

The Burning of King Saul: The End of a Tragic Life

I Samuel 31

The people of Israel had for centuries been governed and rescued from military crisis by local leaders known as “judges.” But the judge system had lost public support, and the population demanded that the last judge, the prophet Samuel, reform the political system and name a king to succeed him, in spite of the LORD's warning that this would be a disaster.

At the LORD's direction, Samuel named Saul, a young farmer, to be king. Although Saul didn't want to be king and he hid, he was quickly found, and a ceremony of anointing was observed. Then Saul, still avoiding the kingship, returned to his father's farm.

But a crisis arose when the Israelite city of Jabesh came under severe attack. Saul rose to the occasion and assembled an army, and Jabesh was rescued. Upon this stunning victory, Saul became a national hero and took his throne.

But in spite of his heroism, Saul was unfit for leadership of God's people. Placing military strategy, pride, and greed above public service and faithfulness to the LORD, Saul ignored his kingly duties of national security, moral leadership, and obedience to the LORD, investing the latter part of his reign in a paranoid hunt for his faithful army general David, whom he wrongly considered a rival. As a result of many acts of disobedience, the LORD removed Saul from power, and removed his heirs from the throne.

We read in I Samuel 31 one of the most tragic chapters in the Bible. King Saul and his army were badly defeated by the Philistines. Saul's heir and David's best friend, Jonathan, was killed, as were two of Saul's other sons.

Hard pressed by Philistine soldiers, King Saul was wounded. Unable to escape, and afraid of being captured and tortured by the enemy, Saul urged his armor-bearer to kill him.

Afraid, he refused. So Saul fell on his own sword and died. Seeing this, his armor-bearer did the same. This double suicide was one of only five suicides recorded in the Bible.

Seeing the battle lost and their king dead, the Israelites in the region abandoned their homes, which the Philistines then occupied.

The Philistine soldiers found Saul's body. They cut off his head and strung his body outside the city wall for all to see. This was too much for the men of Jabesh, whom Saul had rescued many years ago from a horrible fate. They journeyed through the night and removed the headless bodies of Saul and his sons from the city wall. If they had been caught, they would certainly have been killed. They escaped to Jabesh, however, burned and buried them, and performed a proper funeral.

We would all probably agree that none of us wants to be like King Saul. His life, however, is recorded for us in the Scripture so that we may be warned of dangerous pitfalls to avoid in the world. How did Saul sink so low?

Why did his life end in tragedy and ruin? The title of my message is, *The Burning of King Saul: The End of a Tragic Life.* I would like to consider four steps in the life of King Saul which ultimately led to his terrible end.

1. Let us consider first, Saul's promising start.

Saul's first real test as king came when the Israelite town of Jabesh was under attack by the Ammonite king Nahash.

The people of Jabesh, recognizing their defenseless situation, offered their surrender. But cruel Nahash would accept their surrender only if every man in Jabesh allowed Nahash to gouge out his right eye.

A Bible commentator writes, "Nahash was probably leveraging his anticipated victory, reasoning that if the Jabeshites tolerated this, no other Israelite town would have the morale to resist him. The people of Jabesh requested 7 days to recruit an army, agreeing to submit to Nahash's condition if they were then still unable to fight."

With the taste of future effortless conquests rich in his mouth, Nahash agreed. Saul reacted like a true king, treating this as a national emergency. He immediately slaughtered the oxen he had on hand, and cut them into many pieces. He placed the pieces in the hands of his servants and supporters. He sent them to every city and town in Israel with the message, “If you don't want this to happen to your cattle, report for military duty *now!*” Shocked by this startling mode of communication, the men showed up, totally united against king Nahash.

Learning of their coming rescue, the men of Jabesh were thrilled. They slyly repeated their message to Nahash, that if no rescuing army came, they would submit to his cruel demand.

King Saul divided his army into three divisions and surrounded the Ammonite army during the night. Toward morning they attacked. Apparently catching the enemy by surprise, they routed them so completely that by afternoon, what survivors were left were so scattered that no two were together. Jabesh was rescued.

