

I Samuel

Lesson 45 - Chapter 30 and 31 (End of Book)

Today we'll conclude the book of 1st Samuel. But unlike most times when we conclude a book and begin the next, we won't feel much of a change. The book of 2nd Samuel is nothing more than a point at which the original, quite large, Samuel Scroll was divided into two for the sake of convenience; thus it will feel more like merely turning the page to another chapter than transitioning to another book.

As we closed last time, David and his men were only just returning from rescuing their kidnapped families from the Amalekites. Amalek had come to Ziklag, the village that King Achish of Philistine Gath had graciously assigned to David, and Amalek attacked the weakest and most vulnerable when David and his men left for battle. Let's review very briefly.

The Philistines decided to again try to establish territorial dominance over Israel (especially northern Israel). Thus the armies of the 5 Philistine Kings that represented the bulk of the Philistine population honored their alliance and agreed to assemble at Afek (on the northern edge of Philistine controlled territory) for war on King Saul. Since David had established an informal treaty with King Achish, and was being allowed to live in Achish's kingdom, it was a given that David's private army of 600 would join in the battle as part of Achish's contingency. But this was an awkward situation to say the least; David would be fighting alongside Philistines against his own people, the Israelites.

Interestingly while David expressed no reservations about fighting the army of Israel, 4 of the Philistine Lords did. They didn't trust David or his motives and reckoned that once the battle started David and his men would turn against the Philistines and aid their natural countrymen. Whether this treason would be the result of pangs of guilt as the war proceeded, or it was a planned deception all along, they didn't know. But it really didn't matter because the result would be the same.

David and his men were dismissed from the war assembly of the Philistines and sent home to Ziklag, but not before David defended himself and reaffirmed his loyalty to Achish and pled to be able to participate in the coming battle. His pleas were rejected as a political impossibility. After a 3 days journey David and his men arrived home to find their village abandoned and leveled. Amalek had taken the women and children, and all things of value, and destroyed the

remainder.

It is an interesting fact of history that Amalek, in their first dealing with Israel, attacked the rear of the Exodus column that was marching out of Egypt where the elderly, the sick, the lame, the pregnant women and the young children took their place. And here in this chapter we find that Amalek waited until the men of the village were gone and then came and attacked the women, the children, the sick and the lame, and the elderly. So it is a characteristic of Amalek, and by extension the Spirit of Amalek, to go after the most vulnerable of God's people when they least expect it. Turn your Bibles to Ezekiel 38.

READ EZEKIEL 38:1 – 11

The Spirit of Amalek is alive and well and its very nature is to attack Israel when they think all is well or when they have been weakened and are vulnerable. In the last days the Lord will use this characteristic to lure the nations who will all harbor the Spirit of Amalek into their destruction.

After David's men caught up to the Amalekite marauders and defeated them, thus freeing their families and recouping their stolen possessions, they backtracked on the road home to Ziklag. They stopped along the way to pick up the 200 warriors that they had left behind at the **Wadi Beshor**. Of the 600 total warriors at David's disposal, these 200 had become too exhausted to continue the pursuit of Amalek, so they were left at the Wadi to recuperate. It was the remaining 400 who found the Amalekites and fought them.

Let's pick up our story there. Open your Bibles to 1st Samuel 30.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL 30: 21 – end

David had a crisis on his hands. The 400 men who had fought the Amalekites and rescued their Hebrew families and goods were not in a mood to share with the 200 who had stayed

behind. It was not all the 400 who felt this way; in fact it was apparently just a handful of men that the Bible describes as **rah** and **belial**, evil and worthless, who made all the fuss. But as any leader knows, insurrection usually begins with but one vocal dissenter. Nonetheless it took all of David's natural (or God-given is probably more accurate) people skills to manage the potentially explosive situation. While the result is given in but a sentence of Scripture, no doubt some tense hours of careful negotiation, gentle persuasion and soothing hurt feelings was needed to avoid a serious split in his army.

