

Dying As One Has Lived (1 Samuel 31)

Sequence of Events (Chronologically):

- A. The Philistines made the decision to fight against Israel, and Achish insisted that David and his men join them (28:1-2).
- B. The Philistine army prepared by assembling all their forces at Aphek. There, David was released from the impending battle (29:1-10). At the same time, Israel set up camp in the vicinity of the Jezreel Valley (29:1).
- C. From Aphek, David and his men headed south to Ziklag (29:11-30:1) as the Philistines simultaneously moved north to the Jezreel Valley (29:11).
- D. The Philistines set up camp at Shunem (northern side of the valley) while the Israelites assemble at Gilboa (southern side of the valley) (28:4).
- E. Saul, desperate for revelation, seeks out a witch from Endor at night (28:5-25).
- F. David reaches Ziklag in less than three days after his departure from Aphek and discovers that the Amalekites had taken the women, children, and livestock. They burned down the city as well. David and his men will recover everything (30).
- G. As David is fighting with the Amalekites more than a hundred miles away to the south, Israel is fighting the Philistines in the Jezreel Valley (31).

1. Saul's Encouraging Take-Off (1 Samuel 9-12)

- Despite the people's untimely request for a king (8:4-5), the LORD had already sent Saul at least one day prior on a mission to recover his father's lost donkeys.
- Saul was a handsome and impressive man who was a head above all others (9:2). He was anointed with a flask of oil (10:1) even before the lot fell on him (10:20-24). There was no one like him (10:24). He was changed into a better man (10:6) and even given a new heart (10:9). He was anointed by the Spirit and even prophesied with the prophets (10:10). He had the full support of the prophet Samuel (10:1, 24) and started off his kingship well with high hopes in his impressive defeat of Nahash, king of the Ammonites who was oppressing the residents at Jabesh-gilead (1 Samuel 11).
- The people and king were still required to fear, serve, and obey the LORD through the prescriptive commands of the Torah and new revelation dispensed through God's prophet (Samuel). Saul's kingship was conditional: if he obeyed, his kingdom would be over Israel forever (13:13). If he disobeyed, the LORD's hand would be against him (13:14).

2. Saul's Turbulent Mid-Flight (13-30)

- Saul was raised up by the LORD in foreknowledge of the people's request for a king. He was raised up to save the nation of Israel from the hands of the Philistines (9:16). Instead of leading his people to victory against the Philistines, he was prone to doubt and fear (13:5-7).
- Instead of obeying the LORD at Gilgal in obedience to Samuel's command, he offered sacrifices instead. This demonstrated his tendency to superstition over obedience. The result of this was the forfeiture of his kingdom: neither Jonathan nor any of Saul's other three sons will ever be king (13:8-14).
- The LORD is silent towards Saul as he inquires of the LORD, despite the ark, ephod, and presence of Ahijah, who is priest from the rejected house of Eli (14:3, 36-42).
- Saul again refuses to obey the command of the LORD in destroying the Amalekites and insists that he did obey (15:1-23). Saul has now lost his kingship. The LORD has officially rejected Saul as king, which was confirmed when the Spirit of the LORD departed from him (16:14) and rushed upon David (16:13).
- For several years, Saul, in jealousy and envy, is going to try everything in his power to kill David, and anyone else who him gives aid, including the priests at Nob (22:18-19).

- Even though Saul has been rejected, he refuses to give up his kingship to David, who he suspects is his neighbor and the better man (15:28; 24:17).
- In God's providence, He will use Saul's hardness of heart and unwillingness to yield to his rejected state as means to sanctify David as God's future king (13:14; 16:2).
- Saul's last meal as king is with a witch from Endor, whom he pursued under the cover of darkness (28:3-25). Despite this inquiry as being banned by the Torah (Ex. 22:19; 19:31; Deut. 18:10-11), Saul was desperate for some form of revelation, even if it was through necromancy. The last prophecy he receives as the rejected king is from the deceased Samuel who reminds him that the LORD is against him and has become his enemy. Consequently, Saul and his sons will die the next day (28:16-19).

3. Saul's Catastrophic Crash (1 Samuel 31)

- The Israelites are being overrun by the Philistines and on the verge of defeat. The narrator mentions Jonathan, along with two of Saul's other sons, falling at the hands of the Philistines on the slopes of Mount Gilboa.
- Saul is injured by archers and on the precipice of death. He requests that his armor bearer kill him, which in his case is a selfish and cowardly desire. He is afraid that the Philistines will torment him and desecrate his body. The narrator is alluding Saul's scenario to the wicked ruler Abimelech (Judges 9). The armor bearer refuses, either because Saul is the LORD's anointed (24:6; 26:11), or because he fears Saul as king.
- Saul falling on his sword was a dishonorable act in ancient near eastern culture. The next day, the Philistines come to "strip off" his armor from his body. This same Hebrew word was used to describe Jonathan stripping off his robe, giving it to David (18:4), along with Saul's willing undressing of himself while prophesying before Samuel (19:24). Finally, Saul was stripped of his royal garments. This time, however, it was not volitional: they were removed by the very people he was raised up to defeat (9:16).
- The next day, the Philistines cut off Saul's head, strip him of his armor, place his armor in the temple Ashteroth and fasten his body (and his three sons' bodies) to walls of Beth-shan. Saul's head was placed in the temple of Dagon (1 Chron. 10:10).
- The people of Jabesh-Gilead, who live 12 miles away, successfully recover the dishonored bodies from the walls of Beth-shan during a nocturnal operation. They remember Saul's heroic activity as king nearly 40 years ago in delivering them from the oppressive hand of Nahash, the king of the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11).
- While the burning of bodies was used in certain forms of capital punishment (Lev. 20:14; 21:9; Josh. 7:25), they did not cremate Saul and his three sons (Amos 2:1-3). The bones were intact. Three options for why the bodies were burned: there may have been advanced decay, they may have burned the flesh to prevent any wild animals from breaking their bones (bones were honored), or it may have been a local practice, although neo-orthodox, to honor Saul and his sons. They fasted for seven days, which would have complemented the Mosaic prescription, as they were ritually unclean (Numb. 19:11).
- Saul's body was ironically buried under a tamarisk tree. The last mention of a tamarisk tree was where Saul lorded over his men and accused them of treason (22:6).
- Mount Gilboa is the second "Ichabod" (4:10-18). The glory has departed from house of Saul, as it had departed from the house of Eli. Two houses rejected, which function as book ends. 1 Samuel opens with rejection of the wicked, priestly house of Eli (1 Samuel 2-4) and concludes with the death of Saul's kingdom and kingship (1 Samuel 31).
- While David is successfully defeating the age-old enemy (the Amalekites), Saul is being defeated by Israel's archenemy the Philistines. David defeats the Amalekites and successfully retrieves all that was lost, while Saul is defeated by the very nation he was raised up to defeat. David's family is recovered fully, while Saul and three of his sons are killed.