

## **“Two Men Named Saul...”**

Texts: I. “Then Saul said, I have done wrong...  
I have played the fool.” I Sam 26:21

II. Then Paul wrote: “I have fought the  
good fight; I have finished the race;  
I have kept the faith.” II Tim 4:7-8

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I am pleased to be with you this morning. Some of you will recall that I preached at Trinity a few months ago. I must have behaved myself reasonably well or I guess I would not be standing here before you now. It does remind me of a Methodist guest preacher once who was invited back again to preach at a congregation who never seemed to like any of their guest preachers. And, since this minister was not the best preacher in the conference, the Methodist Bishop was surprised... He called one of the stalwart members of the congregation and asked why the Church liked this particular preacher, peculiar as he was. The man hesitated, then he confessed: "Well, sir, you see.... it is like this: we really don't want any preacher at all, and .... he's the closest you've come to it." God bless you; I am happy to be back again to share the good news of the Gospel. Let us be about it.

There are two men in the Scriptures named Saul. The first Saul was the first King of Israel. He was chosen by God, and anointed by Samuel to be the leader of the people of God at a transitional and dangerous time in their history, roughly 1000 to 1200 B.C. Take a look at him. He was truly blessed, the envy of all. It says he was agile, and handsome and pleasant to behold. He was tall and mighty and muscular. The Biblical author wrote that "He was head and shoulders above everyone else in the land." To add to the story, he was also wealthy. He came from a prosperous farm, and he added to the family fortune. Prophet-priest Samuel said "There was none like him in all the earth"; and there wasn't; he had everything. That is nice; but maybe it was too much for him in the end.

The other Saul, we know him as Paul, had some good things too. He recites his mini-biography in Philippians, where for some reason, he felt the need to defend his reputation: “If any man thinks he has reason for confidence (and reason to brag), I have more.” (Philippians 3:4) I am of the tribe of Benjamin; I am a Hebrew of Hebrews; I am a Pharisee, at the top of my class, a blue blood of the First Century. I hail from Tarsus, a premier University City, like Harvard or Princeton or Auburn or Duke or North Carolina, or pick your own favorite College town. He was reared in Jerusalem, under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, of the Hillel School of Judaism. It looks, by the time we meet him, like he was already a member of the Council. He had been zealous in defense of the Faith, even to the point of persecuting the new Christian sect.

Hey, he sounds like the other Saul for a while, doesn't he, like an ancient favored King? But, stay with me for a minute...the second Saul-Paul had some problems. For one thing, he was born with an awful, indescribable malady, which was painful and awkward and embarrassing. No one knows for sure what it was, but if you know anyone who has a child with a physical or mental congenital illness, you will understand what Paul meant when he wrote that over and over and over he besought the Lord in prayer to take his malady away, and God never did. It remained. Most think it was epilepsy, before the day of suitable drugs to comfort and control.

But beyond that, he gave up his career. He chose to throw it all away. He chased off after the vision of some itinerant evangelist from a hick town in the North named Nazareth. He ended up having visions. He never made a decent living, never had an extra dime. He depended on the generosity of his little circle of friends and converts to have a place to rest his head at night, as he vagabonded his way across the Roman World. He was trained as a tent-maker, but he was chronically unemployed.

He tells us himself, in II Corinthians 11, that he felt like a troublesome little misfit everywhere he went. And, he paid the price. Listen, St. Paul is speaking: “I have had endless imprisonments, with countless beatings, I was often near death...many time in danger, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure...” Oh dearie me, it goes on and on. I sometimes ponder why he did it; what on earth possessed him to throw all his finery away. He could have been the Chief Rabbi back in Jerusalem and from that vaunted position; he could have swayed the nation in favor of the faith and helped thousands of people. Why did he leave? What on earth would make you give up your home and your job and your family and go off to evangelize the world?

