



Community Group Discussion Guide

April 6, 2025

1 Samuel 31:1-13 | The Final Fall of Saul

MOTIVATE

- ⇒ **What memorable deaths of world leaders can you recall? What kinds of legacies did they leave behind?**

DISCUSS

Saul's life and his reign over Israel come to a tragic end. He rebelled against God as king and his actions brought judgment upon himself, three of his children, and the entire nation of Israel. God repeatedly warned He would lift His hedge of protection from His people when they turned from Him. He had given Saul advanced warnings to repent but Saul refused. As Saul's reign began to decline, it allowed for David's slow but steady ascension to the throne. 1 Samuel 31:1-13 depicts the tragic events surrounding the death of Israel's first anointed king. This narrative can also be found in 1 Chronicles 10. (See [1 Samuel Overview](#) for additional information.)

- ⇒ **Does it make sense that someone can be in the vicinity of God but not experience intimacy in a relationship with Him? Why or why not?**
- ⇒ **In what ways did Saul know or not know God? Where did he go wrong?¹**

1 Samuel 31:1-3 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.

1 Samuel 31 picks up the story of 1 Samuel 28 where the Philistines were closing in on Jewish territory. Saul was filled with fear at the sight of the enemy forces and became desperate when God would not answer his prayers. Saul quickened God's judgment by turning to a medium or witch to speak with Samuel (1 Samuel 28:7-18). Samuel appeared and advised Saul that his army would be defeated, and he and his sons had one more day to live (1 Samuel 28:19).

As the Philistine army continued to oppress Israel's army, the Israelites retreated to the higher ground where their initial camp resided. They likely thought that they could escape the Philistine's grasp by fleeing up toward familiar territory which was dense with forests. Unfortunately, taking refuge in their original camp did not deter the Philistine army.

The Philistines defeated Saul and the army of Israel in a battle on Mount Gilboa and just as Samuel had predicted, Saul and his sons met their end swiftly as the Philistines took possession of all Israel valued. After witnessing the defeat of his army, Saul then witnessed the death of three of his four sons. One son, Ish-bosheth, would survive and later challenge David's claim to the throne (2 Samuel 2:8-4:12).

¹ Thomas & Greear, Christ-Centered Exposition, Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Samuel, Holman Reference, 2016, p. 177.

- ⇒ **How does the tragedy of Saul's death resonate with the overall narrative of his life and kingship?**
- ⇒ **How do the deaths of Saul's sons, especially Jonathan, impact the narrative going forward into 2 Samuel as well as David's rise to the throne of Israel?**

1 Samuel 31:4-6 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."

The description of Saul's death brings the contrast between David and Saul to a climax. In 1 Samuel 30, David had successfully rescued the lives of everyone associated with him. Here, those associated with Saul died in battle with the Philistines. Saul had been commissioned as king to provide victory against the Philistines and his death illustrated his failure as Israel's king.

Saul's armor-bearer had been true to the end and his actions or non-action continued to prove his loyalty to Saul. Saul did not want it to be said he died at the hands of the "uncircumcised," so he demanded this unnamed armor-bearer to "thrust him through." Saul knew death was preferable to a Philistine capture and torture, but the armor-bearer "feared greatly," so he would not kill Saul. This was similar to David's avoidance of harming "God's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:6; 26:11). Saul then fell on his own sword and his armor-bearer did likewise.

The author of the book of Chronicles revealed that Saul died not only because of his rebellion against God's Word, but also because he turned to the demonic realm for guidance. 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 states, "So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the LORD, because of the word of the LORD which he did not keep; and also because he asked counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it, and did not inquire of the LORD. Therefore He killed him and turned the kingdom to David the son of Jesse."

- ⇒ **Discuss the reasons for Saul's death as stated in 1 Chronicles 10.**
- ⇒ **What was Saul's legacy as king?**

1 Samuel 31:7-10 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.

After losing Saul and his sons in the formidable battle, many of the Jewish cities were lost to Philistine invaders. The Philistines took the Jewish lands as their own and lived in their cities. The Philistines desecrated Saul's body and mocked God by placing the former king's belongings in the temple of Ashteroth. Saul had fallen on his sword to avoid this fate; yet he was powerless to stop it. 1 Chronicles 10:8-10 indicates the Philistines also placed Saul's armor and his severed head in the

house of Dagon. The two are related as they were both places where the Philistines worshipped their pagan gods.

