

# **The Life of David**

## **The Death of Saul**

*1 Samuel 31:1-13*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

November 24, 2019

# The Death of Saul

## Scripture

First Samuel and Second Samuel were originally written as one book. Somewhere along the way, perhaps because of its length, the Book of Samuel was divided into two. First Samuel essentially deals with the life of Saul, and Second Samuel deals with the life of David. So, as First Samuel ends, it seems fitting that the last chapter of First Samuel describes the death of King Saul.

Let's read about the death of Saul in 1 Samuel 31:1-13:

**<sup>1</sup>Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. <sup>2</sup>And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul. <sup>3</sup>The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. <sup>6</sup>Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together. <sup>7</sup>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.**

**<sup>8</sup>The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup> They put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. <sup>11</sup> But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days. (1 Samuel 31:1-13)

## Introduction

*The Rest of the Story* was a daily radio program on weekdays hosted by Paul Harvey. The program began during World War II. *The Rest of the Story* consisted of stories presented as little-known or forgotten facts on a variety of subjects with a key element of the story (usually the name of some well-known person) held back until the end. Paul Harvey always concluded his story with a variation on the tag line, “And now you know the *rest* of the story.”<sup>1</sup>

The author of First Samuel could have concluded chapter 31 by saying, “And now you know the *rest* of the story.” The last few chapters of First Samuel are actually out of chronological order. Briefly, following John Woodhouse, here is what happened:

1. The Philistines made the decision to fight against Israel, and Achish insisted that David must come along (1 Samuel 28:1, 2).

2. In preparation for the assault, the whole Philistine fighting force assembled at Aphek, and there David was excluded (1 Samuel 29:1–10). At the same time the Israelites set up camp in the vicinity of the Jezreel Valley (1 Samuel 29:1).

3. From Aphek David then headed south to Ziklag (1 Samuel 29:11–30:1) as the Philistines moved north to the Jezreel Valley (1 Samuel 29:11).

---

<sup>1</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rest\\_of\\_the\\_Story](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rest_of_the_Story).

## The Life of David

4. The Philistines set up camp at Shunem on the northern side of the Jezreel Valley, and the Israelites assembled in the Gilboa hills on the south side of the valley (1 Samuel 28:4).

5. The terrified Saul secretly visited the medium at Endor by night (1 Samuel 28:5–25).

6. Meanwhile David reached Ziklag, discovered the catastrophe that had fallen at the hands of the Amalekites, and redeemed the situation (1 Samuel 30).

7. As David was dealing with the Amalekites more than a hundred miles to the south, the Philistines engaged the Israelites in battle in the valley of Jezreel (1 Samuel 31:1).<sup>2</sup>

In other words, at exactly the same time that David was striking down the Amalekites and rescuing his people from “the enemies of the Lord” (1 Samuel 30), Saul was being attacked by the Philistines 100 miles to the north of David, with a very different outcome (1 Samuel 31). In fact, whereas David emerges victoriously, Saul is defeated and dies by his own hand.

Earlier in Israel’s history, they were governed by judges. However, the people Israel demanded a king “like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). God agreed to give the people of Israel a king (8:7). But he also warned them that a king would eventually deal harshly with the people and oppress them (8:10-18). So, Saul was chosen to be king over Israel (9-10). Saul started off well, but very quickly showed that he was disobedient and unrepentant. He was not a believer and he was unfaithful to the Lord. In fact, in the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 10:13–14, we read, “So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.”

---

<sup>2</sup> John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 545.

## Lesson

First Samuel 31:1-13 shows us what happens to one who is unfaithful.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Defeat of God's People (31:1-3, 7)
2. The Certainty of God's Judgment (31:4-6)
3. The Dishonoring of God's Name (31:8-10)
4. The Help of God's Men (31:11-13)

### I. The Defeat of God's People (31:1-3, 7)

First, let's look at the defeat of God's people.

While David was defeating the Amalekites 100 miles to the south, the Philistines were defeating the Israelites in the Jezreel Valley. In fact, the catastrophic defeat is summarized in verse 1, **“Now the Philistines were fighting against Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.”** Presumably, the men of Israel moved on to Mount Gilboa to escape the chariots of the Philistines. But, there were far too many Philistines, and the army of the Israelites were defeated on Mount Gilboa.

