

## ~ Saul's Final Battle ~

**Text:** I Samuel 31

**Theme:** The end of rebellion is personal, and sometimes family, tragedy

**Intro:**

1. In chapter 28, we studied Saul's Wicked Witchcraft, when he went to the woman at Endor who had a familiar spirit and sought counsel from the deceased prophet, Samuel.
  - a. Samuel's response was to inform Saul that he would die on the battlefield the following day and that Israel would be defeated by the Philistines.
  - b. In the intervening chapters, the narrative shifts to David and his exploits against the Amalekite who had attacked David's community at Ziklag.
2. In chapter 31, the narrative picks up right where it left off after Saul's overnight visit to Endor. Chapter 31 gives us a short account of how the battle against the Philistines went and the death, desecration, and burial of Saul.

We will break down the chapter into two sections:

- I. The Dead in the Battle (Vs 1-6)
- II. The Disgrace of the Battle (Vs 7-13)

**Main:**

- I. **The Dead in the Battle (Vs 1-6)**
  - A. The death of Saul's sons (Vs 1-2)
    1. The Israelites fled from the battle.
      - a. The account in this chapter opens up with the battle already underway.
        - i. The day after Saul's wicked witchcraft, the Philistines launched their attack against Saul's army, and the battle soon went in the favour of the Philistines.
        - ii. "Saul's soldiers were no match for the Philistine army with its large divisions and its many chariots. Some of the men deserted and many others died on the battlefield. The Philistines preferred to fight on level ground because they depended on their chariots, while Israel tried to lure them into the hill country around Mount Gilboa. Israel was outnumbered and outclassed, but even if they had boasted superior forces, they still would have been defeated. Saul's hour of judgment had come. Without

- Samuel's prayers and David's anointed leadership, the army of Israel was destined for defeat."<sup>1</sup>
- iii. "In the first seven verses of this chapter the words "fled", "fell", and "forsook" are prominent and characterize the conduct of the Israelites in this battle."<sup>2</sup>
- b. The nation of Israel experienced many defeats throughout her history as a result of rebellion against God, and this battle is no different.
    - i. The rebellion of Israel against God's theocracy was the first of their problems. When the people followed the Word of God as it was given by the voice of the prophets, all was well. But the people wanted a king to rule over them instead, and this rebellious spirit is what brought Saul to the throne in the first place.
    - ii. Saul had the same rebellious spirit as the people and had been working to thwart God's plans for a long time now. Saul's personal rebellion was kick-started when he refused to utterly destroy Amalek.
      - The rebellion of Israel, coupled with the rebellion of king Saul, meant that the time had come for God to bring judgement upon them.
      - We mustn't blame Saul alone. Saul was a rebellious king, but he ruled over a rebellious people. Even the early days of Saul's reign were unstable due to a rebellious faction within Israel.
2. The sons of Saul were slain.
    - a. The army of Israel was completely routed.
      - i. As Saul's army was being overwhelmed by the Philistine attack, the army began a full retreat, attempting to get as far away from the battle as they could.
      - ii. The Philistines had obviously identified the exact location of the command post for the army, as they began vigorously pursuing Saul and his sons, along with Saul's personal guard.
      - iii. From the description we have, it appears that Saul's sons, Jonathan, Abinadab, and Melchi-shua fought a rear-guard action, attempting to slow the Philistines down in order to give Saul time to escape from the battlefield.

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Successful*, "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor/Cook Communications, 2001), 159.

<sup>2</sup> John G Butler, 2008; LBC Publications; Saul – The Rejected King, Pg 462

