekite. For reasons that we will soon see, the man who brought the news of Saul's death to David wanted his story to go rather differently from the actual events. Crucial to his version of what happened was his identity as an Amalekite.

The Amalekites were descended from a grandson of Esau (Genesis 36:12) and were therefore related to the Edomites who were the descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:1–17). On an earlier occasion one notorious Edomite, named Doeg, had been among Saul's servants (1 Samuel 21:7). At that terrible time Doeg had obeyed Saul's command when none of his Israelite servants dared to do so. He slaughtered eighty-five priests and every man, woman, child, and animal in the town of Nob (1 Samuel 22:17–19). David knew about and had been deeply troubled by what Doeg did at Nob (1 Samuel 22:21, 22). According to the story the young man was now telling David years later in Ziklag, "by chance" (v. 6) Saul had a kinsman of Doeg available to do his will on Mount Gilboa.[31] We know that there was an Israelite servant there who did not dare to do so (1 Samuel 31:4).

The Young Man Said He Was Asked to Kill Saul (v. 9)

The young man continued his story: "And he said to me, 'Stand beside me and kill me,[32] for anguish[33] has seized me, and yet my life still lingers'"[34] (v. 9).

We know the young man was lying,[35] but like all the best lies it was close enough to the truth to be believable.[36] Saul had indeed asked to be killed (1 Samuel 31:4). It is possible that if he had known of the presence of a Doeg-like character he *would* have directed his request to him. Like Doeg

previously, an Amalekite could be expected to be free from the scruples that kept his armor-bearer (to whom Saul actually addressed his appeal) from doing the deed. The lie was credible.

As we hear the young man's story what really happened is becoming clearer. He almost certainly did witness the events on Mount Gilboa, but the probability is that he did so unobserved by Saul or anyone else. However, his answer to David's question, "How do you know . . . ?" (v. 5), claims more—that he was not only there, but that Saul spoke to him and asked him to finish him off. The young man distorted the truth just enough to claim the status not only of a credible eyewitness but also of a participant in the events he was telling.

The Young Man Said He Was Obedient (v. 10a)

Indeed his claim to have been involved went one astonishing step further: "So I stood beside him and killed him, because I was sure [literally, I knew] that he could not live after he had fallen" (v. 10a).

The young man justified his breathtaking claim with an argument that sounds surprisingly like today's defenses of euthanasia. Saul was about to die anyway. Hastening his death was an act of kindness. We will see that his reasoning was no more valid then than it is today.

The lie was brazen. But remember that David had none of our reasons for recognizing the deception. True, David still had no *proof* that the young man was speaking truthfully. He had answered David's question, "How do you know?" (v. 5) with the claim to have inflicted the fatal blow himself—out of kindness and with Saul's informed consent. The further (unspoken) question (how could David know he was telling the truth?) was about to be answered.

The Young Man Had Proof (v. 10b)

The climax of the young man's story is now reached: "And I took the crown[37] that was on his head and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord" (v. 10b).

The young man's story had been breathtaking in its daring and suddenly became utterly convincing to those in Ziklag who were hearing it. With a closing flourish the young man produced Saul's royal insignia, no doubt instantly recognizable by David and those with him. These objects must have appeared as positive proof of the story the young man was telling. How else could they have come into his possession?

The scene is remarkable. The first person to bow before the one who we know will succeed Saul and be king of God's people was an Amalekite who, by bringing these objects to David, symbolically "crowned" the new king of Israel[38] and was the first now to call him "my lord" (v. 10).[39]

Nonetheless as we listen to his story we realize that the man's cunning was astonishing. His possession of Saul's royal emblems certainly demonstrates the substantial truthfulness of his story that we have already recognized. He must indeed have been on Mount Gilboa and close to Saul. However, from what we know of the actual course of the events on Mount Gilboa, we must conclude that the young man witnessed Saul's suicide and the death of his armor-bearer in like manner (1 Samuel 31:4–6), and *then* (before the Philistines came to strip the bodies the next day, 1 Samuel 31:8) this young man stole the crown and the armlet from the fallen body of Saul.[40]

We have no idea when he concocted the story that he was now telling David, but his motives are becoming clear. While some questions remain unanswered, the man's efforts in traveling to Ziklag, prostrating himself before David and now presenting David with the symbols of kingship, show that he knew David as at least a contender to be Saul's successor.[41] He hoped to benefit from the favor of the new king. David's understanding of the man's motives is revealed some time later. David believed that the man expected to receive a reward for bringing to David the "good news" of Saul's death (4:10). David's response to the news (1:11, 12) will demonstrate how wrong he was. Furthermore the man evidently expected to gain additional favor with David if he had been personally involved in Saul's death. He would soon learn what a mistake that was. Finally he thought he could gain these benefits by constructing a lie that completely misrepresented his own role in the events concerned. His ingenious efforts were about to bring the very opposite of their intended effects—for a reason that he had completely overlooked. He had made a terrible miscalculation.

As we (quite rightly) find ourselves disapproving of the lying Amalekite, the searching question is whether we are likewise deluded into thinking that we can win some advantage in life by wrong behavior—a lie, a deception, a broken promise, a betrayal. How easy it is to think that a moral compromise (which we always see as slight) may be advantageous. The Amalekite only distorted the truth a little. He is a striking example of "the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). His sinful heart (like ours) allowed him to think that crime might pay. The crime he falsely claimed (killing Saul) and the lie with which he claimed it were motivated by twisted thinking that is all too famil-

iar to us. The idea that we live in a world where wrongdoing can benefit us is a terrible miscalculation because it completely overlooks the decisive factor.

In our next chapter we will see that the decisive factor overlooked by the Amalekite was the character of God's king. The young man dared to bow before God's king and thought he could gain some benefit from his lie and his claimed act of violence. He thought that David's ways were like his ways. He had an ultimate lesson to learn.

It was David's righteous character that shattered the idea that the Amalekite might profit from his crimes. David's righteousness was a mere shadow of the righteousness of the one who is now God's King (see Isaiah 9:7; 11:4, 5; 16:5; Acts 3:14; 7:52; 17:31; 22:14; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Peter 3:18; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 2:1, 29; 3:7).

This little Amalekite was a deluded fool, and so are we whenever we think we can be servants of God's King, the Lord Jesus Christ, and advance our cause with anything other than righteousness. "For we [like the young man who came to Ziklag] must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Corinthians 5:10). Crime *doesn't* pay. Do you believe that? Really?

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