We should not think, either, that all of David's men carried an equal degree of loyalty and faithfulness towards David or the community. Sometimes we get so carried away with the holiness and loftiness of the Scriptures that we forget that the characters involved in its pages were just everyday humans. So like any congregation whether its basis is familial, political, or evens a church or synagogue, there was no monolithic sentiment among all of David's men. The matter of assembling for war alongside the Philistines at Afek had no doubt raised serious red flags among David's men and brought many of his army to the brink of parting company with the group and perhaps even removing themselves from under David's leadership. When they returned home to a devastated Ziklag many of the doubters were openly suggesting that David be executed. And now when fully one-third of David's men refused to go any further in their pursuit of Amalek (regardless of their stated reason) there was a very visible line of division drawn.

In diffusing the tension and pronouncing an undeniably God-centered and God-provided judgment in the matter, David proved his fitness to lead God's people as their earthly king. The wisdom of it, the firmness of conviction, and the sense of community that it re-established continued in the next move David made: to share the loot taken from the Amalekites not only with the 200 who had stayed behind but also among many families within the tribe of Judah who had no idea that this action had even occurred.

His village gone, and the Philistine kings having refused his services, David knew that he would have to mend some fences and re-establish loyalty with his Judean brethren. Thus in verse 26 we see that upon arriving home to his burnt-out headquarters in Ziklag, rather than keep all that had been captured from the Amalekites for himself and his immediate people, he sent gifts to the "elders of Judah". The words, "To his neighbors", are used to modify the phrase "elders of Judah". Sometimes we can get a bit off track in understanding what the Bible means by "neighbor". In the Hebrew Bible there are generally two different Hebrew words used that will both at times become transliterated into the English word "neighbor", but they have two distinctly different senses to them. The first word is **shaken** and it means neighbor in the sense of someone who resides nearby, perhaps even next door. The second is **rea** and means neighbor NOT in the sense of proximity but rather in the sense of relationship. **Rea** is referring to a friend, or a companion, perhaps a mate or a fellow countryman or

someone sharing some sort of recognized common bond. **Shaken** is impersonal and can refer to someone you don't even know. **Rea** is personal and refers to someone you know about and care about. The word used in our passage (referring to the elders of Judah) is **rea**.

So David is using much wisdom (and substantial political acumen) in showing undeserved generosity to some fellow tribe members (but not all); here we have a listing of whom it is he honored. Like our President inviting an exclusive group to a banquet at the White House there is always underlying meaning and purpose in each selection. There is as at least as big a message to those who are excluded as to those who are invited. This listing of verses 26 – 31 was leaders who first and foremost were those he felt would support him and welcome him back into Judah. They were also those whose leadership and influence would be vital in his ascension to the throne of Judah.

No doubt the many villages mentioned had been harmed by the Amalekites or the Philistines or both; so the justification for awarding reparations to these Judean villages could be made as David would have had to explain to his 600 man army just why he would give away all of this plunder that THEY had risked their lives for! After all, weren't they in dire need as well? Their own homes and businesses were destroyed, and they were essentially living among the ruins. While we can and should credit David with a wonderful display of generosity and mercy, we need to temper it with a bit of reality. It has always been so that political leaders buy the loyalty of others by giving away wealth that came from the efforts of their people (whether those efforts were voluntary or not).

The final few words of this chapter tell us that some of the loot was also distributed to less important places in Judah but they had been of aid to David at some point and so he wanted to recognize them. How Godly this process of giving the spoils earned by his men to these village elders and "other places" actually was I can't say; but it certainly would prove to be politically effect from an earthly perspective.

Let's move on to the final chapter of 1st Samuel.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 31 all

Here is the story of the inevitable end of King Saul who died as violently as he lived. There is no sense of gloating or even condemnation of this tragic king; rather what we read is almost sentimental, perhaps even reverent. The account of the battle scene is typically brief, and yet one can almost close their eyes and picture it as it unfolded. The main confrontation was fought in the Jezreel Valley, a vast plain where countless battles had been fought over the centuries and many more would follow. This is the same place that our Messiah will lead us into Holy War as our Warrior/King against the world's allied forces of evil; this is the place of Armageddon.

