

Opening Scripture: Psalm 94:20–23

The most popular and successful emperor in Roman history was Augustus (Octavian), the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He was well-liked for:

- **Public works and infrastructure initiatives**—he built roads, bridges, aqueducts, and impressive public buildings.
- **Social reforms**—Augustus implemented several social reforms aimed at addressing poverty, homelessness, public health, and starvation. He subsidized grain production alleviating starvation among the poor.
- **Moral legislation**—Augustus enacted laws that promoted the establishment and support of the family and the practice of public honor and decorum.
- **Personal benevolence**—he frequently came to the assistance of residents who had undergone a natural disaster. He personally invested in Roman art and the development of a particular Roman brand of intellectualism.
- **Veterans' benefits**—Augustus implemented policies to improve the welfare of soldiers, particularly veterans, through land grants, pensions, and bonuses to veterans rewarding service.
- **His death**—Augustus' reign was hailed as the *eugangelion* of Caesar—the gospel of Caesar, good news for the world that the gods have sent us a king to rule justly and fairly, and for the benefit of the commonwealth. So popular was Octavian's rule that they declared him “the son of God”—the savior and lord of Rome. They erected temples in his honor, and the Caesar cult was born.

But if Augustus was the standard bearer for successful leadership, then Nero was the epitome of failure.

- **Nero squandered Rome's wealth by building personal vanity projects.** After his death, Rome literally built overtop of those buildings to erase his tarnished reign.
- **In terms of morality, Nero's reign was characterized by decadence and moral scandal.** His pursuit of personal indulgence and self-gratification contributed to a decline in public morality and also public confidence in government.

- **His reign was also disastrous for the military**, particularly their morale and a sense of trust. His erratic behavior and rank incompetence militarily contributed greatly to a sense of instability.
- **His death**—Facing a national rebellion and the complete loss of any support from anyone, Nero committed suicide in AD 68. While Augustus’ last words were “Since well I’ve played the part, dismiss me now from the stage with applause.” Nero’s last words were, “What a shame that such an artist dies in me!”

They were two very different kinds of rulers with very different approaches. One with a glorious end after an illustrious career having served the people such that he left the place better than he found it.

And the other? Lamenting that the world was losing such a talent, such a gift.

After reading Saul’s death this week, I had to fast-forward and read about David’s passing.

Notice where Saul is buried. On the high place, under the tamarisk tree. You’ve got a hill, and a totem—you’ve got a worship center for pagan gods. ***And while it is not an exact parallel to Augustus and Nero, you do get the same sense of contrast.*** One man dies the national hero—David becomes the archetype of an Israeli King, the benchmark performance for all others to aspire. He dies in peace after many years of ruling, mostly very good years with a few exceptions. Hailed as the greatest king in Israel’s history.

And the other man? His predecessor? Let’s pick up the story in verse 1...

1 Samuel 31:1–13 The Philistines fought against Israel, and Israel’s men fled from them and were killed on Mount Gilboa. ²The Philistines pursued Saul and his sons and killed his sons, Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua. ³When the battle intensified against Saul, the archers found him and severely wounded him. ⁴Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through with it, or these uncircumcised men will come and run me through and torture me!” But his armor-bearer would not do it because he was terrified. Then Saul took his sword and fell on it. ⁵When his

armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his own sword and died with him. ⁶So on that day, Saul died together with his three sons, his armor-bearer, and all his men.

⁷When the men of Israel on the other side of the valley and on the other side of the Jordan saw that Israel's men had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned the cities and fled. So the Philistines came and settled in them.

⁸The next day when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons dead on Mount Gilboa. ⁹They cut off Saul's head, stripped off his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to spread the good news in the temples of their idols and among the people. ¹⁰Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and hung his body on the wall of Beth-shan.

¹¹When the residents of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹²all their brave men set out, journeyed all night, and retrieved the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. When they arrived at Jabesh, they burned the bodies there. ¹³Afterward, they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

Let's unpack this catastrophic ending to Saul's story...

1. A tragic end for a tragic man. Just as Samuel's spirit had prophesied to Saul, he and his sons meet a gruesome end on the battlefield. The House of Saul has ended. His oldest Son, Jonathan, an innocent man, a just person—becomes the collateral damage of his father's evil and increasingly wicked choices.

There are few things more disheartening than the loss when a beloved leader chooses sin and the consequences associated with that depravity. Failure can take on many forms:

- Moral failure.
- Financial indiscretion.
- Character issues—a big ego.
- Laziness—it becomes all too easy to phone in it, to hit auto-pilot and

lack engagement.

- Inattentiveness to the things that matter most.

But the leader who refuses to grow, to be challenged, to live in accountability with their peers—a leader that refuses to be faithful and nurses secret areas of sin with no sense of remorse or conviction for wrongdoing—that leader is on a path to failure.