The other Saul, the First King of Israel, stayed in his position. He went from strength to strength. From the hill country of Bethel, the House of God, he chased the powerful Philistines all the way out past Bethaven in the south. He earned all the medals and ribbons and spoils this mortal life can give. His uniform was covered with a huge panoply of military decorations from his head to his feet. Saul was it! And even the Spirit of God rested on him; because of Saul, the Spirit also rested on his people. For most of his life he had fame and fortune and family and sons and daughters, and a faithful, loving child named Jonathan. They all lived in a fine Palace. In the end he too, threw it all away. When he put Saul first, in front of the Lord, it says quietly, “One day the spirit of God departed from Saul...”

The other Saul, Paul, never got to marry. He never had a child. He was often lonely, most always alone. He never had a victory, never on the right side, unless it was the day he stood by consenting to the stoning of Stephen; and he would just as soon have forgotten that. He

started out on top, but it was downhill all the way, until he ended up in prison writing sometimes nasty letters to his few remaining friends.

In time, as it always does for all of us, the time came for both men to take a look back and ponder all that life had been. The Scripture makes it clear that each of us will also have to account for the living of our days, and one day, in the presence of Christ, we will have to declare what we really valued and what makes us proud. For life is not a game. We do go around only once, but it is not gusto we are looking for; it is Grace.

It is convenient for this sermon that the Bible records the final words of both of the two men named Saul. In fact, it came to me by accident one day not long ago in my daily Bible reading: two summaries by men of the same name. I hope you will remember them. The first Saul, the King, the one who made it to the top, the one who got most all the goodies this mortal life can give, finally had to come to honest terms with himself. There was no room left at all for pretence; the land of make-believe was gone. The trolley brought him back to the living room. Standing on his last legs, about to lose his Kingdom, also about to take his own life, he murmured: “Behold, I have done wrong, I have sinned, I have erred exceedingly; I have played the fool.” I have put myself before the Lord; I have abandoned my faith; I have become a Jester in the Heavenly Courts. How sad...

But, listen to St. Paul as he nears the end: “At the point of my departure,” i.e., while he was waiting in his prison cell for the executioner to come, he wrote to his young friend Timothy as if he knew what on earth he was talking about, finished, a failure, without an estate, without a success on earth to cherish, with one friend left beside him, he had the nerve to act as if he knew what this mortal life is all about, as if he knew what God required. Listen to his words:

The time of my departure has come; I know it looks like I have failed. I know I didn't make it in the eyes of the world. But, he continues, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." The race is over, and I won ! "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who loved his appearing."

We all need something to believe in; something beyond the here and now and the workaday world around us. We all need some eternal purpose and meaning for the living of our days. We all need someone to believe in, beyond the fortunes and misfortunes of the moment, someone steady and immovable to attach our hopes and future to. It's a lonely world out there some days, and not one of us can make it through the dark night of the soul on our own.

Someday, your life and mine might go out into the depths; maybe it already has, and what if there is no depth there to hold on to. Two summaries: I have played the fool. I have kept the faith. How would you describe the difference and which describes you?

It does not mean that there is anything wrong with being a success. Goodness no, the Bible is a fan of our success. God wants us to succeed. Neither does it mean there is any particular virtue in being a failure. It simply means that God is not mocked: Whatever we sow, that will we also reap. King Saul ended up believing in himself, blinded by the limited vision of his own wee world. He did it his way. But when Saul was challenged, and his strengths began to wane, he had nothing left to hold on to. When he lost his kingdom, he was a goner. And nothing can erase the horror of his final words, and the summary he fashioned for himself: "I have played the fool." I blew it. My father used to say to me: "For one so smart, you sure are dumb."

Saint Paul on the other hand was fastened to the goal and not the gain. He relied upon his faith and not his fortunes. He rested his case in Christ and not in himself. “Whatever gain I had, I count it all as loss for the sake of Jesus Christ.” “To live is Christ; to die is gain.” Do you believe that?”