Let me point out that we find this same account, nearly word for word, in the book of 1st Chronicles 10 and with only the most minor variation that is really but added information.

These battles lasted for hours, sometimes days, almost always beginning at dawn. Darkness was a disadvantage to both sides; you can't fight an enemy you can't see. All day long the opposing forces of Saul and the Philistines waged a desperate struggle for survival, but in time the Philistines gained the upper hand. The Hebrews had to retreat and they did so by fleeing the plain and scampering back up the slope into the area of their battle camp, the hills of Gilboa. As the sun was getting low in the sky, the now energized Philistine warriors cornered the Israelites and the slaughter was on. Only darkness stilled the clanking of sword against shield, but not the cries of anguish as the wounded on both sides lay dying. Who was mortally wounded? Who had survived? What was the final toll? Who won? Only at the rising of the morning sun would the answer be apparent.

As the darkness gave way to light the slain covered both sides of Mt. Gilboa. As the narrative informs, King Saul and 3 sons (Jonathan, Avinadav, and Malkishua) were unable to escape and became the most valuable targets for the Philistines. The Bible spends no time to give us a blow by blow account or the gory details of their deaths; rather we are only told that the archers had zeroed in on King Saul. At least one arrow found its mark and Saul was mortally wounded and in great pain. Some ancient Biblical manuscripts include that he was shot in the belly, the area of the intestines.

Knowing that his life was over his main concern was to alleviate his pain and to not fall into the hands of the enemy and be tortured. Our CJB says in verse 4 that Saul tells his personal armor bearer to end it for him now so that the uncircumcised enemy doesn't "run him through". Actually the original Hebrew says that Saul wants the armor bearer to kill him so that the enemy doesn't *ve hit'allu vi*: have their way with me. The idea is that Saul is worried that the Philistine soldiers might get to him before their kings do. If that happened the soldiers might humiliate King Saul and disfigure him (something that just isn't supposed to happen to kings).

Saul's armor bearer rightly refused; the passage says it was because he was too frightened. What was the armor bearer too frightened of? Was he concerned that he might be punished or be executed? Not at all. No armor bearer would allow himself to live if the king he was honored with serving and protecting was killed. If the king dies in battle, almost without fail so does the armor bearer.

No; the armor bearer feared God. Just as David maintained that he had no right to harm God's anointed king, Saul, so did most Israelites feel the same way (and the king's armor bearer chief among them). The armor bearer feared God's judgment upon him in a way that would affect him after his death so he wasn't about to kill the king even in an act of mercy. The evidence of this is in verse 5 when after the armor bearer refused to kill the king, Saul committed suicide and so the armor bearer did the same. It is interesting to me that Saul even called upon the armor bearer to kill him. It is obvious from the narrative that Saul was not helpless as he was certainly able to bring about his own death. It was not unusual in battle (even into modern times) for a hopelessly wounded soldier to ask a comrade to end his suffering. But almost to a fault it only occurred when that wounded soldier had no ability or means to end his own life.

Verse 6 explains that there on Mt. Gilboa the reign of Israel's first king came to a gruesome end. There Saul, 3 of his sons, his armor bearer, and (so says the CJB) "all his men" died that same day. This would give us the impression that all (or almost all) of Sha'ul's soldiers died that day; but 1st Chronicles adds some information to clarify.

CJB 1 Chronicles 10:6 Thus Sha'ul, his three sons and all his household died together.

Do you see the difference? In 1st Samuel 31 it says "all of his men", but in 1st Chronicles 10 it says "all of his household". So we now understand that the phrase "all of his men" is meant as a saying, a figure a speech, with the idea being that "his men" are those men closest to him by blood and by status. The English word "household" is **bayith** in Hebrew; it literally means "house" in the sense of those living together or joined together. It can mean relatives, but it can also include (as it does here) the king's court.