There is an implicit warning in this text. We really have two responses to it:

- To choose a life that trusts God’s wisdom and timing.
- To choose to go our own way, rejecting the commands and wisdom of the LORD.

This was the temptation in the garden. Every single temptation is a choice between two trees. The tree of life—which is the path of faithfulness and obedience to God’s word as we trust His wisdom even when we don’t understand it. Or rejecting his wisdom in pursuit of our own understanding leading to death.

Here’s the truth: Saul got away with it for a long time. And every day he spent pursuing the innocent, following after pagan false gods, and breaking the commands of God, not pursuing a relationship from the heart with his God—every day he got away with it, he was storing up God’s wrath. And today, the bill comes due. It’s time to pay up. The day of reckoning has arrived, and it always, always comes. Chapter 31 shows us the tragic end of a tragic man who failed to prioritize walking with God.

2. The Lessons learned from Saul’s downfall.

Illustration: One of the joys of being a pastor is you get to attend a lot of memorial services and funerals. Now, that’s not a macabre statement. I don’t have a morbid fascination with death. But I see a lot of faithful believers who’ve remained faithful to the gospel. And to see them off into the arms of Jesus, knowing they are enjoying the full rays of his glory at this very moment—is a hopeful way of grieving.

But I have to tell, if I’m being perfectly honest, I’ve also attended several memorial services with an open mic where people felt the need to get up

and tell the truth. It's just so uncool to get up and tell everybody the truth at this person's funeral—they were a scoundrel, they lived entirely for themselves, they broke our hearts and left us with the incinerated remains of their wasted life.

Have you ever heard that at a memorial service?

So, today, let's have an honest memorial service for Saul.

There was a mental switch that flipped in him that said, "I can do whatever I want. I'm above God's law. I won't eventually be held accountable by God or anyone else."

That's an out-of-control ego that is getting in the way of serving in humility.

Truth: Every poor leader's greatest downfall is their inflated sense of self-importance. Folks, you need to know, as the Senior Pastor, this is my greatest temptation. **Not because it is unique to me. But because this is an inherent vulnerability** to having an ego. **Now, it's perfectly ok to know your value. As the Pastor, I have a general sense of what my value is to the church body.** It's advisable to know your strengths and weaknesses, spiritual gifting and calling, and to regularly reflect on your experience and the knowledge and wisdom one has gained from trial and error.

Good leaders know the value they bring to the organization. But a poor leader, a godless leader, has an exaggerated sense of self-importance. They have quite simply overestimated their contribution. Instead of viewing themselves as a vital organ to the body, they come to believe they are the brains of the operation.

This can manifest itself in a number of ways.

A post-mortem of Saul's leadership: It was a life of...

- Taking shortcuts: Saul's downfall began the day he rushed the sacrifice and didn't wait patiently for God's timing.
- Blameshifting: When Saul took the shortcut, he immediately blamed Samuel for not being there on time. When he failed to execute the wicked Amalekite king Agag and all their soldiers and livestock, Saul attempted to blame the people for putting pressure on him. After throwing a spear at David's head, Saul blamed David for conspiring against him.
- Cult of personality: Unable to celebrate someone else's wins: this

resulted in an inability to hear David's acclaim reverberating in the streets. He couldn't stand to hear that someone else was successful. He couldn't bear it. He was happy to let David lead his campaigns and fight his wars successfully, so long as he got all the credit. This fear that someone other than the leader might be praised for a job well done often manifests in a refusal to delegate responsibility and authority to others. Sometimes a person doesn't delegate well because they really just don't know how to do it. It is skill. It is a muscle that one has to develop. **But, sometimes, it's because that leader cannot imagine letting go of control, allowing someone else to be applauded for a job well done.** Instead of seeing success as an infinitely available commodity, they view it as a zero-sum game that we must win in order for us to feel valued; little gets done. If you must be the center of gravity such that all things orbit around your particular skills, strengths, interests, and pet projects—then you are building a cult around your personality.

- Mission drift: pursuing pointless and tangential projects, like the pursuit of David over the wellbeing of the Kingdom. Ultimately, Saul's life descended into futile pursuits, causing him to miss the target of his mission as God's king. He couldn't shepherd the people so long as he was busy pursuing an imagined rival.
- Resistance to feedback: Saul even threatened the safety of his own son, hurling a spear at him. Unable to hear the truth about himself. And when a leader can't countenance the truth from those around him/her, that leader is on a path to failure.

It's the epitaph of failed leadership. He values his word over God's word. He's over-inflated his worth and value to the organization. He's radically underestimated just how committed the LORD God is to have a righteous ruler who serves at the pleasure of the High King of Heaven.