Naturally, the nation was elated with this victory. They held a second coronation ceremony for Saul, at which Samuel retired from office, and Saul assumed day-to-day leadership of the nation. Samuel preached a great sermon, admonishing the people to be faithful to the LORD under their new king.

At Saul's original coronation, certain people had opposed his appointment as king. Today, the entire nation came to be Saul's supporters, and they called for the death sentence against those who had opposed Saul earlier. But before anything could be done, Saul nullified their verdict, saying no one would be put to death during the celebration of a great victory given by the LORD.

The people of Jabesh never forgot their debt to Saul. Decades later when Saul was killed in battle and his body desecrated by the enemy, the brave men of Jabesh risked their lives to retrieve his body and give him an honorable burial.

Have you ever felt threatened like the Jebusites by an enemy far superior and stronger than you. The enemy of sin. The enemy of the world. The enemy of Satan all rage war against the souls of men.

Who shall deliver men from such powerful enemies? Jesus Christ delivers men from the clutches of sin and Satan. He sets the prisoners free! Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

What a promising start Saul had as Israel's first monarch!

2. Let us consider secondly, Saul's terrible miscalculations.

From the very start of his reign, Saul had the perfect opportunity to be the benchmark by which all future kings could be measured. All he had to do was to seek the Lord whole-heartedly, obey His commandments and align his will with that of God's, and his rule would have been a God-honoring one. However, like so many others, Saul chose a different path and strayed away from God. It wasn't long before King Saul abandoned the Lord, and from there his deterioration was continuous.

Failing to keep the momentum of the victory at Jabesh Gilead, Saul disbanded the army, keeping only 3,000 troops active.

With a third of this tiny force, Saul's enthusiastic son Jonathan attacked Geba, a well-equipped Philistine outpost deep in Israelite territory. Realizing how the Philistines would react, Saul ordered another draft, probably hoping to amass an army as big as for the Jabesh battle, about 330,000 men.

The Philistine reaction was swift and strong. They assembled a massive army, equipped with 3,000 chariots — invincible against Israel's foot soldiers. The Israelites, lacking a metalworking industry, weren't even equipped with swords or spears. They were badly outmatched in both numbers and equipment.

The prophet Samuel had made arrangements to meet Saul at a certain time, to offer sacrifices and ask the LORD's blessing on this military venture. Many times before, God had given his people great victories, even when they were similarly outmatched. But as the time passed Israel's soldiers, seeing the brewing crisis and the king's worried state, began to abandon the cause.

Saul, seeing his army evaporating before his eyes, panicked. Rather than trust the LORD for victory, he decided he needed to stop the loss of manpower. So, without waiting for Samuel to arrive, he offered the sacrifices himself — an act prohibited by the LORD's law.

Just as Saul was finishing, Samuel arrived. Saul tried to make excuses for his violation, but Samuel replied that because of Saul's disobedience, the LORD would remove him from being king, replacing him with “a man after [God's] own heart.”

We read Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:6-7, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Albert Barnes writes, “*Be careful for nothing means* be not anxious or solicitous about the things of the present life. The word used here does not mean that we are to exercise no care about worldly matters--no care to preserve our property, or to provide for our families, (1Ti 5:8;) but that there is to be such confidence in God as to free the mind from anxiety, and such a sense of dependence on him as to keep it

calm. There is nothing which pertains to body, mind, estate, friends, conflicts, losses, trials, hopes, fears, in reference to which we may not go and spread it all out before the Lord.”

King Saul relied first and foremost on manpower and not on the Lord, and this terrible miscalculation cost him his kingdom!

Saul's first disobedience led later to Saul's foolish order. So many soldiers had fled that Saul's army numbered only 600 men. His son Jonathan took one man and set out on his own, not sure what their mission was. They came upon a small Philistine outpost of about 20 men, and decided to attack it, seeking the LORD's help.

The LORD did help them — an earthquake struck, throwing the Philistines into panic. The attack was successful, and Philistines at other nearby posts, fearing the earthquake and hearing the cries of Jonathan's victims, were similarly thrown into panic.

