

# **1 Samuel 31 - Israel Defeated at Gilboa; Jonathan Dies in Battle; Saul Kills Himself; Philistines Desecrate Saul's Body; Jabesh-Gilead Gives Saul a Proper Burial**

IV. Transition from the house of Saul to the house of David (1 Samuel 16:1—31:13)

(4) Epilogue (30:1—31:13)

(B) Saul's death (31:1-13)

## **1 Samuel 31**

(B) Saul's death (31:1-13) (Cf. 1 Chr 10:1-7)

**1** Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from the Philistines but fell fatally wounded on Mount Gilboa.

**1** Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.

**1** The Philistines fought against Israel, and the army of Israel fled before the Philistines. They fell slain on Mount Gilboa.

**1** Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa.

- The narrative now returns to Saul, and picks up after 1 Sam 28 (after David was released from fighting against Israel and for the Philistines, and his return to Ziklag)

— This battle happened the next day, after Samuel's prophecy of Saul's death (28:19)

— This battle may have taken place at the same time as David's battle against the Amalekites (1 Sam 30)

- Four memorable battles were fought in this area:

(1) The battle of Kishon, in which Deborah and Barak defeated the hosts of Sisera (Judges 4:15; 5:21)

(2) The battle of Jezreel, in which Gideon's 300 defeated the vast hordes of the Midianites (Judges 7)

(3) The battle of Mount Gilboa, recorded here

(4) The battle of Megiddo, in which Josiah, king of Israel, lost his life fighting against Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:29)

2 And the Philistines also overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul.

2 The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua the sons of Saul.

2 The Philistines pursued Saul and his sons. The Philistines struck down Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchi-shua, Saul's sons.

2 And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons.

- The death of godly Jonathan, a faithful son who followed his father into battle, seems unfair and tragic

— He died because of his father's sins, and God permitted it

— Three of Saul's sons died with him, fulfilling Samuel's prophecy (28:19)

— Another son of Saul, Ish-bosheth, (aka Eshbaal) must not have been present for the battle (Cf. 2 Sam 2:8,10,12; 3:8,14-15; 4:5,8,12; 1 Chr 8:33)

— Abner, Saul's general, also somehow escaped

3 The battle went heavily against Saul, and the archers found him; and he was gravely **wounded** by the archers.

3 The battle went heavily against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was badly wounded by the archers.

3 The heaviest fighting was directed toward Saul, and when the bowmen who were shooting located Saul, he was severely wounded by them.

3 And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers.

- The LXX and the Vulgate read, he was wounded in the abdomen. The story does imply a wound that prevented his escape.

- "...wounded" - *chuw*, to twist or writhe in fear; be in pain

— A little more intensity to this word than just generic "fear"

4 Then Saul said to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and pierce me through with it, otherwise these uncircumcised *Philistines* will come and pierce me through, and abuse me." But his armor bearer was unwilling, because he was very fearful. So Saul took his sword and fell on it.

4 Then Saul said to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and pierce me through with it, otherwise these uncircumcised will come and pierce me through and make sport of me." But his armor bearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. So Saul took his sword and fell on it.

4 Saul told his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through with it, or these uncircumcised people will come and run me through and make sport of me." But his armor bearer did not want to do it because he was very frightened, so Saul took the sword and fell on it.

4 Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it.

- Saul was very concerned about his image with the enemy, but showed little concern for his relationship with God, Whom he is about to meet

— He continued to assert his pride by stealing for himself a role reserved for our life-giving God

— Saul's sin to commit suicide set into motion a series of devastating consequences for those he left behind

- The account of Saul's death differs from the one the Amalekite messenger later gave David (2 Sam 1:1-10). Many scholars don't believe that the Amalekite's account is accurate, but if so, it is not difficult to harmonize the two accounts (also see notes in 2 Sam 1):

— Saul saw that he was defeated; he did not want to fall into the hands of the enemy alive because they would only humiliate him. Therefore, he tried to take his own life by falling on his sword. This, however, did not kill him; and he was yet alive, leaning upon his spear (2 Sam 1:6), when the Amalekite came along and finished the work.

There is an important lesson in Saul's death: because Saul refused to slay all of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15), one of them ended up (possibly) killing him. The sin that we fail to deal with eventually causes our downfall. Another prominent Amalekite who will emerge later will be Haman, the villain in the Book of Esther.

Eli also died as a result of a battle with the Philistines. Some of his sons also died (4:17). Eli had served as Israel's high priest unfaithfully for 40 years when he died (4:18), and Saul had served as king for about 40 years when he died (13:1). Eli fell off his seat and died (4:18), but Saul fell on his sword and died. Both men were disappointments to both God and His people.

5 When his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword and died with him.

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5 And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him.

- Because he outlived the one whom he should have protected with his life, he could have been executed for dereliction of duty; he simply saved someone else the trouble

Saul was the king the people had demanded prematurely. He was the king after the people's heart. His name means "he who was requested." Saul failed to submit to Yahweh's authority and to obey His Word as God had revealed it in the Mosaic Law and through the prophet Samuel (v13-14). This the only place where we read that the LORD directly intervened to substitute one king for another.

Saul had failed to respond appropriately to God's elective grace in placing him on the throne. He had no heart for God. Consequently God brought discipline on Saul and on Israel under him. Because Saul failed to listen to God, God eventually stopped listening to him (Cf. Jer 7:13-16). Finally God killed him (v14).