What is the cure for this? Cultivating a life of humility. How do we do that?

- **Acknowledging and loving God.** That's the core competency of our worship. Here's what the Psalmist said, Psa 100:2–4 "Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. ³ **Acknowledge**

that the Lord is God. He made us, and we are his—his people, the sheep of his pasture. ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him and bless his name.” Remember Romans 1:19ff. Remember how Paul describes how unbelievers have failed to worship—“Failing to acknowledge God.”

Worship is ascribing to God the “worth” and value that is due Him.

The honor, the glory, the power that belongs to him. **This is why, on Sunday, our worship is heavily doctrinal. We try to stay away from sappy emotional fluff.** There is a place for passionate devotion in our poetry in the songs we sing. But you’ll notice that our worship services are permeated with the book of Psalms. Daniel often reads from the Psalter at the beginning, we will read a psalm for the congregational worship, and very often, I will incorporate the psalms into my sermon. Why is that? Because the Psalms remind us to express our deepest devotion accurately. The Psalter reminds us of the theological context of our prayer and praise life. Psalms is one of the best theology books in the entire Bible.

Let me ask you a question—do you love God? Now, that sounds like such a churchy thing for a pastor to ask. But what I mean is, *do you love what is true about God?* Does something ***leap inside of you*** at the thought that there is an eternal creator of the universe who had no beginning, who will have no end, and who brought every microcosm of this universe into being? Does that thrill you? Does that excite you?

What I mean when I ask, “Do you love God?” is, do you love the fact that *there is a being who is infinite in all his perfections—a creator God who is holy, the very essence of goodness and righteousness?* In such a filthy, unrighteous, self-absorbed age, isn’t it thrilling to know a God who is the epitome of moral perfection, who is the quintessence of goodness and grace?

The path to humility starts with acknowledging the magnificence and splendor of the Creator God. And the universe was made, the cosmos was fashioned to help us do that. The more we know about his created order the larger our eyes and our appetites become for

the God who made it.

Illustration: I love the latest James Webb telescope news in my news feed.

I love the discoveries in the far regions of space, unimaginable distances, where observers are seeing things only previously theorized about, or previously unknown entirely. Because the glory of this creation suggests some things to me. *The grandeur of creation causes me to reflect on the greatness of the God who brought it into being. And I am humbled to contemplate the majesty of this God compared to how small, weak, and helpless I actually am.* I am a nano-particle, on a speck of blue dust, hurling through space around a small star. God made us a little lower than the angels and yet he takes thought of us.

David's discography—his songbook is filled with this kind of stuff. Just reflecting on the goodness, the kindness, the severity, the awesomeness of our God.

Do you love to acknowledge, to worship God?

Humility also comes through...

- **Acknowledging our sins.** I honestly think a life of confession is the key to walking humbly before God. Acknowledging our sins is a discipline that brings healing and sober thinking. Listen to these words of David.

Psalm 32:1–5 “How joyful is the one
whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered!

² How joyful is a person whom
the Lord does not charge with iniquity
and in whose spirit is no deceit!

³ When I kept silent, my bones became brittle
from my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was drained
as in the summer's heat. *Selah*

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you

and did not conceal my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

Developing the twin skills of acknowledging God's rightful place and person, while developing a life of regular confession of what is true about us: saved and being sanctified; Reformed and reforming; transformed by his grace and transforming.

- Confession cultivates a life of humility and self-awareness.
- Confession encourages a life of continued repentance and forgiveness of others.
- Regular admission of wrongdoing heals and strengthens our relationships. We grow to trust a person who can admit that they're not perfect, and they depend every single second of every day on God's amazing grace—the oxygen supply to the Christian life.
- Confession cultivates in us a greater degree of empathy and compassion for others.

The word "selah" in Hebrew means "Contemplate this. Meditate on this truth. Stop and pause a moment and reflect on the power of these things. Let's practice Selah for a few minutes...

Let's pause and consider the greatness of our God. "God of heaven, we acknowledge your rightful place as LORD of all, over the world and its affairs, over our lives. We meditate on your vast power, and knowledge and wisdom, though we can't comprehend it. God, today we are astonished at your faithfulness and your love and patience toward us. Be exalted above the heavens and in this congregation today."

"God, we confess that we are sinners born into condemnation. Lord, we come before you today washed in the blood of your Son. Cleansed and forgiven of all unrighteousness because of his work on the cross and in resurrection. We have no claim of righteousness on our own but are solely dependent on Christ. We admit that we have been prideful and selfish. We confess our fear of circumstances and our pervasive distrust of you. We acknowledge our sins, for your hand has been heavy upon us. You forgave all our trespasses and in Christ, with clean hands we lift highest praises to

you.” Amen