

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 16: Ziklag Recovered; The Death of Saul

1 Samuel 29:1–31:13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The aim of this lesson is to set two homecomings side by side and let the class feel the weight of both. David comes home to ruin and, by turning to God and inquiring of Him, recovers all; Saul comes to his end on Gilboa as the bitter fruit of a life spent setting aside God's word. Lead the class to see that the difference between these men was not talent, height, or opportunity, but the direction of the heart, toward God or away from Him.

Press the practical center of David's example: encouraging oneself in the LORD when human support collapses, inquiring of God before acting, and dealing justly and generously with others (the sharing of the spoil). These are not heroics; they are habits of a heart anchored in God, and they are reproducible in any Christian.

Handle Saul's death with sobriety and tenderness, never with gloating. Saul is a warning, not a target. Keep God's justice and His long patience both in view, and let the lesson drive every heart to examine itself before the same slow drift hardens us. Hold up Romans 15:4 and Hebrews 3 so the class hears the Spirit's own application: take heed, lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief.

Question 1

Student Question:

When the Philistine lords refused to let David go up to battle (29:1–11), how do we see God's providence quietly protecting David from a terrible compromise, and what does this teach us about how God works through ordinary decisions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 29 opens with David in an impossible position. He and his men are marching with Achish and the Philistine armies toward a battle against Israel, the very people he is anointed to one day lead. Whatever David's reasoning had been in fleeing to Gath, he is now perilously close to having to fight against his own nation or to betray the Philistines who trusted him. There seems to be no clean way out.

The way out comes not from David's cleverness but from the suspicion of the other Philistine lords. They remember the old song, "Saul slew his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (29:5), and they will not risk having a Hebrew in their ranks who might turn on them in the heat

of battle. So they send David away. Achish, who genuinely trusted David, protests, but the lords prevail. David is dismissed and sent home.

We should not miss what is happening beneath the surface. God is quietly steering David out of a compromise that could have stained him forever. The deliverance comes disguised as a rebuff, even an insult to David's honor (he must protest his loyalty to Achish), but it spares him from the impossible. This is how God often works, not by parting seas but by closing a door we were leaning hard against.

There is comfort here for ordinary believers. We rarely get burning bushes. We get rerouted plans, a job that falls through, a relationship that ends, a circumstance that frustrates us, and only later do we see that God was protecting us from something far worse. Providence usually wears everyday clothes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's providence operates through ordinary human decisions and even through the suspicions of unbelievers, without overriding anyone's free choices.
- David's flight to Gath had put him in this bind; God's mercy rescued him from a trap partly of his own making, a reminder that God is gracious even toward our missteps.
- Providence is not the same as approval; God can deliver us from a compromise we had no business approaching.
- We should be slow to read divine endorsement into our preferred outcomes and quick to thank God when a door He shuts spares us harm.
- This is written for our instruction (Romans 15:4), teaching us to trust God's unseen governance over the events of our lives.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask the class to name a time a closed door later proved to be God's protection.
- Discuss how to keep faith when God's deliverance feels like an insult or a setback in the moment.
- Explore the difference between God's providence and God's approval, using David's situation.

Question 2

Student Question:

Have you ever been spared from a sin or a snare by a circumstance you did not arrange, perhaps even resented at the time? How does seeing God's hand in that change the way you face today's frustrations?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the doctrine of providence toward the heart. It is one thing to affirm that God works through circumstances; it is another to recognize His hand in the frustrations of our own week. The aim is to help the class read their lives with eyes open to God's quiet rescues.

Many of us can look back and see a sin we nearly committed, a path we nearly took, a relationship we were spared, and the thing that stopped us was a circumstance we did not arrange and may even have resented. A canceled plan. A sudden illness. A friend's blunt word. At the time it felt like an obstacle; in hindsight it was a guardrail.

The discipline here is to bring that backward-looking gratitude forward into today's irritations. The traffic, the delay, the no we did not want, may be the very thing God is using to steer us. We do not need to manufacture meaning in every inconvenience, but we can hold our frustrations more loosely, trusting that the God who rerouted David is rerouting us.

This reframing guards us from bitterness. Resentment assumes we know best how our story should go. Faith leaves room for a wiser hand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gratitude for past deliverances builds trust for present trials.
- Resentment over frustrated plans often reveals that we trust our own judgment more than God's governance.
- Recognizing providence is a learned habit of seeing, cultivated by reflection and thanksgiving.
- We must avoid superstition, not every inconvenience carries a hidden message, while still trusting God's overarching care.

