

# CHAPTER 31

In the foregoing chapter we had David conquering, yea, more than a conqueror. In this chapter we have Saul conquered and worse than a captive. Providence ordered it that both these things should be doing just at the same time. The very same day; perhaps, that David was triumphing over the Amalekites, were the Philistines triumphing over Saul. One is set over against the other, that men may see what comes of trusting in God and what comes of forsaking him. We left Saul ready to engage the Philistines, with a shaking hand and an aching heart, having had his doom read him from hell, which he would not regard when it was read him from heaven. Let us now see what becomes of him. Here is,

**I.** His army routed (v. 1).

**II.** His three sons slain (v. 2).

**III.** Himself wounded (v. 3), and slain by his own hand (v. 4). The death of his armour-bearer (v. 5) and all his men (v. 6).

**IV.** His country possessed by the Philistines (v. 7). His camp plundered, and his dead body deserted (v. 8). His fall triumphed in (v. 9). His body publicly exposed (v. 10) and with difficulty rescued by the men of Jabesh-Gilead (v. 11-13). Thus fell the man that was rejected of God.

## ~~1~~ 1 SAMUEL 31:1-7

### THE DEATH OF SAUL

The day of recompence has now come, in which Saul must account for the blood of the Amalekites which he had sinfully spared, and that of the priests which he had more sinfully spilt; that of David too, which he would have spilt, must come into the account. Now his day has come to fall, as David foresaw, when he should descend into battle and perish, ~~1~~ Samuel 26:10. Come and see the *righteous judgments of God*.

**I.** He sees his soldiers fall about him, v. 1. Whether the Philistines were more numerous, better posted, and better led on, or what other advantages they had, we are not told; but it seems they were more vigorous, for they made the onset; they fought against Israel, and the Israelites fled and fell. The best of the troops were put into disorder, and multitudes slain, probably those whom Saul had employed in pursuing David. Thus those who had followed him and served him in his sin went before him in his fall and shared with him in his plagues.

**II.** He sees his sons fall before him. The victorious Philistines pressed most forcibly upon the king of Israel and those about him. His three sons were next him, it is probable, and they were all three slain before his face, to his great grief (for they were the hopes of his family) and to his great terror, for they were now the guard of his person, and he could conclude no other than that his own turn would come next. His sons are named (v. 2), and it grieves us to find Jonathan among them: that wise, valiant, good man, who was as much David's friend as Saul was his enemy, yet falls with the rest. Duty to his father would not permit him to stay at home, or to retire when the armies engaged; and Providence so orders it that he falls in the common fate of his family, though he never involved himself in the guilt of it; so that the observation of Eliphaz does not hold (~~Job~~ Job 4:7), *Who ever perished being innocent?* For here was one. What shall we say to it?

**1.** God would hereby complete the vexation of Saul in his dying moments, and the judgment that was to be executed upon his house. If the family must fall, Jonathan, that is one of it, must fall with it.

**2.** He would hereby make David's way to the crown the more clear and open. For, though Jonathan himself would have cheerfully resigned all his title and interest to him (we have no reason to suspect any other), yet it is very probable that many of the people would have made use of his name for the support of the house of Saul, or at least would have come in but slowly to David. If Ishbosheth (who was now left at home as one unfit for action, and so escaped) had so many friends, what would Jonathan have had, who had been the darling of the people and had never forfeited their favour? Those that were so anxious to have a king like the nations would be zealous for the right line, especially if that threw the crown upon such a head as Jonathan's. This would have embarrassed David; and, if Jonathan could have prevailed to bring in all his interest to David, then it would have been said that Jonathan had made him king, whereas God was to have all

the glory. *This is the Lord's doing*. So that though the death of Jonathan would be a great affliction to David, yet, by making him mindful of his own frailty, as well as by facilitating his accession to the throne, it would be an advantage to him.

**3.** God would hereby show us that the difference between good and bad is to be made in the other world, not in this. *All things come alike to all*. We cannot judge of the spiritual or eternal state of any by the manner of their death; for in that *there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked*.

