

1 Samuel 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 31. Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malkishua, the sons of Saul. The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armour-bearer, Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through and mistreat me. But his armour-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it, and when his armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armour-bearer, and all his men on the same day together. And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, and those beyond the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled, and that Saul and his sons were dead, they abandoned their cities and fled.

And the Philistines came and lived in them. The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. So they cut off his head, and stripped off his armour, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people. They put his armour in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 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 Beth-shan. And they came to Jabesh, and burned them there. And they took their bones, and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

In 1 Samuel chapter 31, the final chapter of the book, Saul dies with three of his sons. Saul started off like Gideon in his early faith, but he died like Abimelech, Gideon's wicked son.

In Judges chapter 9 verses 53 to 54, And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. Then he called quickly to the young man, his armour-bearer, and said to him, Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, a woman killed him.

And his young man thrust him through, and he died. Saul's death is also like that of Eli. Saul falls on his sword, while Eli fell from his seat. He fulfills the last prophecy of Samuel here. The death of Eli and his sons in the battle of Aphek, in chapter 4, fulfilled the first prophecy of Samuel. In these events taken together, we see the fulfilment of Hannah's prayer of praise, where she recognises the hand of God in bringing low the wicked and raising up the righteous. Saul, who has been wickedly pursuing David to this point, has now been destroyed, and David will be raised up.

[2 : 47] 1 Chronicles chapter 10 verses 8 to 14 gives us a fuller portrayal of what happened. The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.

But when all Jabesh-Gilead heard all that the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose, and took away the body of Saul, and the bodies of his sons, and brought them to Jabesh. And they buried their bones under the oak in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

Therefore the Lord put him to death, and turned the kingdom over to David, the son of Jesse. Saul's suicide was an ignominious death, and his body was dishonoured in death too.

His body was fastened to the wall of Beshan, and his head in the temple of Dagon. When his body was finally recovered, the body was burned and the bones were buried, presumably so that it could not be further desecrated. This again was not an honourable burial.

And now, at his death, he's seen something very different. Israel's rejection of the Lord as their king, and their pursuit of a king like the nations, has now brought them to the point of catastrophe.

[5 : 02] Israel's possession of the land has been greatly compromised. Their loss in this battle has seemingly left them worse off than they were after the Battle of Aphek. And now, in this fractured and frayed nation, there is a great power vacuum after the death of Saul and his three sons.

What part might the idols be playing in the larger story?