

1st Samuel

Lesson 56

Chapter 31

D. The Story of the Final Day for King Saul

1. The Death of Saul (31:1-6)

As we come to the last chapter of this book, the compiler inserts the chronicles of Nathan, who remained with Saul at Gilboa. Nathan tells the story of the final day for King Saul and the death of Saul. Chapter 31, verse 1.

“Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ² The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua the sons of Saul. ³ The battle went heavily against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was badly wounded by the archers. 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. ⁵ When his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword and died with him. ⁶ Thus Saul died with his three sons, his armor bearer, and all his men on that day together.” (31:1-6)

First, we learn of the deaths of three of Saul’s sons. Ishbosheth is not mentioned because he was not there. Why was he not there? We are not told. I suspect he was in one of the Israelite camps across the valley or on the other side of the Jordan River, but we will discuss that in the next passage.

Second, Saul was shot with an arrow and mortally wounded, but it would be a slow death. As all his men with him on Gilboa were being killed around him, he did not want to still be alive when the Philistines found him. They would have taunted him and filled him with a thousand cuts. Instead, he asked his armor-bearer, who probably took David’s place, to kill him, but he refused. Therefore, Saul committed suicide. When his armor-bearer saw what Saul did, he committed suicide. The armor-bearer was also the bodyguard of the king. When he failed in his job to protect Saul, his punishment would have been death. He killed himself instead.

2. The News of Saul (31:7)

From across the valley, another camp of the Israelite army could surely see the progression of the Philistines up Mount Gilboa as they chased the Israelites. The Israelites surely retreated back to Gilboa because that was where their camp was and all their baggage. Surely, the Israelites hoped in their retreat that they could retrieve their baggage and run for the hills. Many did escape. Someone reported to the other to Israelite camps with the knowledge of Saul. Verse 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.” (31:7)

That night, after the death of Saul, the villages in the area of the battle, in the territory of Issachar were abandoned and the Philistines took shelter that night in the homes to live.

3. The Display of Saul (31:8-10)

The following day, the Philistines exited the homes they had confiscated and lived in the night before to take spoils from the dead. They found Saul and his sons. The display of Saul occurred. Verse 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. 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. ¹⁰ They put his weapons in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan." (31:8-10)

Saul's head was cut off and sent throughout the land of the Philistines as a trophy. It probably circulated in the newly captured villages of Issachar first before making its way on a three-day journey to the Gaza Strip for show and tell. Saul's weapons landed in the temple of Ashtaroath. You should recognize that name because she was the moon god whose symbol was the crescent moon seen on all Muslim flags. She was also the fertility goddess associated with rabbits and eggs. A variation of her name was Ashtar, which was later used in association with Easthar, or Easter. Her temple was in the Philistine city of Ashkelon, and it was the temple of Venus, which was also known as Ashtar or Ashtaroath.

The headless body of Saul was nailed to the wall in Beth-shan. Actually, the bodies of Saul's sons were nailed there too. Beth-shan was not far from Mount Gilboa. It sat about five miles from the Jordan River, just passed the flood line where the Jordan would leave its banks every year. It was on the major trade route from Jerusalem to Damascus. Many years later, the Apostle Paul (Saul) would take that same route on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus. Beth-shan sat where the Jezreel Valley ended at the Jordan River Valley about twelve miles south of the Sea of Kinnereth (Sea of Galilee) at the eastern border of Issachar's land. To put it in perspective, all of this happened while David and his men were on their second day of the three days, headed from the Jezreel to Ziklag, where they will find the town burned and their families gone.

4. The Burial of Saul (31:11-13)

In the compiler's last entry in this book, he leaves us with the good deed of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead and the burial of Saul and his sons. Verse 11.

"Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 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. ¹³ They took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days." (31:11-13)

It is fitting that the Jabesh-gileads did this for Saul and his sons. After all, they were the real reason the men asked Samuel for a king forty years before. You will remember in chapter 8 that the men came to Samuel and asked for a king with the excuse that Samuel was getting old and his priestly sons were worthless and wicked. Saul was selected and anointed king but not really considered the king until Nahash the Ammonite came to take over the main city in East Manasseh, known as Jabesh-gilead. The city elders sent word to all the nation for help instead of King Saul. When Saul heard of it, it made him angry that he had been bypassed. Saul killed his two oxen and sent pieces to the land with the warning that the same thing would happen to anyone who did not come to Mizpah of Gilead to help him defend the Jabesh-gilead's from Nahash. When the battle was over, Samuel revealed why the men wanted a king like all the surrounding nations. He said, *"When you saw that Nahash the king of the sons of Ammon came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' although the LORD your God was your king."* (12:12) The first reason the men gave Samuel for a king was a lie. Samuel just bided his time, anointed Saul as king, and waited. Then, Samuel told them the real reason they wanted a king. They wanted a king who could defeat Nahash and his Ammonite army. The men of Jabesh-gilead started that desire for a king in Israel, and now, forty years later, they owed it to dead Saul to recover and bury his body and those of his sons.

The bodies had been dead for more than two days by this time. The Hebrews were accustomed to burying before sunset on the day of the death. It was not the custom to burn the bodies. Yet, the men of Jabesh-gilead burned their bodies, but not to ashes, for the bones were buried under the tree.