King Saul sprang into action. In those days a priest could communicate with God. Therefore, Saul began asking his priest to consult the LORD, but the situation was urgent, and he foolishly decided he couldn't afford to take the time.

Just as in the previous battle, Saul considered military considerations more important than having God's aid.

So canceling his call to the LORD, Saul sent his tiny force directly into battle, compounding his foolish decision by calling the LORD's curse on any of his men who stopped fighting to eat before sundown. As a result, his men, weak with hunger, were not fighting at their best.

However, the earthquake and Jonathan's assault had put momentum on their side. Ultimately, the Philistines were defeated, in spite of their vast superiority.

However, during the day Jonathan had stumbled onto a honeycomb. Being hungry, and having been absent during the announcement of his father's curse, he stopped a moment, ate some honey, was refreshed, and continued fighting.

When evening came, the soldiers paused to eat, and then Saul proposed that they resume the fight during the night, before the surviving Philistines could escape. Saul's priest Ahiah suggested they consult the LORD this time, and Saul agreed. They called on God, but God did not answer them.

Saul rightly assumed God kept silence because someone in the army had broken faith. Again following their custom, they drew lots to find out who was the violator. God arranged for Jonathan to “win” this lottery. Saul demanded that he confess his violation. By now Jonathan realized his father had called on the LORD to curse anyone who ate before sundown, and Jonathan confessed he had snacked on honey. Saul pronounced the death sentence on his son, but the soldiers violently objected, realizing that Jonathan's courageous attack had sparked the day's great victory. Jonathan was rescued.

But because of Saul's foolish management and terrible miscalculation that day, the military momentum was lost. The army withdrew, and the invading Philistines were not expelled from the land. We see later that Saul graduated from ignoring the LORD to outright disobedience.

This is dramatically seen in how he dealt with the Amalekite king Agag. The Amalekites were long-standing enemies of Israel, being distantly related by their ancestry in Esau (Genesis 36:12). They attacked Israel shortly after the exodus of the nation from Egypt, and their eventual destruction was foretold by Moses in Exodus 17:8-16.

The LORD's assignment to Saul was: attack the evil Amalekites; destroy them completely, taking no survivors and no plunder. Saul was commanded to “utterly destroy” these heathen people, along with their livestock. Again, he failed to obey the Lord. He spared the king, Agag, and also the best of the livestock. When Samuel arrived on the scene, the king boasted: “I have performed the commandment of Jehovah.” To phrase it literally, the prophet inquired: “What means then this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”

Samuel then uttered the famous declaration: “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). This was a very proper answer to, and refutation of Saul's excuse. Is not obedience to the will of God the end of all religion, of its rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices?

God has no delight with superficial sacrifices which are designed to be a substitute for humble obedience. Human wisdom is not a proper exchange for divine revelation. Saul's actions were beginning to be a real index to the man's character.

Samuel demanded a sword, which was brought to him. His appropriate words were addressed to the Amalekite King Agag: “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless” — and he killed him, as the LORD had told Saul to do. Samuel went home, grieving deeply for a long time over Saul and his inevitable downfall. They never saw each other again.

Thus far we have considered Saul’s promising start, and his terrible miscalculations.

3. Let us consider thirdly, Saul’s consuming jealousy.

Ever since Samuel disavowed Saul, Saul had had severe bouts of depression. His staff recommended music to sooth his mood, and so David, a skilled harpist and singer, was retained as Saul's private musician. David was also a courageous young man.

Since the LORD was no longer aiding Saul, the Philistines were now able to encroach deeply into Israelite territory, and Saul's army was unsuccessful against them.

One summer as the two armies were facing each other, each waiting for the other to strike, a huge Philistine soldier named Goliath, probably over nine feet tall, stalked the valley between the two armies, shouting taunts, and challenging any Israelite to one-on-one combat. Israelite soldiers scattered at his approach.

The Israelite who should logically have answered the challenge was King Saul — but he, like everyone else, was afraid. David, who was just a youth, was enraged that this evil man was allowed to insult the LORD this way, and he volunteered to fight. With no armor, and no weapon except a shepherd's sling, he killed Goliath with his first stone. He proceeded to take the giant's sword from him and cut off his head with it.