The reason the writer recorded the death of Saul at such length seems to have been to show that David had no hand in it. Disloyalty to God always results in catastrophe, especially for His servants (Cf. Luke 12:48). Another reason may have been to present Saul as a prototype of all the *evil* kings that follow, and to present David as a prototype of all the *good* kings that follow.

## **Suicide**

There are only five examples of suicide in the Bible:

- Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23)
- Zimri (1 Kings 16:18)
- Judas (Matt 27:5)
- Saul, here
- Saul's armor bearer (v5)

This doesn't include Samson, which can be argued was a suicide; nor does it include Adam, who was not deceived (1 Tim 2:14) and chose to join Eve in her predicament rather than go on without her! (Cf. Eph 5:22-31).

6 So Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together.

6 Thus Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together.

6 As a result, Saul, his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men died together that day.

6 So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together.

7 Now when the people of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, with those who were beyond the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned the cities and fled; then the Philistines came and settled in them.

7 When the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, with those who were beyond the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned the cities and fled; then the Philistines came and lived in them.

7 When the men of Israel who were across the valley and who were across the Jordan saw that the army of Israel had fled, and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned the cities and fled, and the Philistines came and occupied them.

7 And when the men of Israel that were on the other side of the valley, and they that were on the other side Jordan, saw that the men of Israel fled, and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities, and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them.

- The other Israelite soldiers retreated when they heard that Saul and his sons had died; this left towns wide open for Philistine seizure

— Instead of driving the native inhabitants out of the Land, Saul made it possible for them to drive the Israelites out and re-establish themselves in Galilee (Cf. Joshua 1:2-9)

8 It came about on the next day, when the Philistines came to strip those killed, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

8 It came about on the next day when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

8 The next day, the Philistines came to strip the dead, and they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

8 And it came to pass on the morrow, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen in mount Gilboa.

9 They cut off his head and stripped off his weapons, and sent *them* throughout the land of the Philistines, to bring the good news to the house of their idols and to the people.

9 They cut off his head and stripped off his weapons, and sent *them* throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people.

9 They cut off his head and stripped him of his weapons. They sent people throughout the territory of the Philistines to report the good news in the temples of their idols and to the people.

9 And they cut off his head, and stripped off his armour, and sent into the land of the Philistines round about, to publish it in the house of their idols, and among the people.

- The Philistines' despicable treatment of the bodies of Saul and his sons shows the nature of those with whom David associated for a time

- The treatment may have been in retaliation for the treatment given Goliath (17:51)
- The Philistines hung Saul's head as a trophy in the temple of Dagon (1 Chr 10:10)

10 They put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they nailed his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

10 They put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

10 They put Saul's weapons in the temple of Asherah and fastened his corpse to the wall of Beth-shan.

10 And they put his armour in the house of Ashtaroath: and they fastened his body to the wall of Bethshan.

- They also hung his head in the temple of Dagon (Cf. 1 Chr 10:10)

This book began with scenes from God's temple, but it ends with scenes in the temples of Israel's pagan enemies. David's faith had brought Israel success, but Saul's disobedience had lost it.

11 Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul,

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11 When the residents of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul,

**11** And when the inhabitants of Jabeshgilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul;

12 all the valiant men got up and walked all night, and they took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there.

12 all the valiant men rose and walked all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there.

12 every valiant soldier got up, traveled all night, and removed Saul's body and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. Then they went to Jabesh and cremated the bodies there.

12 All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there.

- Perhaps the men of Jabesh-Gilead feared that the Philistines would remove the bodies and add further insult

— Saul had once rescued these people (1 Sam 11), and this was one way they could repay him

— Cremation, except in the case of criminals (Joshua 7:25), was not a normal Hebrew practice. It was practiced by the Philistines and may have been borrowed by the men of Jabesh-Gilead because Saul's body was either severely abused, or perhaps to prevent disease.

13 And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted for seven days.

13 They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

13 They took their bones, buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted for seven days.

13 And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

- Saul was a hero of tragedy in the classical sense of the term. He had some good features, such as courage, generalship, modesty, and generosity. But he did not have single-minded tenacity; that was his "tragic flaw."

— Even his pursuit of David was at times half-hearted. He lacked the greatness of the later David.

- Later, David honored Saul and Jonathan by digging up their bones and burying them more appropriately in their family tomb (2 Sam 21:12-14)

- A seven day fast honored Saul, but was much less than the honors given other great leaders of Israel (Cf. Num 20:29; Deut 34:8)

## **Application**

(1) Great sins often begin as "little matters"—impatience, incomplete obedience, excuse-making.

(2) Once sin gets hold of people, they go from bad to worse.

(3) If we are not right with God, we will not get along with God's people.

(4) Excuses are no substitute for confession.

(5) Natural gifts and abilities mean nothing without the power of God.

(6) There is no substitute for obedience.

(7) We need to love and trust God at all times. Under pressure or in crisis, if we feel God has not done what we want, we may default to what seems right or what seems to work for others. Any effort to get what we desire that is not what God desires is sin.

(8) God proved Himself faithful to David, even in enemy territory.

(9) The dangerous thing about stubbornly insisting on doing things our way is God will often let us be stubborn until we break.

(10) Dependence upon God for guidance and strength results in right actions.

(11) One thing that sets David and Saul apart was David's willingness to seek the Lord in what he should do next.

(12) Spiritual growth and leadership is about humbly trusting God and seeking His help to do the next right thing.