Discussion Prompts

- Invite members to share, briefly, one frustration that later proved to be a mercy.
- Ask how a current annoyance might be re-read in light of God's care.
- Discuss practical ways to cultivate a thankful, trusting reading of daily events.

Question 3

Student Question:

At Ziklag "David encouraged himself in the LORD his God" (30:6). What does the text reveal about where a believer's strength is meant to come from when human support fails?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now we reach the heart of the lesson. David returns to Ziklag to find it burned, the families taken captive, and his own men, wild with grief, speaking of stoning him (30:1–6). This is rock bottom. He has lost his home, his family, and now the loyalty of his last six hundred friends. There is no human comfort left.

And here the inspired writer gives us the verse that defines David: “But David encouraged himself in the LORD his God” (30:6). The word translated encouraged carries the sense of strengthening, of taking hold. David reached past every empty human resource and laid hold of God Himself. He had no army’s loyalty, no city, no family in his arms, but he still had the LORD, and the LORD was enough to stand on.

Notice that David’s circumstances did not improve at this verse. The town was still ashes; the families were still gone. What changed was where David planted his feet. Strength did not come from a turn of events but from a turn of the heart toward God. This is the well that never runs dry.

For the believer this is everything. There are seasons when human support simply fails, when friends turn, when the people we served blame us, when there is no one to lean on. In those seasons God means for us to do exactly what David did, to encourage ourselves in Him, through His word, His promises, His presence, and prayer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True strength for the believer comes from God Himself, not from circumstances, allies, or self-confidence.
- Encouraging oneself in the LORD is an active turning of the heart toward God, often through His word and prayer, not a passive feeling.
- God remains the believer’s portion even when every human support has failed (Psalm 73:25–26).
- David’s example refutes both despair and self-reliance; the answer to a crushing day is neither giving up nor gritting our teeth, but laying hold of God.
- This habit must be built before the crisis; David could lean on God at Ziklag because he had long known Him.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask the class to describe concretely how a person encourages himself in the LORD.
- Discuss what Scriptures or promises members reach for in their darkest hours.
- Explore why we so often turn to God last instead of first.

Question 4

Student Question:

When have you felt the loneliness David felt, blamed by the very people you were trying to help? What would it mean for you, in that place, to encourage yourself in the Lord rather than in self-pity or defense?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses David's loneliness into our own experience. Many believers know the particular pain of being blamed by the very people they were trying to serve, a parent by a child, a leader by those he led, a friend by a friend. It is a grief David knew acutely at Ziklag.

Our instinct in such moments is either to collapse into self-pity ("after all I did for them") or to mount a defense, marshaling our record and our grievances. Both responses curl us inward and away from God. David did neither; he turned outward and upward, encouraging himself in the LORD.

To encourage oneself in the Lord in such a moment is to remember that our worth and our calling do not rest on the approval of those we serve. We answer to God. When others turn, He does not. When our record is forgotten by men, it is never forgotten by Him.

This does not deaden the pain; David still wept until he had no strength. But it gives the pain somewhere to go, into the hands of a God who sees and does not turn away.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being blamed by those we serve is a real and recurring grief in family, church, and work.
- Self-pity and self-defense both turn us inward and away from God.
- Our security must rest on God's unchanging regard, not on the approval of people.
- Encouraging ourselves in the Lord does not erase the pain but redirects it to the One who sees.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask members to name the difference between self-pity and honest grief brought to God.
- Discuss how to respond when those we have served turn against us.
- Explore how resting in God's approval frees us from needing everyone else's.

Question 5

Student Question:

Before pursuing the raiders, David "inquired at the LORD" (30:8), and only then pursued. What does this pattern of asking God before acting reveal about the heart God is looking for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Strengthened in God, David's very next move is telling: "And David inquired at the LORD, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? shall I overtake them?" (30:8). Before he acts, he asks. The man who could have justified an immediate, furious pursuit instead stops to seek God's will, and only when God answers, "Pursue: for thou shalt surely overtake them," does he go.

This is the rhythm that marked David and that Saul had abandoned. David asks; Saul presumes, and when Saul finally seeks an answer in chapter 28, the LORD does not answer him at all, and

he turns to a medium. The contrast is deliberate. A heart right with God instinctively brings its decisions to God.

Inquiring of the LORD is not a magic trick to guarantee success; it is the posture of a heart that genuinely wants God's will more than its own. David could have rationalized skipping this step, the case for pursuit was obvious. Yet he asked anyway, because he had learned that obedience is better than presumption.