So it was Saul's family and all those of his royal court (who were at the battle scene) who are being referring to as having died together that day. Many Israelite warriors fled the area and escaped. It is interesting that we do not find Avner's name mentioned. Avner was Saul's highest military commander and one would expect to see him standing shoulder to shoulder

with his king. No explanation is offered; for some reason Avner was not there and apparently it was understood that his absence was for legitimate reasons. The other name we might expect to find among the dead is Ishbosheth, Saul's 4th son. He apparently escaped with Abner or wasn't present at all for some reason. We'll encounter both of these men in later chapters.

The news of Israel's devastating defeat and their king's death raced across central and northern Israel, even to the other side of the Jordan where a large population of Israelites lived. It would have taken no more than a few hours. People panicked; to the north of the Jezreel, up to the Galilee mountains and even across to the Transjordan in areas near the Jordan River large populations deserted their cities and villages and fled into the countryside to hide. Even their walled fortress cities were abandoned and left to the Philistines to take without a fight.

Essentially we find that an entire new political landscape now faced Israel; much of the land of the northern tribal coalition of Israelites was lost to the Philistines. Those Hebrew tribes who had always sided with Saul and supported his rule were now firmly under Philistine control. But the southern tribes of Simeon and Judah remained largely unaffected because of the mountain range that acted as a formidable separation and barrier between northern and southern Israel. In general the Israelite territory of the Transjordan was also unaffected except perhaps for a few isolated cities and/or towns.

As was customary after battle the plunderers got busy searching and stripping the enemy dead. Much to their surprise and delight there laid the King of Israel and his 3 sons. This victory was far more complete than the Philistines had any right to hope! To take everything of value from a corpse, from weapons to armor to jewelry, was not considered at all wrong nor a mistreatment of the dead. It was the customary reward of the spoils of war to the victor, and to this day in all armies the practice is permitted to some level or another. But to add the final insult to Israel's defeat the Philistines hacked off the heads of Sha'ul and his sons. This typically was not done to a king.

The heads and armor of Saul and his sons were dispatched all over Philistia where they were displayed in their temples, set before their deities. After all, all war was essentially a battle between the various national gods; so in the eyes of the Philistines their Philistine gods had defeated the one Israelite god, YHWH. Ironically the Philistines had no way of knowing that Yehoveh long ago abandoned King Saul and was now with David, the *nagid*, the king in waiting; Saul had been on his own in this battle and basically the Lord merely used the Philistines to remove the anti-king and pave the way for God's anointed king. Yet David, the one God was now present with, was living freely in Philistine territory and even being protected and subsidized by the Philistine King Achish.

Verse 10 tells us that while Saul's skull and his armor were presented to the goddess Astarte (where we get the name Easter from); his body was taken to the city of **Beth Sh'an** and affixed to the city wall. Beth Shean was a well known and long established fortress of the Canaanites; it had been built centuries earlier and fought over countless times due to its strategic location. Even the Egyptians occupied it for about a 200 year period beginning at a time not long before the Exodus. It was located at the junction of the important east-west highway that connected the Jezreel Valley with Gilead, and the main road that connected the north to the south of Canaan. Caravans and armies used these routes since time immemorial and the importance of these highways never ceased being of the greatest value to merchants, conquerors and kings.

Apparently the Philistines controlled the **Beth Sh'an** fortress at the time of Saul's demise and they wanted to send a powerful message to all who passed by that Israel's time was over and that the era of Philistine hegemony in the region had begun. So they hung the headless bodies of Saul and his sons onto the city walls and allowed nature's scavengers to start to work on them. This could only have indicated the immense hatred and disrespect that the Philistines had for Saul and his northern tribal coalition.

But the men of the Trans-Jordanian city of Jabesh-Gilead heard of this atrocity and could not stand the thought, and so they determined to not let such an insult stand. Were these warriors of Jabesh-Gilead so brave and pious that they would risk their own lives that no son of Israel would sway in the evening breeze for the amusement of their enemy? In a way, yes, but there was more to it than that. Recall that there had been a strong connection between the tribe of Benjamin and the city-state of Jabesh-Gilead for many years prior to Saul's death.

