

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 31

The Death of Saul

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 Ashteroth, 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.

31:1 Battle is summarized in this single verse. Saul had been commissioned to save Israel from the Philistines (9:16), but now he will die at their hands, a measure of his failure. (TLSB)

Mount Gilboa. Location of Israelite camp, opposite Shunem (location of Philistine camp). Jezreel Valley stood between the forces. (TLSB)

31:2 *Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua.* The surviving son, Ish-Bosheth or Esh-Baal (1Ch 8:33; 9:39), was afterward promoted by Abner, who somehow survived the battle, to succeed his father as king (2Sa 2:8–9). (CSB)

Saul's sons are the first named casualties (Saul's son Ish-bosheth evidently was not on the battle line). Abner, commander of the Israelite army, escaped and later would help to reestablish the government under Ish-bosheth (2Sm 2:8–10). (TLSB)

31:3 *archers found him.* Perhaps they actually came upon Saul, but possibly they adjusted for the correct range and mortally wounded him. (TLSB)

31:4 *uncircumcised.* Saul did not want the Philistines to make sport of him or torture him as they did Samson (Jgs 16:25). Mocking and torture were regarded as part of the triumph of battle. (TLSB)

mistreat me. A practice that was not uncommon; previously the Philistines had mutilated and humiliated Samson after his capture (see Jdg 16:23–25). (CSB)

he feared greatly. Armor-bearer refused to end Saul's life, probably because of his great respect for the Lord's anointed or fear of punishment. (TLSB)

took his own sword and fell on it. The culmination of a long process of self-destruction. (CSB)

Saul regarded death as preferable to capture. Scripture condemns murder (Ex 20:13), including suicide, which is always described in a negative light (cf 2Sm 17:23; Mt 27:5; Ac 1:18–20). (TLSB)

31:5 *also fell upon his sword.* Armor-bearer was accountable for the life of the king. Were he found alive beside the dead king, he probably would have been executed for failure in battle. (TLSB)

31:6 *all his men.* Those who had served around him in his administration. (CSB)

Refers to Saul's servants or bodyguards, chosen troops who stood with him and his sons at the front. (TLSB)

31:7 *abandoned their cities.* Outcome of battle and accompanying movements of troops could be seen from surrounding hills and vantage points. The bad news caused general panic and a mass evacuation from Israelite towns in the region. The Israelites probably crossed the Jordan River to the east. Out of that region would be established a new kingdom under Ish-bosheth, Saul's remaining son (2Sm 2:8). (TLSB)

the Philistines came. The Philistines occupied the abandoned towns and thus came to control the entirety of northern Israel, a fertile area to the north and east of the central hill country. The defeated and weakened Israelites were now confined to the hill country of Samaria and Judah. (TLSB)

31:8–9 Philistines gloat in their victory at Saul's expense when they come upon the bodies of Saul and his three sons. (TLSB)

31:9 *They cut off his head.* David had done the same to Goliath (see 17:51). (CSB)

Commonly done to enemies, as in the case of Goliath (17:51). (TLSB)

sent messengers throughout the land. Probably bearing Saul's head and armor as proof and trophies of their victory. (CSB)

good news. The news encouraged their own people and further intimidated the Israelites. (TLSB)

the house of their idols. The temple of Ashtoreth, the female deity worshiped along with Dagon. (TLSB)

31:10 *They put his armor in the temple.* Symbolic of ascribing the victory to the Philistine gods. (CSB)

Saul's body armor became a trophy to be deposited in the heathen temple, in much the same way Goliath's sword had been kept in the shrine of the God of Israel (21:9). (TLSB)

Ashtaroth. A temple of Ashtoreth has been excavated by archaeologists at Beth-shan. (TLSB)

fastened his body to the wall. Public exposure of bodies of enemy captives was common, perhaps connected with the belief that such exposure between heaven and earth was a protection against supernatural infection, thereby neutralizing the danger of the corpse to the living. (TLSB)

Beth-shan. Old Canaanite city that the Israelites had not conquered; c 12 mi SE of Jezreel. (TLSB)

31:11–12 *Jabesh-gilead*. City on the east bank of the Jordan that Saul had delivered from Nahash the Ammonite (11:5–11). People there remembered and took this opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty. (TLSB)

jabesh. Same as Jabesh-gilead. (TLSB)

burned. Unusual because cremation was not ordinarily practiced in Israel. Perhaps the bodies were extremely mutilated or decomposed, or perhaps this was a means to prevent further indignities. David subsequently commends the people of Jabesh for their piety (2Sm 2:4–7). (TLSB)

31:12 *took the boys of Saul...his sons*. The men of Jabesh Gilead had not forgotten how Saul had come to their defense when they were threatened by the Ammonites (see ch. 11). (CSB)

burned them. Cremation was not customary in ancient Israel and here appears to have been done to prevent any further abuse of the bodies of Saul and his sons by the Philistines. (CSB)

31:13 *took their bones and buried them*. David later had their remains removed from Jabesh and placed in the family burial grounds of Zela in Benjamin (see 2Sa 21:12–14). (CSB)

After purification by fire, the bones were properly buried. Despite Saul's failures, he was the anointed of Yahweh. (TLSB)

tamarisk tree in Jabesh. Saul's bones would rest at the place where he had won his first victory, during better days in his life (ch 11). David would later remove the bones of Saul and Jonathan and rebury them in Benjamin (2Sm 21:11–14). (TLSB)

fasted seven days. As an indication of their mourning for Saul (cf. 2Sa 1:12; 3:35; 12:16, 21–23). (CSB)

Ch 31 Saul forfeits his divine blessings by compromising God's Word, and he dies a brutal death at the hands of the very enemy he was chosen to defeat. There is no greater tragedy than when God's people compromise His Word, no greater blessing than when they steadfastly receive it. Learn by the examples of Saul and David. By promises and blessings, the King of heaven provides life for you in His Son, Jesus. • "Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word; Curb those who by deceit or sword Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son And bring to naught all He has done." Amen. (LSB 655:1) (TLSB)