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**Now, just before we go, let me walk it around the Sanctuary for you and see how it applies. I stop first with those who are young. I will let you decide who the young are. Summing up your life just now need not be your immediate concern just now. But I issue this gentle warning: you will turn around twice and fifty will be staring back at you from the mirror. Like my old friend Willie Nelson used to sing “Ain’t it funny how time slips away.” It ain’t funny; but it does slip away. An old professor friend of mine told me at Pitt, that he could usually tell from the first exam how a student would do on the final exam “No,” I objected, “it couldn’t be, students are not that predictable.” He said, “Well, some of them change over the course of the term, mostly they finish the way they begin”. Mostly, we finish the way we begin.**

**After forty-five years in the ministry, I can testify personally to the truth of his observation. Those I knew to be trustworthy when I was a young man are still largely trustworthy now. Those who were connivers forty years ago, are still connivers now. Those who felt cheated now, felt cheated then. I believe in Christian conversion to be sure; but even Billy Graham once said that “When you convert a cranky old woman, what you get is a cranky old Christian woman.”.... Most of us finish the way we begin.**

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**But, keep it going through the pews. I pause to speak to those of you who are parents now, or singles growing up and growing at little older, those who have left college and graduate school behind, and are fully underway in career and family, coming near the middle years: I want to speak to you. Christ needs you on this spinning planet Earth. We keep hearing and reading that you should be planning for your retirement; “Get a good financial advisor the sooner the better. Don’t wait until it is too late!” I saw it again in financial pages of the Charlotte Observer: Plan ahead for your future.**

**I am not an expert in finance, but this I know for sure: the early middle years are the ideal time to catch hold of the vision of the claim Christ has on you, and what he wants you to do in these years. It is a time to awaken your spiritual powers. It is a time to take a long look at what you believe, at the foundations you are laying for the Fortress of your Faith. Of what you want to pass along to your children, not in property and trusts, but a moral and spiritual legacy to carry them on to their children's generation. If you wait until the time has come, you will have wasted decades of your closer walk with Christ. And more ominously still, you might wait until it is too late.**

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**Finally, I move on to those of you who like me, have tip-toed into retirement, or at least are nearer to the edge than you ever have been before. To us, most of all, the plea takes on some urgency. The summaries of Saul and Paul are brief, pithy and to the point. I somehow feel that there will be too many standing in line on Judgment day for any of us to have time for long explanations and excuses. Make it short and sweet and move on. The Bible cautions us that it will be “yea” or “nay”.**

**Here is my summary Lord: Six words or less: “I have played the fool.” or “I have kept the faith”. Saul or Paul? And, (Are you listening?) There is no in-between. There is no middle ground. There is no “Maybe”. Jesus said you are for me or against me. You are on my side or you are on the other side. You cannot serve God and Mammon. Lloyd George once warned that “You cannot cross a chasm in two jumps; you will fall in every time.”**

**Most of you will know of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian in the middle of the last century. When World War II broke out in full in 1939, he was in the United States, at Princeton lecturing on theology. He was free. He could have stayed safely in America. But he felt that God needed his witness back home. He went. He witnessed. He was arrested. He was shoved in a concentration camp.**

**He wrote a little book THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, where he revealed the cost of being a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is all or nothing. It is complete and final. It**

**is irreversible. It is without compromise. I do not know how many of us want to take it at that price, how many are willing to pay the cost. But that is the price it is.**

**Bonhoeffer was executed by the Third Reich on April 9, 1945.**

**They asked him once along the way if he ever was afraid, whether he was fearful of what would happen to him. “No, he said, not most of the time...no...I am only afraid when I forget to remember that Jesus Christ is my Lord.”**

**Well, it is time to go; past time some of you are thinking. Just this last little word to you and me: One day back at the beginning, chaos and darkness ruled the face of the mighty deep. One day, the Bible says, it will all return to chaos once again. This terra firma spinning old planet cannot last forever. But, however it ends, whatever changes might come crashing in along the way, when the curtain goes to dark; three things will still be true: God will still be God; Christ will still be Christ; and you will still be you.” Count on it, for now and forevermore. Amen.**