

# In the Mess

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## WHERE ARE YOU HEADING?

I have to admit my hopes were high this time. I genuinely thought we had the best chance of doing well that I could remember. I don't remember a time when we did so well in qualifying and I thought – maybe this time! But it turned out to be so disappointing: two uninspiring draws, one narrow victory, and then the most inept display I have ever witnessed by any England side. The Red Sea of England shirts parted, and the Germans marched through ridiculously easily. What started so well finished so badly. Spain on the other hand lost their first game, but went on to finish well – they won! Now which story would you rather tell?

What story will people tell of you do you think? If you were to write an epitaph of Spain's world cup, what would it be? Maybe something like: "one blip but best finish!" What would you write for England? Maybe something like: "Never fulfilled their promise!" What will people write about you?

We've come in the story of David's life to the point where Saul dies.

<sup>1</sup> Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. <sup>2</sup> The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. <sup>3</sup> The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

<sup>4</sup> Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me."

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. <sup>5</sup> When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. <sup>6</sup> So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

<sup>7</sup> When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they

abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them.

<sup>8</sup> The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. <sup>9</sup> They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. <sup>10</sup> They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

<sup>11</sup> When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, <sup>12</sup> all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. <sup>13</sup> Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days. (1 Sam 31)

Saul spoke his own epitaph in 1Sam 26 v 21, “Surely I have acted like a fool...”

When he spoke those words he probably didn't mean them to tell his story, but they did. What's your story? Saul's life was, in truth, tragic, and yet it had promised so much. Israel had cried out to God for a King and God in his grace had chosen Saul. Saul was God's appointed man, at God's appointed time, in God's appointed place, to do God's appointed will. He was head and shoulders above other men – tall and handsome. Saul was strong and a natural leader. The people of Israel wanted Saul as their king – he could get the job done! What began with much promise didn't end that way, and Saul says of himself, “I have played the fool.” Saul, who has God on his side, chose ultimately to live as if God did not exist. What does it mean to live like a fool?

“A man plays the fool when he neglects his godly friends, as Saul neglected Samuel. A man plays the fool when he goes on enterprises for God before God has sent him, as Saul did. A man plays the fool when he disobeys God even in seemingly small matters, as Saul at first did; for such disobedience nearly always leads on to worse default. A man plays the fool when he tries to persuade himself that he is doing the will of God, as Saul tried to persuade himself, when all the time, deep down in his heart, he knows otherwise. A man plays the fool when he allows some jealousy or hatred to master and enslave and deprave him, as Saul did, toward David. A man plays the fool when he knowingly fights against God, as Saul did in hunting David, to save his own face. A man plays the fool when he turns from God, from the God he has grieved, and seeks an alternative in spiritism, in traffic with spirits in the beyond. The end of all these ways of sin and folly is moral and spiritual suicide. We

can only finish any such downgrade course with the pathetic groan of Saul, *"I have played the fool"*<sup>1</sup>

Saul dies by falling on his own sword. His body is captured and hung out on display as an insult, and only the bravery of a few valiant and loyal men leads to Saul being buried properly. What would you say is the biggest tragedy in the story of the life of Saul? I think the greatest tragedy of his life and death is that it didn't need to be that way. In truth, his life and his death could have been so different. But Saul made his choices, and choice is a very powerful thing. What choices are you making?

How many of you have heard of Billy Graham? Anyone heard of Chuck Templeton? Or Bron Clifford? The year is 1945 and these three guys are all packing in the crowds to hear the preaching of the gospel. All three guys are in their mid 20's. Templeton was described by one seminary president as the most gifted and talented young man preaching in America at the time. Clifford was believed by others to be the most gifted and powerful preacher the church had seen in centuries. These young guys had remarkable ministries. How come the only name most of us have heard of is Billy Graham? By 1950 Chuck Templeton had left the ministry to pursue a career in radio, TV, and as a newspaper columnist. He had decided he was no longer a believer in Christ in the orthodox sense of the term. He no longer believed the validity of the claims of Jesus. By 1954, Bron Clifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health and his life. Alcohol and financial mismanagement had been his undoing. He left his wife and two Downs syndrome children. At the age of 35 he died of cirrhosis of the liver in a run down motel on the edge of Amarillo. He was buried in a cemetery for the poor because some ministers clubbed together to give him a proper resting place.

In 1945 there were three young guys blessed with immense gifts and huge promise. Within ten years only one was still following Christ. It's not how you start the Christian life that matters, it's how you end it. What's your story? Friends, where are you heading?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter, *"Mark These Men"*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan 1980 p 35 quoted in Swindoll Charles, *"David: A Man of Passion an Destiny,"* Word Publishing 1997 page120

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had played the fool? What would have happened if Jesus had given in to any of the temptations of Satan? What would have happened if after John the Baptist's beheading, Jesus said: "This is getting dangerous – I'm going into hiding!" What if he'd given up after his disciples failed time and time again to grasp what he was doing when one moment they see him feed 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish and gather up 12 baskets of bread afterwards, and the next they don't recognise him as he walks to them on the water? How must he have felt at the betrayal of a friend – one who said he's never let him down? What about in the garden, when the pressure was really on and the heat intense? What if he'd said, "No! I'm not going there – I'm not going to die on a cross, hanging there like a common criminal. I'm not going through that pain – I won't do it."