We no longer inquire by ephod, for God has spoken to us fully in His Son and in His completed word (Hebrews 1:1-2). But the heart-posture is exactly the same: to bring our decisions humbly before God, to search His word, to pray, and to refuse to charge ahead in mere self-confidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A heart right with God brings its decisions to God before acting.
- David's inquiring stands in deliberate contrast to Saul's presumption and final turn to a medium.
- We inquire of God today through His completed word and prayer, not through ephod or signs (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- Seeking God's will is not a formula for guaranteed success but the posture of genuine submission.
- Even when the right course seems obvious, humility still asks rather than presumes.

Discussion Prompts

- Discuss what it means to inquire of God today, given that we have His completed word.
- Ask why we often skip seeking God when the answer seems obvious to us.
- Explore the contrast between David's asking and Saul's presuming.

Question 6

Student Question:

Where in your life are you most tempted to charge ahead without asking the Lord, trusting your own competence? What is one decision this week you could deliberately bring before God first?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns David's habit into a personal challenge. Most of us have areas of life where we are competent enough that we simply act without consulting God, our work, our money, our words, our schedule. Competence quietly becomes the place we least invite God in.

The danger is subtle. It is precisely in the areas where we feel most capable that self-reliance grows, and self-reliance, left unchecked, is the seedbed of the very presumption that ruined Saul. The point is not to make every choice agonizing, but to keep no part of life walled off from God.

A practical step is to name one recurring decision and deliberately bring it before God this week, in prayer and in the light of His word. It might be how we spend an evening, how we respond to a difficult person, how we use a sum of money. The act of pausing to ask realigns the heart.

Over time these small acts of inquiring shape us into people who, like David, instinctively turn to God, so that when the crisis comes, the habit is already there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We are most tempted to act without God in the areas where we feel most competent.
- Self-reliance unchecked grows into the presumption that destroyed Saul.
- Bringing decisions before God is a habit built in small, ordinary choices.
- No area of life should be walled off from God's word and prayer.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each member to name one area they tend to handle without consulting God.
- Discuss a specific decision this week to deliberately bring before the Lord.
- Explore how small habits of seeking God prepare us for large crises.

Question 7

Student Question:

David insisted that those who stayed with the supplies share the spoil equally with those who fought (30:21–25). What does this ruling reveal about God's sense of fairness and the value He places on every servant's part?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When David recovers everything, a dispute arises. Two hundred of his men had been too exhausted to cross the brook Besor and had stayed with the supplies; the four hundred who fought wanted to deny the stay-behinds any share of the spoil except their own families (30:21–25). It is an old, ugly instinct: those who did the visible work want all the reward.

David refuses, and his ruling is striking: “as his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff: they shall part alike” (30:24). And the Scripture notes he made it a statute and an ordinance in Israel. The spoil was the LORD's gift, not the soldiers' wages, and so it was to be shared.

Beneath the ruling is a principle about how God measures service. The men who guarded the supplies were not slackers; they were exhausted, and their guarding the baggage made the pursuit possible. In God's economy the unseen, supporting work is not lesser work. The victory belonged to all of them because it belonged, first, to God.

This is the spirit Paul would later teach about the body of Christ, that the parts which seem less honorable are necessary, and that there should be no schism in the body but mutual care (1 Corinthians 12:22–25). David, the man after God's own heart, already grasped that God values every faithful servant's part.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The spoil was God's gift to be shared, not wages earned only by the front-line fighters.
- God values the unseen, supporting labor as truly as the visible, heroic labor.
- Greed and self-importance want to deny others their share; God's fairness includes everyone who served.
- David's statute anticipates the New Testament teaching on the unity and mutual care of the body (1 Corinthians 12).
- Leaders are to guard the weak and weary from being despised by the strong.

Discussion Prompts

- Discuss why the strong are so often tempted to despise the contribution of the weak.
- Ask how David's statute should shape the way a church values quiet service.
- Explore what it means that the victory, and the reward, belonged first to God.

Question 8

Student Question:

Do you ever measure your worth, or others', only by the visible, front-line work? How does David's statute reshape the way you view the quieter, unseen service in the Lord's church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses David's statute into our own hearts and into the life of the church. We live in a world that measures worth by visibility, by the front-line, applauded, measurable work. The two hundred who tarried by the stuff rarely make the highlight reel.

Yet the church is full of people who tarry by the stuff: those who clean the building, prepare the supper, watch the children, visit the shut-in, pray in private, give quietly. Without them the front-line work would collapse. God sees them, and David's statute insists that the reward is theirs as fully as anyone's.

The danger is that we begin to measure ourselves and others by visibility, growing proud of our public work or discouraged that ours is unseen. David's ruling rebukes both: the public servant has no greater portion, and the hidden servant has no lesser one.