**III.** He himself is sorely wounded by the Philistines and then slain by his own hand. The archers hit him (v. 3), so that he could neither fight nor fly, and therefore must inevitably fall into their hands. Thus, to make him the more miserable, destruction comes gradually upon him, and he dies so as to feel himself die. To such an extremity was he now reduced that,

**1.** He was desirous to die by the hand of his own servant rather than by the hand of the Philistines, lest they should abuse him as they had abused Samson. Miserable man! He finds himself dying, and all his care is to keep his body out of the hands of the Philistines, instead of being solicitous to resign his soul into the hands of God who gave it, <sup><2107></sup>Ecclesiastes 12:7. As he lived, so he died, proud and jealous, and a terror to himself and all about him. Those who rightly understand the matter think it of small account, in comparison, how it is with them in death, so it may but be well with them after death. Those are in a deplorable condition indeed who, being *bitter in soul, long for death, but it cometh not* (<sup><3800></sup>Job 3:20, 21), especially those who, despairing of the mercy of god, like Judas, leap into a hell before them, to escape a hell within them.

**2.** When he could not obtain that favour he became his own executioner, thinking hereby to avoid shame, but running upon a heinous sin, and with it entailing upon his own name a mark of perpetual infamy, as *felo de se* — a *self-murderer*. Jonathan, who received his death-wound from the hand of the Philistines and bravely yielded to the fate of war, died on the bed of honour; but Saul died as a fool dieth, as a coward dieth — a proud fool, a sneaking coward; he died as a man that had neither the fear of God nor hope in God, neither the reason of a man nor the religion of an Israelite, much less the dignity of a prince or the resolution of a soldier. Let us all pray, *Lord, lead us not into temptation*, this temptation. His armour-bearer would not run him through, and he did well to refuse it; for no man's

servant ought to be a slave to his master's lusts or passions of any kind. The reason given is that *he was sorely afraid*, not of death, for he himself ran wilfully upon that immediately; but, having a profound reverence for the king his master, he could not conquer that so far as to do him any hurt; or perhaps he feared lest his trembling hand should give him but half a blow, and so put him to the greater misery.

**IV.** His armour-bearer who refused to kill him refused not to die with him, but *fell likewise upon his sword*, v. 5. This was an aggravating circumstance of the death of Saul, that, by the example of his wickedness in murdering himself, he drew in his servant to be guilty of the same wickedness, and *perished not alone in his iniquity*. The Jews say that Saul's armour-bearer was Doeg, whom he preferred to that dignity for killing the priests, and, if so, justly does his *violent dealing return on his own head*. David had foretold concerning him that God would *destroy him for ever*, <sup><6516></sup>Psalm 52:5.

**V.** The country was put into such confusion by the rout of Saul's army that the inhabitants of the neighbouring cities (*on that side Jordan*, as it might be read) quitted them, and the Philistines, for a time, had possession of them, till things were settled in Israel (v. 7), to such a sad pass had Saul by his wickedness brought his country, which might have remained in the hands of the uncircumcised if David had not been raised up to repair the breaches of it. See what a king he proved for whom they rejected God and Samuel. They had still done wickedly (it is to be feared) as well as he, and therefore *were consumed both they and their king*, as the prophet had foretold concerning them, <sup><9125></sup>1 Samuel 12:25. And to this reference is had long after. <sup><2830></sup>Hosea 13:10, 11, "*Where are thy saviours in all thy cities, of whom thou saidst, Give me a king and princes? I gave thee a king in my anger, and took him away in my wrath; that is, he was a plague to thee living and dying; thou couldst expect no other.*"

## <GEN> 1 SAMUEL 31:8-13

### THE DISPOSAL OF SAUL'S BODY

The scripture makes no mention of the souls of Saul and his sons, what became of them after they were dead (secret things belong not to us), but of their bodies only.

**I.** How they were basely abused by the Philistines. The day after the battle, when they had recovered their fatigue, they came to strip the slain, and, among the rest, found the bodies of Saul and his three sons, v. 8. Saul's armour-bearer perhaps intended to honour his master by following the example of his self-murder, and to show thereby how well he loved him; but, if he had consulted his reason more than his passions, he would have spared that foolish compliment, not only in justice to his own life, but in kindness to his master, to whom, by the opportunity of survivorship, he might have done all the service that could be done him by any man after he was dead; for he might, in the night, have conveyed away his body, and those of his sons, and buried them decently. But such false and foolish notions these vain men have (though they would be wise) of giving and receiving honour. Nay, it should seem, Saul might have saved himself the fatal thrust and have made his escape: for the pursuers (in fear of whom he slew himself) came not to the place where he was till the next day. But whom God will destroy he infatuates and utterly *consumes with his terrors*. See <JOB> Job 18:5, etc. Finding Saul's body (which now that it lay extended on the bloody turf was distinguishable from the rest by its length, as it was, while erect, by its height, when he proudly overlooked the surrounding crowd), they will, in that, triumph over Israel's crown, and meanly gratify a barbarous and brutish revenge by insulting the deserted corpse, which, when alive, they had stood in awe of.