- b. As the Philistines pursued Saul, three of his four sons were slain in the battle, including godly Jonathan.
    - i. As the leader of your home, when you rebel against God it has a destructive effect on you wife and children. In the case of Saul, his son Jonathan was godly man and a fine soldier, but his father's rebellion against God cost Jonathan his life.
    - ii. A rebellious parent has the potential to destroy the life of a godly child, through their own bad example or through bad choices.
      - Example: There were a number of families that left Northside in Adelaide when I was still very young. Some of them I remember quite well, while others are just vague memories. The thing that stands out to me is that, for the vast majority of them, their children ended up going off the rails and living like the world. I can't help but wonder if the reason for that is because their parents took them out of a good church into a luke-warm church. The decisions parents made had a long-term negative effect on the children.
      - Your bad choices can have long-term effects on others, particularly if you are in a position of leadership over them.
- B. The death of king Saul (Vs 4-6)
1. The king was struck by an arrow
    - a. Following the death of Saul's sons, the Philistines continued to pursue Saul.
      - i. It is quite likely that the rear-guard that had been formed to protect Saul's retreat fell into total disarray once the three princes of Israel were dead. As the Philistines gained on Saul, one of their archers fired at Saul and his bodyguard and the arrow struck Saul.
      - ii. One of the first rules of ancient warfare was to kill the enemy king, and the Philistine archer had effectively achieved that.
    - b. The archers arrow caused a serious wound.
      - i. The phrase "sore wounded" means to writhe in extreme pain; to be seriously injured. In other words, the arrow that hit Saul caused a serious amount of pain and would likely result in death.
      - ii. In an attempt to quickly end things before the Philistines arrived, Saul asked his armourbearer to finish him off but the armourbearer would not.

- iii. The reason for Saul's request was probably two-fold.
  - First, the wound that he was suffering from was extremely painful and made his chances of surviving the battle very slim at the least, so Saul wished for a speedy death instead.
  - Second, if the Philistines caught him alive, they would likely torture him to death, as they were fond of humiliating enemy princes and kings in that way.
  - There was also the shame involved in being slain by a Philistine that Saul was trying to avoid.
- 2. The king fell on his own sword
  - a. Saul decided to commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Philistines.
    - i. Saul realised that his armourbearer was unwilling to slay him, so Saul took his own sword, reversed it to point at himself, and then he allowed himself to fall down in the sword, thus committing suicide.
      - "Saul... did not live the life of the righteous and so did not die like the righteous. Saul's death was a result of suicide after being injured in war. Saul's shameful death was the culmination of his shameful failures."<sup>3</sup>
    - ii. Later on, an Amalekite would find Saul's body and would steal his crown and his bracelet and would pretend that he was the one who killed Saul, but the passage makes it clear that the armourbearer saw Saul was dead and followed Saul's example, falling on his own sword.
  - b. Verse 6 gives us a summary of the deaths that resulted from rebellion against God.
    - i. *"So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together."*
    - ii. One of Saul's sons, Ish-Bosheth, was not present at the battle and was later made a puppet king over the northern tribes of Israel, although, his kingdom only lasted a few years.
      - The other three of Saul's sons were slain by the Philistines on the Mountain of Gilboa... Jonathans death, in particular, was a great grief of mind to David, who later sought out Jonathans son, Mephibosheth, so that he might show him kindness for his father's sake.
    - iii. Saul's personal bodyguard were all killed the same day.

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<sup>3</sup> John G Butler, 2008; LBC Publications; Saul – The Rejected King, Pg 461

- I'm speculating a bit, but perhaps Doeg the murderer was among the slain on that day.
- c. The rebellion and Israel, followed by the rebellion of Saul cost Israel a great deal when the day of judgement came.

## II. **The Disgrace of the Battle** (Vs 7-13)

### A. The disgrace of abandoned cities (Vs 7)

1. When the people of Israel saw that their army was defeated, they abandoned their cities to the Philistines.
  - a. This was the land that had been promised to Israel and now they were abandoning it to their enemies.
    - i. Abandonment of their cities was not just a disgrace to the Israeli army but also a sign of God's judgement upon Israel, since the land was intended to remain in Israel's grasp as long as Israel faithfully served God.
    - ii. The loss of this territory was a clear signal to Israel that they had rebelled against God and God was now judging them for it.
  - b. "These folk had earlier deserted the Lord to make Saul king, and then they deserted the land as consequences of Saul being king. There is a price to pay for turning away from the commands of God."<sup>4</sup>

### B. The disgrace of desecrated bodies (Vs 8-13)

1. The following day, the Philistines looted all the bodies of those who had been killed in the battle.
  - a. Collecting spoils off the dead bodies was common practice and afforded a reward to the soldiers who had participated in the battle.
  - b. As the spoilers came through collecting their loot, they found the bodies of Saul and his three sons.
    - i. The Philistines realised who they had killed and took the bodies as trophies to show their dominance in the region.
    - ii. "Saul had been so worried that he might be insulted by the Philistines. That he committed suicide. But he was still disgraced and insulted by the Philistines; for when they found his body after the battle, they cut off his head and sent it into the land of the Philistines along with his armour. After that they fastened his body to a wall in Beth-shan, a town a few miles west of Jordan and about a dozen miles south of the Sea of Galilee."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John G Butler, 2008; LBC Publications; Saul – The Rejected King, Pg 464