The author of First Samuel zooms in and focuses on Saul and his sons. He writes in verse 2, **“And the Philistines overtook Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-shua, the sons of Saul.”** We know **Jonathan**, of course. He was David's closest friend. He understood that God had selected David to be the next king over Israel, and was wonderfully supportive of David. But, now, on Mount Gilboa, Jonathan was killed by the Philistines.

Saul had another son named Ishvi (in 1 Samuel 14:49). He was not named in verse 2, which means that he either escaped or, more likely, was not present for this battle against the Philistines.

He will appear later by the name Ish-bosheth (in 2 Samuel 2:8-10).

The author zooms in yet closer in verse 3, **“The battle pressed hard against Saul, and the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by the archers.”** The chariots might not have been able to get up the mountain, but the archers certainly could. And one of the arrows found its way to Saul and, as the text says, **“he was badly wounded by the archers.”**

Then, zooming back out so as to get a wide-angled view, the author notes in verse 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.”** The defeat of God’s people was now complete. The Israelites ran away from the Philistines, and the Philistines came and occupied their homes and their cities in the northern part of Israel.

Saul’s unfaithfulness to God led to the defeat of God’s people. His growing resistance and rebellion against God led to a national disaster in which three of his sons were killed and the people of God in the northern region of Israel fled from their homes.

Let us be aware that our actions have consequences on the lives of other people. If we are rebellious and disobedient to God, our actions will eventually have a negative impact on other people. So, let us pay attention to our obedience to God and his Word.

## II. The Certainty of God’s Judgment (31:4-6)

Second, let’s note the certainty of God’s judgment.

Saul was mortally wounded. He was dying. He knew that he was dying, and perhaps he also knew it might take hours or days before he died. In those days, when kings, their family members, and senior military officers were captured they were terribly mistreated, tortured, and abused. So, **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”** (31:4a). Saul feared being mistreated and so he wanted his armor-bearer to kill him. **But his armor-bearer would not, for he feared greatly** (31:4b). The author of First Samuel does not say exactly what it was that the armor-bearer feared. However, it is likely that he was fearful of lifting his hand against the Lord’s anointed servant, just as David would not lift his hand against the Lord’s anointed servant. The armor-bearer may have recalled what David once said, “The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord’s anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord’s anointed” (1 Samuel 24:6). The armor-bearer did not greatly fear Saul or the Philistines, but the Lord.

So, because Saul’s armor-bearer would not kill him, **Saul took his own sword and fell upon it** (31:4c). In the Hebrew text, just five words describe the death of Israel’s first king. He had proven to be a terrible disappointment to the people of God. The king whom the people wanted was now dead. His failure was complete.

Verse 5 says, **“And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him.”** The text does not say whether the armor-bearer was wounded. Perhaps he was also fearful of being mistreated by the Philistines. Or perhaps he was overwhelmed by all that was happening.

Meanwhile, 100 miles to the south, David’s success was in stark contrast to Saul’s defeat and death. Of Saul, the author writes in verse 6, **“Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together.”** But, of David, the author writes in 1 Samuel 30:19, “Nothing was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that had been taken. *David brought back all.*”

The Prophet Samuel had warned God’s people in 1 Samuel 12:25, “But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both

you and your king.” On the evening before his death, when Saul asked the medium of Endor to bring up Samuel, Samuel said to Saul in 1 Samuel 28:19, “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.” This was a confirmation of what Samuel said to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:28, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.” God’s judgment on Saul was certain and now complete. God did what he said he would do.

We need to be aware of the certainty of God’s judgment. Let us never become complacent when we rebel against God and his Word, and nothing happens. We may be emboldened to rebel and sin even more against God. But, God is patient. He is waiting for us to turn to him in repentance. Eventually, however, the end will come, as it did for Saul, and must for all of us. Saul is in hell and will spend eternity in hell because he showed that he really was unfaithful to the Lord.

Years ago, I attended a Walk Thru the Bible seminar on the Old Testament. It was a one-day seminar giving an entire overview of the Old Testament. By the end of the day, an attendee has memorized about 40 key events in the Old Testament. I don’t remember much now about that seminar, but I do remember the key idea for Saul, David, and Solomon. It was, “Saul – no heart. David – whole heart. And Solomon – half heart.” Saul had no heart for God. Oh, he may have pretended to have a heart for God. But, his life and actions showed that he was a rebel against God, and God judged him for being unfaithful.