There must have been many times when, in his humanness Jesus had felt like giving up. But he didn't .... because he knew where he was heading! And because of that he finished well! Powerfully! Triumphantly! What a contrast to the life and death of Saul. "I have played the fool!"

Saul's life and death demonstrated, tragically, the foolishness of man. Paradoxically the death of Jesus demonstrated the foolishness of God. Through the foolishness of God, the incredible was to come to pass; through the foolishness of God lives are changed and transformed; through the foolishness of God men, women and children, you and me, are saved for all eternity; through the foolishness of God the greatest miracle the world has ever known came to pass and on the third day he rose again. Jesus knew and understood where he was going and rather than follow the foolishness of man as Saul did, he chose instead to follow the foolishness of God and lived faithfully in the light of that and he kept going. He kept going so he was able to cry out on the cross, "It is finished! I have lived and died that they might live!"

Friends, where are you heading? Which path do you choose; the foolishness of man or the foolishness of God? It's not how you start that matters, but how you finish. How are you doing?

My best guess is that some of us might say we're on for finishing well at the moment. Life isn't perfect, but we're not derailed! We have our discouragements but we're on the right path. I encourage you – finish well! Maybe some of us are going great guns right now! I rejoice with you – keep going! Probably some of us are struggling – and in truth are quite close to giving up. Perhaps the truth is, and in your heart you know it, you are being drawn away from following Christ, and probably for you, like for Saul, it begins with small steps. You, like Saul, have made choices that are not helpful and you, and like Saul are in danger of making more choices that will draw you away from God. Some of us are in circumstances that are difficult and that have been thrust on us and in truth, we're about ready to quit.

The Race:

Defeat! He lay there silently, a tear dropped from his eye.

"There's no sense running anymore – three strikes,  
I'm out – why try?"

The will to rise had disappeared, all hope had fled away,  
So far behind, so error prone, closer all the way.

"I've lost, so what's the use," he thought,  
"I'll live with my disgrace."

But then he thought about his dad who  
Soon he'd have to face.

"Get up," the echo sounded low,  
"Get up and take your place.

You were not meant for failure here,  
So get up and win the race."

With borrowed will, "Get up," it said  
"you haven't lost at all,

For winning is not more than this –  
To rise each time you fall."

So up he rose to win once more, and with a new commit,  
He resolved that win or lose, at least he wouldn't quit.

So far behind the others now, the most he'd ever been,  
Still he gave it all he had and ran as though to win.

Three times he's fallen stumbling,  
Three times he rose again.

Too far behind to hope to win, he still ran to the end.

They cheered the winning runner as he crossed,  
First place,

Head high and proud and happy, no falling, no disgrace.  
But when the fallen youngster crossed the line, last place,  
The crowd gave him the greater cheer for  
Finishing the race.  
And even though he came in last,  
With head bowed low, un-proud;  
You would have thought he won the race,  
To listen to the crowd.  
And to his dad he sadly said, "I didn't do so well."  
"To me, you won," his father said.  
"You rose each time you fell."

And now when things seem dark and hard  
And difficult to face,  
The memory of that little boy helps me in my race.  
For all of life is like that race,  
With ups and downs and all,  
And all you have to do to win – is rise each time you fall.  
"Quit! Give up, you're beaten," they still shout in my face.  
But another voice within me says,  
"Get up and win that race."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps you're thinking – it's too late! That is not true. Precisely because Jesus finished well – so can you, and the tragedy of Saul is that he could have finished well too! Because of the cross there is repentance and forgiveness and new starts. Finishing well doesn't mean we don't make mistakes. Peter did and he finished well.

David, the next king of Israel, wrote Psalm 37. He wrote it as an encouragement to hold onto faith even when life is difficult and faith is hard. He wrote: "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Ps. 37 v 4) I think its way of saying: know where you are heading and always hold it before you, and then however difficult it might get, you will finish well. To delight yourself in the Lord means: "To throw your whole self into the arms of God who loves you beyond description. It means finding your most valuable treasure in

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Farrah, Steve: *"Finishing Strong,"* The Doubleday Religious Publishing Group 2000, page 23-24 (Author Unkown)

your relationship with Jesus. It's about rejoicing in who he is, loving him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."<sup>3</sup>

So, where are you heading? You only have one life – how will you live it? Will you choose the foolishness of man, or the foolishness of God? Saul tragically spoke his own epitaph: I have played the fool. But friends, wonderfully, it doesn't have to be that way – you can finish well. Where are you heading – what will people say about your life?

Preached at Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2010 by Rev. Ian Phillips.

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<sup>3</sup> Willow Creek: Encountering God: Psalms vol 1. Zondervan 2008. Pg 447