To decapitate or dismember a corpse and leave it unburied was the ultimate disgrace that a victim's family or nation could endure. Impalement of a foe's body on a wall was common during this period and was used to terrorize and shame the enemy.

⇒ **How are the Philistines' actions similar to what occurred with the defeat of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:48-54?**

Ultimately, Saul's sins dishonored Yahweh and brought humiliation to all of Israel. Saul's actions serve as an example that one ungodly leader can negatively impact a nation for multiple generations. Saul's death and defeat became an occasion for the Philistines to imply, through their public proclamations, they had defeated Yahweh. "The national tragedy, painful though it is, serves merely as the backdrop for Saul's failure to vigorously defend and honor the name of Yahweh."²

⇒ **What does this passage teach us about leadership, responsibility, and legacy?**
 ⇒ **Discuss this quote: Ultimately Saul rejected God's authority as king of Israel, and his life degenerated into pathetic bickering and jealousy. Rather than saving the people from the Philistines, Saul devoted himself to denying the kingdom to David. His charismatic gifts and divine blessings had deteriorated into madness."³**

1 Samuel 31:11-13 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.

At the beginning of his reign Saul had shown kingly compassion and loyalty to the people of Jabesh-Gilead by rescuing them from Nahash the Ammonite (1 Samuel 10:27–11:15). The Jabeshites had an opportunity to return Saul's kindness and to pay a fitting and final tribute to the king who had delivered them. When they heard what the Philistines had done to their king, their whole army set out and marched at night, nearly thirteen miles from Jabesh to Beth-shan in order to right this wrong. Taking the bodies of Saul and his sons to Jabesh, they gave them a decent burial. The Jabeshites buried Saul beneath a tamarisk tree.

The tamarisk tree is mentioned in the Bible as a place of significance and importance. The first biblical mention is in Genesis 21:33 when Abraham planted one in Beersheba and worshipped God there. The tamarisk tree was a common tree in the region, often associated with shade and rest. In biblical times, trees were sometimes used as landmarks or memorials. Saul's burial under the tamarisk tree may have symbolized a place of remembrance and honor. This act of burial also reflected the cultural and religious importance of proper burial practices in Israel, ensuring that the deceased were treated with dignity.⁴

² Arnold, Bill, The NIV Application Commentary, 2003, p.401.

³ Arnold, Bill, The NIV Application Commentary, 2003, p.405.

⁴ Biblehub.com, 1 Samuel 31:13, 3-20-2025.

The final association of Saul with a tamarisk was possibly a symbolic gesture, made out of consideration for the fact that he had previously conducted royal proceedings under this type of tree (1 Samuel 22:6). Out of respect for their fallen leaders the people of Jabesh then fasted seven days.

When Saul and his sons died, David's fugitive lifestyle came to an end. Even though Saul's death paved the way for David to assume the throne of Israel, he did not celebrate the death of Saul. 2 Samuel 1 begins with David greatly mourning the loss of his former leader and king and of his best friend Jonathan.

- ⇒ **How does this chapter contribute to your understanding of suffering and God's justice?**
- ⇒ **What can we learn from Saul's tragic death?**

TRANSFORM

1. Make personal application: With the death of Saul, the contrast between David and Saul comes to a climax. In 1 Samuel 30, David had rescued Ziklag and everyone associated with him from the Amalekites. In 1 Samuel 31, Saul and everyone associated with him lay dead on the battlefield. David would be promised an everlasting dynasty (2 Samuel 7:10-13), but Saul's house was destroyed (1 Chronicles 10:6).

- ⇒ **In what ways do God's actions reveal both judgment and mercy regarding Saul and David?**
- ⇒ **What does 1 Samuel 31 reveal about God?**
- ⇒ **This sad ending is the legacy Saul left behind. How can God help you to leave a lasting faith legacy?**

2. Pray: Thank God for His Word and for His leadership and lessons for us in 1 Samuel. Thank Him that He is the perfect King.

Wrap up of 1 Samuel: To help your Community Group consolidate all you have learned from 1 Samuel, take time to discuss these additional questions.

1. What cultural, geographical, or historical information have you learned from the study of 1 Samuel? How has this helped you to have a greater understanding of this book of the Old Testament?
2. What does the story of 1 Samuel teach us about waiting on God's promises, even when the wait is long?
3. What has this book revealed to you about God and His sovereignty?
4. What spiritually transformative truths did you discover in 1 Samuel? What application are you making to your spiritual journey?
5. How do the events in 1 Samuel continually point to Jesus as the ultimate King?

STUDY

Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

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