To take this to heart is to thank and honor the quiet servants among us, and to be content when our own service is unseen, knowing that the One who matters most sees it all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The world, and sometimes the church, measures worth by visibility; God does not.
- Quiet, supportive service is essential and fully rewarded in God's economy.
- Pride in public work and discouragement over hidden work are both corrected by David's statute.
- Honoring the unseen servants among us reflects God's own valuation.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask members to name quiet servants in the church who deserve thanks.
- Discuss how to stay content when our own service goes unnoticed by people.
- Explore how the church can better honor the work that happens behind the scenes.

Question 9

Student Question:

Saul died on Mount Gilboa (31:1–6) at the end of a life that, as Scripture later says, ended because he “kept not the commandment of the LORD” (1 Chronicles 10:13). What does Saul's tragic end teach us about the long, slow danger of a hardening, disobedient heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now the lesson turns to its darkest scene, and we must walk through it soberly. On Mount Gilboa the battle goes against Israel. Saul's sons, including the noble Jonathan, fall. Saul, wounded by archers and afraid of being abused by the Philistines, falls upon his own sword (31:1–6). The tall young man who once hid among the baggage, too humble to be made king, dies by his own hand on a lost battlefield, his armor stripped, his body fastened to the wall of Bethshan.

The inspired commentary on this end comes later: “So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD, even against the word of the LORD, which he kept not... and inquired not of the LORD: therefore he slew him” (1 Chronicles 10:13–14). Saul's end was not random tragedy; it was the harvest of a life of repeated, deliberate disobedience. He spared what God said destroy, he intruded into the priest's office, he hunted the innocent, he consulted a medium. Step by step his heart hardened.

This is the great warning of Saul's life, and it must be handled without a trace of gloating. Saul began with every advantage and real promise. His ruin came not from a single catastrophic sin but from a long pattern of setting God's word aside, each compromise making the next one easier, until there was no softness left to repent. A heart can harden so slowly that the man never notices the door closing.

The Holy Spirit makes the very same application to Christians: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:12–13). Saul is not merely an ancient cautionary tale; he is a mirror. The danger of a hardening, disobedient heart is real for every one of us, and it is held off only by daily, present obedience and a tender heart toward God's word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul's death was the harvest of a lifetime of setting aside God's word, not random tragedy (1 Chronicles 10:13–14).
- Sin hardens by degrees; small compromises make later, larger ones easier until repentance feels impossible.
- A life can begin with genuine promise and end in ruin through a slow drift away from God.
- The Spirit applies this very warning to Christians: a believer can develop an evil heart of unbelief and depart from God (Hebrews 3:12–14), refuting once-saved-always-saved.
- God's justice and His long patience are both displayed; He bore long with Saul before the end came.
- Saul must be handled with sober sorrow, not gloating; he is a warning and a mirror, not a target.

Discussion Prompts

- Discuss how a heart hardens slowly, and what guards against that drift.
- Ask why the Spirit applies Saul's warning so directly to Christians in Hebrews 3.
- Explore how to hold God's justice and His patience together as we look at Saul's end.

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using this passage, David's leaning and Saul's ruin together, to form your own heart toward trust and obedience right now.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the whole lesson into one personal resolve. We have watched two men face the same enemy on the same kind of day. David, with nothing left, encouraged himself in the LORD, inquired of God, dealt justly, and recovered all. Saul, having long since stopped listening to God, fell on Gilboa, the bitter fruit of a hardened heart.

The Lord Jesus, the true Son of David, means to form us by both pictures. By David's leaning He teaches us where to stand when everything fails. By Saul's ruin He warns us to keep our hearts tender and obedient now, before any drift hardens us. The same Spirit who recorded these things presses them into our lives for our learning (Romans 15:4).

The question asks each student to name one specific way Jesus is using this passage right now. Perhaps it is to learn to encourage oneself in God in a present trial. Perhaps it is to begin inquiring of God in a decision habitually made alone. Perhaps it is to soften a hardening place in the heart before it sets like clay in the sun.

Becoming like Christ is not abstract. It happens as we let specific Scriptures do specific work in specific places. Encourage members to leave the class with one concrete way they are surrendering to His shaping hand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus, the true Son of David, forms us through both David's faith and Saul's warning.
- Spiritual formation is concrete, naming specific obedience in specific places.
- The same passage that comforts (David) also warns (Saul); both are means of grace.
- Christ's shaping requires our active surrender, not passive admiration of the story.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each member to name one specific way Jesus is forming them through this lesson.
- Discuss the difference between admiring a Bible story and being changed by it.
- Close in prayer for tender, obedient, God-leaning hearts.