<sup>5</sup> John G Butler, 2008; LBC Publications; Saul – The Rejected King, Pg 465-466

- c. Notice how the Philistines seem to have had a real taste for revenge.
  - i. When David slew Goliath, he brought Goliath's head to Saul as proof of his death, but Goliath's weapons and armour were taken up to the house of God, which is where David retrieved Goliath's sword from in I Samuel 21:9.
  - ii. Now the Philistines cut off Saul's head and sent it around town as proof of his death. Then they placed his armour in the house of their gods as a symbol of final victory over Jehovah. Lastly, they hung Saul's body in a city wall as a display of their total dominance over the kingdom of Israel.
2. The defeat of Israel was an insult to the God of Israel.
  - a. When the people of God suffer a great defeat, the world associates that with the God they serve, and this gives them cause to mock at God.
    - i. "The disgrace of Jehovah God came when the Philistines published in the house of their idol gods the victory over the Israelites."<sup>6</sup>
    - ii. Such battles were viewed as more than just a contest between people's but a contest between gods. Clearly, the Philistines saw this victory over Israel as a signal that their gods had finally triumphed over the God of Israel, not just the nation of Israel.
    - iii. The same could be said of the moral failures of God's people today. When the world sees in the church that marriages are breaking down, children in Christian homes are worldly and immoral in their behaviour, and the church is becoming more and more ungodly, the world doesn't just see a failing people, they see it as a referendum on the God of that people and they mock God.
    - iv. "Saul's military record is summarized in 1 Samuel 14:47–48. It's a commendable record that presents Saul as a conquering general and a national hero. He began his career as a great success; after all, the people did sing, "Saul has slain his thousands." It was after his failure to destroy the Amalekites that Saul began to go downhill. When David came on the scene, Saul's envy of the young man's success so obsessed him that the king became paranoid and dangerous. Saul had many good qualities,

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<sup>6</sup> John G Butler, 2008; LBC Publications; Saul – The Rejected King, Pg 466

but none of them was humble, obedient faith in God. Because of his pride and disobedience, Saul lost everything.”<sup>7</sup>

3. Lastly, notice reward Saul received for the good he had done in his life. (Vs 11-13)
  - a. While much of Saul’s monarchy was plagued with spiritual bankruptcy, narcissism, and jealousy, Saul had done something great in the early days, immediately after his anointing.
    - i. In I Samuel 11, you’ll recall that the Ammonites came against the people of Jabesh-gilead and threatened to destroy them if they would not make a covenant with them. The men would be required to submit themselves to the cruel plucking out of their eyes and all the people would be made slaves.  
The men of Jabesh-gilead sent word throughout Israel asking for help and, when Saul heard of it, he was moved by the Spirit to gather Israel together and go up and deliver the people of Jabesh-gilead.
    - ii. In these verses, we find the valiant men of Jabesh-gilead rewarded the kindness of Saul with a special act of kindness on their part as they rescued his body, and the bodies of his sons, from the shame of hanging on the walls of Beth-shan.  
They then burnt the bodies and buried the bones under a tree at Jabesh, thus preventing the Philistines from ever identifying them and mocking them once again. Then these valiant men fasted for seven days out of respect for their fallen king.
    - iii. These men were later commended by David for treating Saul with honour.
  - b. Thus, the reign of King Saul came to a bitter end.
    - i. Sauls rebellion led to a tragic end as three of his sons were killed, Saul was killed, the nation of Israel was defeated in battle and lost many of their cities to the Philistines, and the name of God was mocked in Philistine temples.
    - ii. Pride and rebellion have a way of bringing a nation very low.

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<sup>7</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, [Be Successful](#), “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor/Cook Communications, 2001), 159.

- iii. **James 4:6** *“But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”*

Conclusion:

1. The armies of Israel found their battle characterised by fleeing, falling, and forsaking and for the Christian who rebels against God they will find their spiritual battles characterised by an equal measure of defeat.
2. Pride, stubbornness, and rebellion put us in opposition to God. God resists such behaviour, but he gives grace to those who humbly submit to Him.