The despair of the Jabesh-gileads for Saul and his sons was great, for the writer tells us that they could not eat for seven days. That is what fasting means, not eating. In the Scripture, it is always associated with great grief, anxiety, and/or death. It is never something that is done to worship of the LORD, although it is used in the worship of every false god in every false religion. Even the Apostle Paul will stop the sailors from fasting to the false gods by saying and encouraging them to eat. Later to the Corinthians, he will say, *“Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food, however God will do away with both of them.”* (1st Corinthians 6:13). The Israelites learned fasting in Egypt, which was part of pagan worship, but the Israelites did not allow Egypt to get out of them. Almost all of their struggles and idolatry sins were learned in Egypt, and fasting was one of them.

And so, we come to the end of the book of First Samuel. Yet, it is not the end of the story. We must quickly move on into the book of 2nd Samuel for the rest of the story of Saul and David. It will pick up where chapter 30 left off. David will have been back in Ziklag for two days when the messenger will bring the news of Saul’s death. By this time Saul’s bones are already buried under a tree in Jabesh-gilead, but not for long. David will see to that.

1 Chronicles 10 fills in some information about what happened on Saul’s last day.

1 Now, the Philistines attacked Israel, and the men of Israel fled before them. Many were slaughtered on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. 2 The Philistines closed in on Saul and his sons, and they killed three of his sons—Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malkishua. 3 The fighting grew very fierce around Saul, and the Philistine archers caught up with him and wounded him. 4 Saul groaned to his armor-bearer, “Take your sword and kill me before these pagan Philistines come to taunt and torture me.” But his armor bearer was afraid and would not do it. So Saul took his own sword and fell on it. 5 When his armor bearer realized that Saul was dead, he fell on his own sword and died. 6 So Saul and his three sons died there together, bringing his dynasty to an end. 7 When all the Israelites in the Jezreel Valley saw that their army had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned their towns and fled. So the Philistines moved in and occupied their towns. 8 The next day, when the Philistines went out to strip the dead, they found the bodies of Saul and his sons on Mount Gilboa. 9 So they stripped off Saul’s armor and cut off his head. Then they proclaimed the good news of Saul’s death before their idols and to the people throughout the land of Philistia. 10 They placed his armor in the temple of their gods, and they fastened his head to the temple of Dagon. 11 But when everyone in Jabesh-gilead heard about everything the Philistines had done to Saul, 12 all their mighty warriors brought the bodies of Saul and his sons back to Jabesh. Then they buried their bones beneath the great tree at Jabesh, and they fasted for seven days. 13 So Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD. He failed to obey the LORD’s command, and he even consulted a medium 14 instead of asking the LORD for guidance. So the LORD killed him and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse. (1 Chronicles 10)

Turning to the first chapter of 2nd Samuel, we discover that three days after returning to Ziklag with the families, a soldier from Saul’s camp arrived to give David knew of the death of Saul and his sons. The writer tells us that *“David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so also did all the men who were with him. They mourned and wept ...”* not eating until the day was done (2nd Samuel 1:11-12). David wrote a song that day and instructed the sons of Judah to play the harp with the bow while singing. Here is that song.

“Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How have the mighty fallen!”²⁰ “Tell it not in Gath, Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, Or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, The daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.”²¹ “O mountains of Gilboa, Let not dew or rain be on you, nor fields of offerings; For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.”²² “From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, The bow of Jonathan did not turn back, And the sword of Saul did not return empty.”²³ “Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life, And in their death they were not parted; They were swifter than eagles, They were

stronger than lions. ²⁴ “O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, Who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. ²⁵ “How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan is slain on your high places. ²⁶ “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; You have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful Than the love of women. ²⁷ “How have the mighty fallen, And the weapons of war perished!” (2nd Samuel 1:19-27)

No doubt, from David’s song, he was grieved over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. However, what comes through in this song really deals with Saul and how David’s heart truly felt about Saul. Saul had not been good to David, yet, David respected Saul’s position as the LORD’s anointed King of Israel. Notice in the song that David said about Saul that “*Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life....*” That can attitude hardly sums up the testimony of the witnesses concerning Saul’s attitude toward David, yet, it does, sum up the testimony of David’s attitude toward Saul. David never wished ill to come upon Saul, the anointed King of Israel. David’s constant saying was, “Thou shall not touch the LORD’s anointed.” He even said it to the soldier who came to deliver the news to David and took the credit for ending Saul’s life after he was mortally wounded. For that, David killed the soldier because he dared to touch the LORD’s anointed (2nd Samuel 1:14-16).

From Ziklag, David, with all his family and followers, journeyed to Hebron, where the tribe of Judah made him their king. In the rest of the Promised Land, the other eleven tribes made Ish-bosheth, Saul’s only living son, their king. But the divided kingdom of Israel also brought civil war to the Promised Land. We will learn about that in our study of 2nd Samuel.

What have we learned in this study? More than anything, we have learned why Samuel said to Saul long before Saul’s death, on that day, when Samuel caught Saul acting foolishly and Samuel declared that Saul’s kingdom would not endure, Samuel says to Saul, “*The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.*” (13:14) That man was David. He, truly, had the heart of the LORD within him. With all of David’s sins, and he had them, he still had a heart in tune with the LORD. We have much to learn from David in 2nd Samuel. Unlike Saul, David’s heart will not change as the days pass in his life. So, he should be an example for all of us to follow. We should all seek to have the heart of the LORD every moment of every day. Will you earnestly seek to have the heart of God also, starting today?