

# The Death of Saul

*1 Samuel 31*

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May 17, 2015

## Introduction

This week's story in Samuel brings several threads in the book to a close. Principally these involve the unfaithfulness of Saul and his appointed judgment. From the beginning of Saul's choosing and crowning we have been given a sense of foreboding in the text. Saul's qualifications, as impressive as they seem, are definitely presented as inadequate and ineffective. His decision-making process and heart orientation are clearly brought to the open in the encounter with Agag the Amalekite in chapter 15. Turn back there and let us remind ourselves of this event.

*And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. <sup>3</sup> Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' "*

*<sup>7</sup> And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.*

*<sup>8</sup> And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. <sup>9</sup> But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.*

*<sup>10</sup> The word of the Lord came to Samuel: <sup>11</sup> "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night. <sup>12</sup> And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." <sup>13</sup> And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord." <sup>14</sup> And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" <sup>15</sup> Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." <sup>16</sup> Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak."*

*<sup>22</sup> And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. <sup>23</sup> For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king."*

*<sup>28</sup> And Samuel said to him, "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. <sup>29</sup> And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret."*

The narrative continues to demonstrate the long and arduous downfall of Saul and the rise of David from this point on. It reaches a particular low point in chapter 28. Saul finds himself in a particular overwhelming situation where David is actually in assistance with the enemy. The overarching strategy is weak and the particular tactics are faulty. Saul needs advice and briefly recognizes God as his best source. Turn to chapter 28.

*<sup>3</sup> Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land. <sup>4</sup> The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. <sup>5</sup> When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. <sup>6</sup> And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. <sup>7</sup> Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said to him, "Behold, there is a medium at En-dor."*

*<sup>15</sup> Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do." <sup>16</sup> And Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy? <sup>17</sup> The Lord has done to you as he spoke by me, for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. <sup>18</sup> Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you this day. <sup>19</sup> 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."*

## **Exposition**

Which brings us to our text for the evening. After an interlude of two chapters that demonstrate the proper approach of a Godly king in the face of complex circumstances, we open with the battle that was beginning in chapter 28.

## **The Fall of the House of Saul...**

The story abruptly begins and presents the Philistines as routing the Israelite army. They have caught up with the royal entourage in their retreat and Saul's sons have been killed. (there is another that we will meet later in 2 Samuel)

*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.*

## **The Fall 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.*

There is some debate as to whether the thought is that Saul was injured or was in grave fear because of the archers. Remember, he knows his fate. His fear would not merely be the torture and mutilation known to occur in the ancient middle-eastern battle, but that today he will be with Samuel and meet with the Yahweh that he has spurned.

Saul falls upon his own sword, ending his life in an ignominious fashion. The other instances of taking one's own life narrated in the Bible are all tragic (Judges 9:52-54, Judges 16:25-30, 2 Samuel 17:23, 1 Kings 16:15-20, and Matthew 27:3-5/Acts 1:81-19).

## **The Fall of Israel?**

And still the defeat seems to be all the more complete. The Philistines seem to have "conquered" and are now living in Israelite cities. Now we know this is a small but yet influential area. But our narrator wants us to feel the depth of this defeat. He wants us to enter in on the sadness, the pain of this fall, the completeness of this judgment.

<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.*

## **The Fall of Yahweh??**

In fact, this judgment is felt so strong, that briefly we are allowed to think that the gods of the Philistines are stronger than Yahweh himself. But in reality we know it is not Yahweh who is defeated, but the god of Saul's own devising that has fallen. It is a religious appraisal of Saul's actions and character. It is a faith statement that finalizes Saul's death. His god has been judged and condemned as well.

<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.

### **The Rise of Honor?**

<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.

But since we know that Israel and their God are far from vanquished, we are given some foreshadowing that the story is far from over. Judgment upon the evil and faithlessness of Saul is complete and it appears that some honor is left for Saul and his son's in their burial. But we will meet this band of loyal followers of Saul later in the text and be confronted with the question, "who are you going to trust and follow?"

### **Assessment**

We are working forward in the narrative for the arrival of God's chosen and special king. But ancient Near-eastern historical narratives did not merely intend to inform or "tell a story". Along with other historical literature of ancient and classical times (Homer's epic poems and various Roman histories), there is an intention to cause the reader/hearer to think and act differently because of the story. Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are four dependent volumes that tell the story of the rise and fall of the nation of Israel from their arrival to and subsequent exile from the "promised land." 1 and 2 Samuel are one narrative broken in two volumes, likely because of scroll size. Samuel, Saul and David are the principle characters but David is the central figure.

Now, Hebrew narrative in particular, although proceeding along the general chronological line, will often (almost always) be arranged topically in a manner called a chiasm (or chiasmus, chiasitic structure or inverted parallel). Each section parallels the earlier/later companion section. The center then usually contains an organizing or thematic piece that links the whole and provides insight into its purpose. For Samuel this can look like this:

- 1 Samuel 1-7 (Samuel succeeds Eli/Hannah's song)
  - 1 Samuel 8-15 (Saul's failure)
    - 1 Samuel 16-20 (David's rise in popularity/anointed by Samuel)
      - 1 Samuel 21-31: Saul's fall 25-Abigail's speech
    - 2 Samuel 1-8 (David's rise in power/anointed in Judah)
      - 2 Samuel 9-20 (David's failure)
- 2 Samuel 21-24 (Solomon succeeds David/David's song)

Even the section that we concluded likely has its own chiastic features (remember, this is the common outlining form, much like we use I/A/1/a today to organize a document).

- 1 Samuel 21-22 (Saul has priest and family killed)
  - David inquires of God,
  - ...is fed by priest,
  - ...decapitates Goliath,
  - ...dismissed by king of Gath
- 1 Samuel 23:1-18 (David saves Judea from Philistines)
  - 1 Samuel 23:19-24:23 (Ziphites betray David, he spares Saul's life)
  - 1 Samuel 25 (death of Samuel/arrival of Abigail)
  - 1 Samuel 26 (Ziphites betray David, he spares Saul's life)
- 1 Samuel 27 (David saves Judea from Philistines)
- 1 Samuel 28-31 (Saul and family killed)
  - David is dismissed by king of Gath
  - Saul inquires a witch
  - ...is fed by witch
  - ...is decapitated by Philistines

The center then in a story about the rise and prominence of the king, David includes the judgment of Saul, his adversary. Let's read the center of Abigail's speech to David in 25:28.

*<sup>28</sup> Please forgive the trespass of your servant. For the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD, and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. <sup>29</sup> If men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the LORD your God. And the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. <sup>30</sup> And when the LORD has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel,*

Even the rise of the king involves the judgment of his enemies. This theme is elaborated on in the later prophets, as God himself is presented as their deliverer and king. And the psalms look to a king who will deliver and crush their enemies.

Who is this king who is to come and defeat the enemy? It is Immanuel himself, God with us in the person of Jesus. Who defeated sin and death on the cross. Our faith must rest on Him. This story reminds us to trust in Yahweh's word, that the end for those who do not believe is defeat and for those of us who do place our faith in Him, God will deliver us to the very end. Glory awaits even in the face of judgment, darkness, despair and "fire."