

The Death of Saul

1 Samuel 31 ESV

¹ Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ² And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. ³ The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. ⁴ Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and mistreat me." But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly. Therefore Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. ⁵ And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. ⁶ Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. ⁷ 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.

⁸ The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹ So they cut off his head and stripped off his armor and sent messengers 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 armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. ¹¹ But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 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 Beth-shan, and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. ¹³ And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days.

Introduction

This morning we come to the end of 1 Samuel with chapter 31.

While this is the final chapter in 1 Samuel, next week I plan to preach a concluding sermon on this series that will consider 1 Samuel as a whole.

1 Samuel ends with the Battle of Mount Gilboa and the death of Saul.

This battle serves as the bookend to the Battle of Aphek from [1 Samuel 4](#).

In the Battle of Aphek, the Philistines defeated Israel, captured the Ark, and placed it in the Temple of their god, Dagon.

We see something similar going on in this morning's passage.

At the beginning of 1 Samuel, the defeat in battle served as a transition point for Israel.

At Aphek, Israel died, and a new Israel was raised on the other side.

The same thing is occurring here at Gilboa.

In [1 Samuel 4](#), Eli, the leader of Israel, died as he fell from his seat.

Here, Saul, the leader of Israel, dies as he fell on his sword.

The death of Eli & his sons fulfilled the first prophecy of Samuel ([1 Sam 3:12-14](#))

The death of Saul and his sons fulfills the last prophecy of Samuel ([1 Sam 28:19](#))

Before the Battle of Aphek, Israel was ruled by tribes.

After the Battle of Aphek, Israel would be ruled by a king like all the nations.

Before the Battle of Gilboa, Saul and his house ruled over Israel.

After the Battle of Gilboa, David would become king over Israel, and David's house would become a house for God's name.

In all of this we see once again the pattern of death and resurrection at play:

An old Israel is dying, but a new Israel is about to be raised from the dead.

With this in mind, I have divided my sermon into two parts this morning:

1. The Death of Israel (vv. 1-7)
2. The Gospel of the Philistines (vv. 8-13)

The Death of Israel (vv. 1-7)

Verses 1-7 describe the Battle of Gilboa and the death of Saul and his sons.

As I mentioned already, the death of Saul and his sons fulfills the last prophecy of Samuel that he gave in [1 Samuel 28](#).

1 Samuel 28:19 ESV

¹⁹ Moreover, the Lord will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The Lord will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines."

"Fell"

the word "fell" occurs repeatedly throughout this first section.

"the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa."

"Saul took his own sword and fell upon it."

"[Saul's armor bearer] also fell upon his sword."

Ever since [1 Samuel 13](#), we have been following the "fall" of Saul.

Here we see Saul's final fall as he fell upon his own sword.

But Saul's fall also means Israel's fall.

A Good Start, a Bad End (Abimelech)

Verses 4-6 describe the details of Saul's death where he takes his own life.

This description has a strong resonance with death of Abimelech in [Judges 9](#).

In [Judges 9:53-54](#) Abimelech and his army attack Shechem.

During the attack on the stronghold, Abimelech is injured badly and he calls his armor-bearer to kill him and the armor-bearer did so.

Abimelech was the son of Gideon and is the conclusion to the Gideon story in Judges.

In Judges the movement from Gideon to Abimelech presents a movement from a good start to a bad end.

This is the same movement we see in the narrative of Saul.

Saul begins well, but then he falls, and keeps falling.

Like Abimelech, Saul asks for his armor-bearer to kill him, but his armor-bearer refuses and he takes his own life.

Self Destruct

The fact that Saul takes his own life highlights that his downfall is the result of his own hand.

The kingdom being taken from him, the Lord abandoning him, and even his men refusing to listen to him, are all the result of his own folly and sin.

Here with Saul we have an example of what the Bible teaches about the nature of sin.

Whenever you turn away from God and toward sin, you are ultimately taking steps to your own destruction.

Of course, God's grace can pull you back from that destruction but, unless God intervenes, you will end up destroying yourself completely.

This is true for Saul, and, as I've mentioned already, it is true of Israel as a whole.

Remember, Israel asked for a king who would rule over them like all the other nations.

That is what they ultimately got in Saul.

They wanted a king like this, in large part, to defeat the Philistines who were oppressing them.

But where has this brought Israel?

Right back to where they were when they asked for a king!

The Philistines are victorious and they are dwelling in the land.

Sin Never Delivers

Again, this is an example of biblical teaching.

Sin never delivers on its promises.

Sin is a "bait and switch".

It pretends to offer you great things, but it only delivers you disappointment and death in the end.

This is what happens with Saul.