Seeing their hero defeated, the Philistines scattered. Saul's army sprang into action, chasing them and inflicting many casualties. For the rest of that summer campaign, the Israelites were successful.

It is a mark of David's obscurity that as he was advancing toward Goliath, Saul, who had employed David's services as a musician, said to general Abner, “Who *is* this youth?” and Abner replied, “I don't know.”

After this summer, though, David was obscure no more. As the armies returned home in the fall, the nation celebrated the successful war season. The artistically inclined wrote songs, and a line from one of these songs, “Saul has slain thousands, and David tens of thousands,” brought joy to by everyone — but it galled Saul.

David's rapid rise to success, his great popularity with the public, and the (true) rumor that the LORD had named David the next king, convinced Saul that David wanted to eliminate him and seize the throne. This was far from the truth. As we shall see, David was supremely loyal to Saul. Saul, however, captured by depression and paranoia, hated David.

Saul became deeply depressed and moody, and his staff, not realizing his thoughts about David were the cause of his melancholy, called David to play the harp for him. While David played, Saul fondled his spear and nursed his anger. Suddenly, he hurled his spear at David, who fled from the room. However, loyal David remained in Saul's service in spite of this violation.

Deciding to avoid direct murder and kill David, Saul began sending him on very difficult military missions, with the hope that he would be killed. David foiled his plans, however, by successfully completing every mission. The public and the king's staff became more and more pleased with David, but this only made Saul hate him more.

Saul's next effort to kill David was also subversive. Saul's daughter Michal had a crush on David, and Saul offered her in marriage to David if he would kill 100 Philistines within a certain time limit, and provide evidence of the feat. Saul hoped David would be killed in the attempt. David, going beyond the call of duty, killed 200. And so this plot also failed.

Next, Saul openly ordered his staff to find David and kill him. Prince Jonathan, who had become David's best friend, first warned David to hide, and then spoke to Saul on David's behalf, reminding him of David's loyal deeds. Saul listened to reason, rescinded the order, and was reunited with David.

Then one day, while Saul was depressed and David was playing the harp for him, Saul again fell into a rage and threw his spear at David. David fled to Samuel's home where, in spite of the discouraging circumstances, the two of them along with some others worshipped and praised God.

Saul sent men to arrest David, but when they arrived, the Spirit of the LORD seized them, and they began praising God with David and Samuel. Saul sent a second and a third group, with the same result. Finally, Saul himself went to capture David. When Saul arrived, he was overcome and began praising God too, abandoning his original intentions.

David next secured Jonathan's aid in appealing to the king. But as Jonathan pled David's case, Saul became enraged and threw his spear at Jonathan. Jonathan had previously defended his father's motives, but this convinced him of Saul's evil intentions toward David. In fury, Jonathan stormed away. He told David the whole story. The two swore an oath to be lifelong friends, and then David went into hiding.

What a different outcome it would have been perhaps for Saul if he had been jealous for the Lord and not jealous against David? Are you jealous for the honor and glory of Jesus Christ? Is Christ ruling your thoughts and desires or is it the flesh?

Saul's consuming jealousy against David was like a cancer that ate through his soul.

4. Let us consider fourthly and finally, Saul's rapid descent.

A. First his rapid descent into spiritual darkness

At this point King Saul graduated from disobeying the LORD to full-fledged hostility against Him. If God favored David, Saul reasoned, then God was a traitor to be punished. When David fled from Saul, he rushed away with no supplies. Lacking weapons and food, but not wanting to implicate anyone as an accomplice to an accused traitor, David went immediately to the high priest, who knew nothing of David's situation and would be above suspicion. David invented a story, telling the priest nothing that might compromise him, and asking for food and Goliath's sword, which was in storage there. These the priest supplied.

Saul had immediately formed a posse and began hunting for David. He raged irrationally at his staff, accusing them of aiding the “traitor,” and bemoaning their lack of loyalty. One of them, Doeg, had been with the high priest during David's visit, and accused the priest of complicity.