**1.** They cut off his head. Had they designed in this to revenge the cutting off of Goliath's head they would rather have cut off the head of David, who did that execution, when he was in their country. They intended it, in general, for a reproach to Israel, who promised themselves that a crowned and an anointed head would save them from the Philistines, and a particular reproach to Saul, who was taller by the head than other men (which perhaps he was wont to boast of), but was now shorter by the head.

**2.** They stripped him of his armour (v. 9), and sent that to be set up as a trophy of their victory, in the house of Ashtaroth their goddess (v. 10); and we are told, <sup><3100></sup>1 Chronicles 10:10 (though it is omitted here), that they fastened his head in the temple of Dagon. Thus did they ascribe the honour of their victory, not as they ought to have done to the real justice of the true God, but to the imaginary power of their false gods, and by this respect paid to pretended deities shame those who give not the praise of their achievements to the living God. Ashtaroth, the idol that Israel had many a time gone a whoring after, now triumphs over them.

**3.** They sent expresses throughout their country, and ordered public notice to be given in the houses of their gods of the victory they had obtained (v. 9), that public rejoicings might be made and thanks given to their gods. This David regretted sorely, <sup><3102></sup>2 Samuel 1:20. *Tell it not in Gath.*

**4.** They fastened his body and the bodies of his sons (as appears, v. 12) to the wall of *Bethshan*, a city that lay not far from Gilboa and very near to the river Jordan. Hither the dead bodies were dragged and here hung up in chains, to be devoured by the birds of prey. Saul slew himself to avoid being abused by the Philistines, and never was royal corpse so abused as his was, perhaps the more if they understood that he slew himself for that reason. He that thinks to save his honour by sin will certainly lose it. See to what a height of insolence the Philistines had arrived just before David was raised up, who perfectly subdued them. Now that they had slain Saul and his sons they thought the land of Israel was their own for ever, but they soon found themselves deceived. When God has accomplished his whole work by them he will accomplish it upon them. See <sup><3106></sup>Isaiah 10:6, 7.

**II.** How they were bravely rescued by the men of Jabesh-Gilead. Little more than the river Jordan lay between Beth-shan and Jabesh-Gilead, and Jordan was in that place passable by its fords; a bold adventure was therefore made by the valiant men of that city, who in the night passed the river, took down the dead bodies, and gave them decent burial, v. 11, 13. This they did,

**1.** Out of a common concern for the honour of Israel, or the land of Israel, which ought not to be defiled by the exposing of any dead bodies, and especially of the crown of Israel, which was thus profaned by the uncircumcised.

**2.** Out of a particular sense of gratitude to Saul, for his zeal and forwardness to rescue them from the Ammonites when he first came to the throne, 1 Samuel 11. It is an evidence of a generous spirit and an encouragement to beneficence when the remembrance of kindnesses is thus retained, and they are thus returned in an extremity. The men of Jabesh-Gilead would have done Saul better service if they had sent their valiant men to him sooner, to strengthen him against the Philistines. But his day had come to fall, and now this is all the service they can do him, in honour to his memory. We find not that any general mourning was made for the death of Saul, as was for the death of Samuel (~~1271~~ 1 Samuel 25:1), only those Gileadites of Jabesh did him honour at his death; for,

**(1.)** They made a burning for the bodies, to perfume them. So some understand the burning of them. They burnt spices over them, v. 12. And that it was usual thus to do honour to their deceased friends, at least their princes, appears by the account of Asa's funeral (~~4164~~ 2 Chronicles 16:14), that *they made a very great burning for him*. Or (as some think) they burnt the flesh, because it began to putrefy.

**(2.)** They buried the bodies, when, by burning over them, they had sweetened them (or, if they burnt them, they buried the bones and ashes), under a tree, which served for a grave-stone and monument. And,

**(3.)** They *fasted seven days*, that is, each day of the seven they fasted till the evening; thus they lamented the death of Saul and the present distracted state of Israel, and perhaps joined prayers with their fasting for the re-establishment of their shattered state. Though, *when the wicked perish there is shouting* (that is, it is to be hoped a better state of things will ensue, which will be matter of joy), yet humanity obliges us to show a decent respect to dead bodies, especially those of princes.

This book began with the birth of Samuel, but now it ends with the burial of Saul, the comparing of which two together will teach us to prefer the honour that comes from God before any of the honours which this world pretends to have the disposal of.