

A Tragic Ending – 1 Samuel 31:1-13

Introduction:

Saul was the first king over Israel. The people wanted a king like the other nations around them, and despite the warning of Samuel the prophet, they pressed the issue until God granted them their wish. God chose the first king, who at first glance seemed the perfect candidate. He was tall, strong and from a family of warriors. He had a son who was a valiant warrior and a level-headed diplomat. This made for a great succession plan.

Yet Israel's first king lacked the most important characteristic in being a good leader: he lacked a relationship with the God of Israel. He became a proud, vain man who only consulted God as a last-ditch effort. Of course, God could see through his duplicity and in the end refuses to answer any of King Saul's prayers.

So in the last chapter of Saul's life he goes to battle without the aid of God. The results are disastrous. In fact, things are so bad one might think that all is lost: Israel is defeated, her leaders are killed and her cities are taken over by the enemy. No doubt this tragic ending is recorded as a warning to all people: life without God leads to disaster.

The Beginning of the End – 1 Samuel 31:1-3

1. Verse 1 starts as a continuation of 29:1 where the armies of the Philistines had gathered against the armies of Israel. It reads as if the Philistines are the aggressors here and Israel the reluctant defenders. What two things happened to the armies of Israel in verse 1?
2. In verse 2 we discover two things. First, that Saul's sons are fighting alongside of him, likely even part of his protective guard. What else do we discover in verse 2? What does this mean for Saul? What does this mean for Israel?
3. We have come to love and admire Jonathan, son of the king, friend of the king elect, mighty warrior and man of faith. Yet what happens to him in verse 2?

Eliphaz, friend of Job asks, “Who ever perished being innocent?” (Job 4:7) Why would God let this happen?

4. In verse 3 we are told that “the battle pressed hard against Saul.” What happens to Saul there on the battlefield? What is his condition?

A Day of Tragedy in Israel – 1 Samuel 31:4-7

5. What is the last command King Saul gives (v. 4)? Why does he issue this command?
6. Is his armour bearer willing to obey his king (v. 4)? What does he fear? (note: Jewish scholars believe this armour bearer is Doeg, the Edomite. What is he noted for? Cf. 1 Samuel 22:18)
7. King Saul now takes matters into his own hands. What does he do (v. 4)?
8. How does the armour bearer respond to what King Saul does (v. 5)?
9. Verse 6 is a summary of what happened that day. What are we told in this verse? How does the future look for Israel?
10. What did the Israelite people who lived close to the battlefield do when they saw what happened that day (v. 7)?

Saul’s Worst Nightmare – 1 Samuel 31:8-13

11. What do the Philistines find on the battlefield (v. 8)? What might they have expected to be done with the body of the king?
12. What did the Philistines do to the body of King Saul (v. 9)? Why? (cf. 1 Samuel 17:51, 54) Did Saul’s plan work (v.4)?
13. In verse 9-10 we are told that the armour of Saul was toured through the temples of the Philistine gods. Why might they do this?

14. What was done with the body of King Saul (v. 10)?
15. What did the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead do (vss. 11-13)? Why did they do this (cf. 1 Samuel 11:1-11, Deuteronomy 21:23)?
16. When Samuel died we are told that ‘all Israel mourned for him’ (1 Samuel 28:3). Do we have a record of this happening when Saul died? Describe his “funeral” (v. 13).

Conclusion:

Just as the ghost of Samuel predicted, King Saul died the next day in battle, as well as three of his sons and most of his army. What a tragic ending for a man who started with so much potential. The life of Saul stands as a stark reminder of what happens when we refuse to follow God or submit to His ways. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, “the wages of sin is death.”

The following paragraphs are from the New Beacon Commentary on 1 Samuel written by Kevin J. Mellish. (p. 176)

“The tragic end to the life of Saul reminds us what happens when sin and disobedience consume an individual. Throughout his career, Saul grew further and further away from God, the outcome of which was a steady increase in the level of his despair, anxiety, loneliness, suspicion, and jealousy. The course of events ultimately led to the horrific ending of his life.

“... Like Saul, the results of a life dominated by disobedience and sin lead to unwholesome behaviour that produces shame and regret. Thankfully, God’s prevenient grace is extended to each of us, and it can both reach and deliver the most hardened of sinners. Because of God’s abundant mercy, his ability and willingness to cleanse sin, and his desire to instill in us the power to overcome sin, our story does not have to replicate Saul’s sad ending, but it can be characterized by peace, joy, freedom, and life, both abundant and eternal.”