And as I mentioned, Saul's death is a death for Israel.

But in the Bible, death is what happens before resurrection.

Yes, Israel is dying, but God is going to raise Israel to new life on the other side of this death.

But before Israel's resurrection happens in David's rise to the throne, the Philistines will boast in their victory.

The Gospel of the Philistines (vv. 8-13)

The Philistine victory at Gilboa was comprehensive.

They were able to leave the slain unattended overnight without fear that the men of Israel might return to recover the bodies of the fallen.

Recovering the bodies of fallen comrades was a big deal in the ancient world.

But Philistines had routed the men of Israel so badly that there was no attempt to recover Saul's body over night.

When the Philistines did return to Mount Gilboa the following day, they found Saul and his three sons slain.

Upon finding Saul they cut off his head and stripped his armor.

After cutting off Saul's head we are told that they,

1 Samuel 31:9-10 ESV

⁹ sent messengers 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 armor in the temple of Ashteroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

At this point we need to take notice of several of these details that shed light on how we are to understand what's going on here.

Saul & Goliath

First, Saul's head is cut off and his armor is placed in the temple of Ashteroth.

This is almost exactly what Israel did after David defeated Goliath.

David cut off Goliath's head and Goliath's sword was placed in the Tabernacle in [1 Sam 21](#).

This practice was done to honor the god whom you were attributing the victory to.

Israel brought Goliath's sword to the Tabernacle because they wanted to acknowledge that God gave them the victory.

The Philistines brought Saul's armor to the house of Ashteroth because they wanted to acknowledge that Ashteroth gave them the victory.

Once again, Saul is being compared with Goliath.

Saul may have begun like a Gideon, but he ended like a Goliath.

“Gospel”

Second, the messengers carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people.

You'll notice the phrase “good news” here.

In the Greek translation of the OT the word is literally “euangelion” or “gospel”.

The Philistines are taking “the gospel” back to the houses of their idols and to the people.

The OT is filled with examples of how to understand the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we have a “negative” example but it is still instructive.

This Philistine gospel proclamation teaches us something about the proclamation of the true Gospel.

For many evangelicals, when they think of “the gospel”, they often focus on one aspect of the gospel or about one particular teaching of salvation.

If you ask someone the question, “what is the gospel”, they might say something like, “Jesus died on the cross for my sins.”

That is very true and it is a central part of the gospel, but it isn't the whole gospel.

We should understand the Gospel of Jesus in a similar way to this false gospel of the Philistines.

The Philistines are proclaiming the good news of their victory and the defeat of their enemies.

This is also what Christians proclaim when we proclaim the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Jesus is victorious, and the enemy is defeated.

This morning, as a herald of the good news, I proclaim this victory to you, the people of God, in the house of God.

“Curse”

The third detail is that Saul's body was hung from the wall of the Philistine city of Beth-shan.

In the ancient world, hanging a body, instead of burying it, was a sign that the person was cursed.

Symbolically, Saul became a curse in his death.

But his death allowed for Israel's rise in David's rise.

He again we are pointed to Christ in a negative example.

Like Saul, Jesus was hung up in his death.

And like Saul, Jesus was cursed in his death.

As Paul wrote to the Galatians.

Galatians 3:13–14 ESV

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of

Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

In a way, Saul became a curse, so that in David, God's blessing might come to Israel.

But Saul points to Christ, who became a curse, so that in his resurrection and ascension, God's blessings might come to you.

Jesus became a curse in his death, so that you will not suffer the curse in your own death.

Ladder to Heaven

The final three verses of this morning's passage detail the fate of Saul's body.

The men of Jabesh-gilead went at night and took Saul's body from Beth-shan and buried them under the tamarisk tree.

Here at Saul's death we are again reminded of the good start of his reign.

In [1 Sam 11](#), Saul defended the people of Jabesh-gilead when Nahash the king of Ammon besieged them.

Remembering Saul's goodness to them the men of Jabesh-gilead recovered his body.

We learn from [1 Sam 22](#) that Saul used under a tamarisk tree in Gibeah to convene his royal court.

This was a normal thing for kings and rulers to do in the ancient world.

Trees were seen as ladders to heaven.

And kings were like trees, men who connected their kingdom to the wisdom of heaven.

Kings ruled their kingdoms like the sun, moon, and stars; which were placed in heaven to rule the day and night.

Here again Saul points to Christ.

As Israel's king he was supposed to be a ladder to heaven, but he was cut down.

But king Jesus, the shoot from the stump of Jesse, is the true ladder to heaven.

And even though he too was cut down, he rose again and ascended in order that you to might be raised with him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!