### III. The Dishonoring of God’s Name (31:8-10)

Third, let’s observe the dishonoring of God’s name.

Verse 8 says, **“The next day, when the Philistines came**



**to strip the slain, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.”** Most likely, during the battle on the previous day, the Philistines did not realize that they had killed Saul. But now they discovered him and his three sons. **So, just as David once did to a Philistine named Goliath, they cut off [Saul’s] head and stripped off his armor...”** (31:9a). Then, the Philistines **sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines, to carry the good news to the house of their idols and to the people** (31:9b). The Hebrew word for **“good news”** here is the same word for “gospel,” for that is what “gospel” means: it is “good news.” But here in 1 Samuel 31:9 the **“good news”** of Saul’s death is being told far and wide to the Philistines. In addition, the Philistines **put [Saul’s] armor in the temple of Ashtaroath, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan** (31:10).

The dishonoring of God’s name was now complete. It was a great day in Philistia! The gods of the Philistines triumphed over the God of Israel.

God’s name is dishonored whenever we surrender to the idols of pride or lust or despair or greed or anger or any other violation of God’s Law. When we break God’s Law, when we do that which is contrary to God’s truth, we dishonor his name.

Jonathan Edwards, the famous New England pastor and theologian who lived in the early eighteenth century, had a daughter named Esther. She married Aaron Burr. (Their son, also named Aaron Burr, was the infamous Vice President of the United States.) Aaron Burr, Sr. was a winsome preacher of the gospel and also president of Princeton College. Unfortunately, he died at the age of forty-one. Esther’s sorrow was colored by a holy concern, of which she wrote to her parents:

O, I am afraid I shall conduct myself so as to bring dishonor on my God and the religion I profess! No, rather let me die this moment, than be left to bring dishonor on God’s holy name – I am overcome – I must conclude, with once more begging, that, as

my dear parents remember themselves, they would not forget their greatly afflicted daughter, (now a lonely widow), nor her fatherless children.<sup>3</sup>

Let us beware of dishonoring God's name.

#### IV. The Help of God's Men (31:11-13)

And fourth, let's look at the help of God's men.

There is a glimmer of light in the darkness of this account about the end of an unfaithful life. Jabesh-gilead was a town about 10 miles southeast of Beth-shan. Verses 11-12 say, **“But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, 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.”** It is not entirely clear why the bodies were burned, because the Israelites considered the burning of bodies a desecration. But perhaps it was done to prevent further dishonor against the bodies. In any event, after they burned their bodies, **“they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days”** (31:13).

What is interesting is that the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead had never forgotten Saul's help to them. About forty years earlier, at the very beginning of Saul's reign as king, the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead were threatened by Nahash the Ammonite (11:2). Saul marched – through the night – to their rescue (11:11). Dale Ralph Davis notes, “Saul's reign began with his deliverance of Jabesh (chap. 11) and ends with Jabesh's ‘deliverance’ of Saul (chap. 31).”<sup>4</sup> The inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead extended kindness

---

<sup>3</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 434.

<sup>4</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 328.

to the body of Saul and his sons.

We learn from this that it is right to treat those who are deceased with respect.

### Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the incident of the death of Saul as set forth in 1 Samuel 31:1-13, let us cast our hope on the only One who is ever faithful.

Although Saul began his reign as king well, he quickly showed that he was not faithful. He disobeyed God and was unrepentant. He put on an outward show of belonging to God, but he was in fact unfaithful to God, and unbeliever.

His whole life points to the fact that Israel needed a better hope than the one Saul gave them. Israel needed a king after God's own heart. And, indeed, as we read in 1 Chronicles 10:14, "Therefore the Lord put him [that is, Saul] to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse."

The life and death of Saul showed us that he was not Israel's hope. But Saul's failure was not God's failure. God gave Israel a king after his own heart. God gave Israel David.

However, as we shall see in the coming lessons, David also failed. And David also died. David was not Israel's hope either.

Israel's hope, and indeed the hope of all people, lies in David's Greater Son, Jesus. Jesus fully obeyed God. He never sinned. And, even when Jesus died, his death was not a failure of God's purpose. In fact, Jesus' death *was* God's purpose. Because three days after Jesus died, God raised him back to life again, thereby showing that Jesus is the only One who is ever faithful. So, let us cast our hope on the only One who is ever faithful. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can  
be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons).
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp).
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source\\_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz).

## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)