It began with the matter when Israel went to war with the tribe of Benjamin over the incident of the residents of the Benjamite city of Gibeah (Saul's hometown) raping a traveler's concubine to death. The act was so horrific that all the Israelite tribes got together and demanded that those responsible in Gibeah be brought to justice, but the tribe of Benjamin said that they would not allow it. So the other 11 tribes of Israel went to war with Benjamin and nearly brought them to extinction.

Not long after that Israel attacked the Trans-Jordanian city of Jabesh-Gilead with the intent of exterminating every man, woman and child. But the Israelites found 400 virgins of marrying age in the city and decided to spare them. Instead they gave them to the few surviving Benjamite males for wives, as a means of regenerating their tribe. Thus the residents of Jabesh-Gilead and the tribe of Benjamin (including Saul's clan) were bound by blood, and the

existence of both Benjamin and Jabesh-Gilead was only because of their inter-marriage.

Later when Jabesh-Gilead came under attack by the Ammonite King Nachash, Saul (from Gibeah) marched all night with a contingent of Benjamite soldiers to rescue them. So from this we can understand the extremely close ties and deep affection that the residents of Jabesh-Gilead had for King Saul.

The brave men of Jabesh-Gilead marched through the night to right this terrible wrong. Saul's reign had not wrung all truth, gratitude and courage out of Israel. They crossed over the Jordan, waited until the residents of Beth Shean were asleep behind the safety of their walls, and stealthily hoisted Saul and his sons' bodies down. They carried the corpses all the way back to Jabesh-Gilead for what to them must have been a proper and honorable burial.

Yet we cannot overlook a bit of a mystery as the narrative explains that the men of Jabesh burned the bodies, and then took the remaining bones and buried them. This is totally uncustomary for Hebrew burial. The Torah forbids the burning of Hebrew bodies except for the most heinous criminals.

CJB Leviticus 20:14 If a man marries a woman and her mother, it is depravity; they are to be put to death by fire, both he and they, so that there will not be depravity among you.

CJB Leviticus 21:9 The daughter of a cohen who profanes herself by prostitution profanes her father; she is to be put to death by fire.

Some have speculated that due to the work of scavenger birds and the natural decay that had already set in that the men of Jabesh-Gilead decided it was better not to bury them in such a condition. That is an unwarranted stretch; this sort of issue with corpses discovered in all manner of disfigurement and stages of decomposition may not have been usual, but would hardly have been rare.

Considering the pagan influences that had crept into the various Israel tribes and clans, and that those Israelites who lived in the Trans-Jordan especially seemed to readily adopt pagan

ways, then very likely this was little more than a rather standard practice for Jabesh-Gilead. Notice that they did not so completely burn the bodies with such heat as to destroy the bones. Rather they would have placed them in an ossuary (a bone box) and buried them under the Terebinth tree in Jabesh-Gilead (as stated in the final verse).

Because they were honoring the death of their king, the residents of Jabesh fasted for 7 days.

But this was not to be the final resting place of Saul and 3 of his sons. We read in 2nd Samuel 21 that at a later date David would have the ossuary dug up and their bones moved to the territory of Benjamin and deposited in the tomb of Kish, Saul's father.

So as we exit the book of 1st Samuel Israel is a rudderless ship, adrift in a sea of turmoil. The Philistines are in control, and Israel in need of a Deliverer. The first king of Israel is dead, and they have no king. The reader is left with a sense of incompleteness and uncertainty amid a vacuum of authority. Even though we know from the narrator that God has everything under control and David is in process of assuming the throne of Israel, we also know that the people of Israel have no idea of this.

But as of this point in the narrative, even the reader of the Samuel Scroll has many questions left unanswered. How and when will the Lord install David as king; especially since the Philistines now have a firm grip on the largest segment of the Hebrew population and Hebrew land? The same sorts of issues would be raised for the coming Messiah. The reader will learn that a Deliverer for David's line is coming; but how, when?

Next week we'll begin 2nd Samuel, the era of King David.