Saul summoned the high priest and his extended family, 85 priests in all, for questioning. It was clearly impossible for them to have received advance word about David's supposed disloyalty — David had fled immediately, arriving before any messenger could have — and David's superb record of success and loyalty was known to all. But irrational Saul accused them and sentenced them all to death. No one on Saul's staff was willing to carry out the sentence, fearing the LORD's judgment. But Saul told Doeg to kill them, and he did. Then he went to their town, Nob, and killed the entire population as accomplices.

Only one man is known to have escaped the slaughter — Abiathar the son of the recently murdered high priest, and therefore the new high priest. Abiathar fled to join David, and the two refugees remained together.

This incident figured prominently into Saul's downfall. From this time on, Saul could no longer inquire of the LORD, since he had no priest, having murdered them all. Later on, Saul tried to communicate with God, but couldn't. But David could inquire of the LORD — he now had the high priest in his exiled community, and he made good use of this important resource.

Things had gone badly for King Saul and Israel ever since Saul had rejected the LORD. Enemies, especially the Philistines, pressed hard. On this occasion, the Philistines planned a major invasion of Israel. Saul was beside himself with worry. Saul wanted advice and help from the LORD. He tried to inquire of the LORD, but he had cut the authorized line of communication back when he executed the LORD's priests. Committed to evil, he had done nothing to repair the breach between him and God. So now, when he asked for God's advice, God was silent.

Deeply distressed, Saul apparently decided that if the LORD wouldn't talk to him, maybe Satan would. He asked his staff to find him a spirit medium — absolutely against the LORD's law.

Saul disguised himself — one wonders how, since he was a foot taller than the other tall men — and set out for the town of Endor, where the medium lived. He told the medium to raise the prophet Samuel, long dead now.

When Samuel appeared, the medium screamed in terror — suggesting she wasn't accustomed to *actually* talking to the dead, but perhaps only pretending to.

Samuel told Saul that the LORD refused to help him, and he wouldn't help him either. Saul had rejected the LORD's leadership, and the LORD had rejected Saul as king. Saul would die in the coming battle, and David would become king. Saul returned, deeply depressed.

B. King Saul's rapid descent led to spiritual darkness which led to his destruction and desecration.

The end of King Saul is recorded for us in I Samuel 31. Saul's end is perhaps the most tragic of all kings that followed him in Israel. After Saul killed himself by falling on his sword, the Philistines discovered his dead body. They then cut off his head. It is possible that they cut off the heads of his three sons as well. Although Saul's head is said to be cut off, and his

body only to be fastened to the walls of Beth-shan, yet we find that the men of Jabesh-gilead found both his body and the bodies of his three sons, fastened to the walls in 1Samuel 31:12.

A commentator observes, “Perhaps they only took off Saul's head, which they sent about to their temples as a trophy of their victory, when they sent the news of the defeat of the Israelites through all their coasts, and at last placed it in the temple of Dagon, 1Ch 10:10.”

We read in I Samuel 31:10 that the Philistines put his armor in the house of Ashtaroth.

A commentator observes, “As David had done in placing the sword of Goliath in the tabernacle. We have already seen that it was common for the conquerors to consecrate armor and spoils taken in war, to those who were the objects of religious worship.

The Philistines fastened Saul's body to the wall probably by means of iron hooks; but it is said, 2Sa 21:12, that these bodies were fastened in the STREET of Beth-shan. This may mean that the place where they were fastened to the wall was the main street or entrance into the city."

The men of Jabesh-gilead courageously rescued the desecrated remains of Saul and his three sons from the cruel hands of the Philistines, and brought them back to Israel, where the bodies were burned and the bones buried.

In closing, the burning of King Saul is the end of a tragic life. Saul's promising start was soon eclipsed by his disobedience and hostility against the Lord. Is King Saul right now burning in hell or rejoicing in heaven? I don't know, only time will tell! But what about you? Will it be heaven or hell? Heaven is open to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. We read God's promise in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." May the Lord write his Word on our hearts for His name sake. Let us pray!