

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

The End of an Era I Samuel 31

Intro: “Meanwhile, back at the ranch” most of us are familiar w/ this phrase. It was used by narrators in old western serials dramas 2 point out a segue from 1 scene 2 another. It originated as an oft-used subtitle in silent movies & nickelodeons but not many of us would remember that. I only mention it b/c that’s about how this last chapter begins. Thru the last 3 chapters (28-30), 1 seminal event has served as the backdrop 4 each episode: the Philistine invasion of Israel & its decisive battle at Mt. Gilboa. In fact, this invasion both drives & directs the actions of all the characters in these chapters: Achish & Philistines preparing 4 it, Saul & the Israelites dreading it & David & his men avoiding it.

But it appears that David wasn’t the only 1 trying 2 avoid it. If it sounds like we’ve shown up late 4 the party its b/c the author has made us late. It seems like he was in no hurry 2 get 2 Gilboa. He could have gone straight 2 the Battle right after ch28 but instead, he switched us back 2 David & something that happened earlier. He makes us spend 2 chapters w/ David & his men b/4 he gets us back 2 Gilboa – after the party’s started. It’s such a tragic, dark & dreary story that the writer loathes 2 tell it. He drags his literary feet as long as he can but now, even this part must be told.

1- Actually, there’s not much 2 tell! It can all be said in 1 line (1b). Well, that’s that! Thanks 4 coming! No, this is common practice in Hebrew narratives: give a summary at the beginning & then flesh out all the details after. There’s no need 4 drama or suspense. We’ve been given a blunt & bloody synopsis at the start & like a bad dream we must get 2 the end of, the sad details will follow. In ch29 & 30, David experienced double deliverance at Aphek & Ziklag, but there’s no deliverance here. The enemies of YHWH win the day at Mt. Gilboa but even in the midst of death & disaster, there are still lessons 2/b learned by those who care 2 look at them, listen 2 them & apply them 2 their life.

2- ch31 is often called a tragic story, referring 2 Saul & his demise but if you’ve been paying attention thru I Sam, his death doesn’t come as a surprise. The real tragedy appears right here in vs2. Jonathan, Saul’s eldest son & heir apparent 2 the throne, is the 1st reported casualty of the battle. As we have seen, Jonathan was a man of great faith who trusted in YHWH enough 2 attempt outrageous feats of courage against impossible odds. He was a loyal man: loyal 2 his God, loyal 2 his friends & in the end, he was loyal 2 his father the king – even tho he knew Saul was wrong & in rebellion against both the will & the word of YHWH.

Jonathan was a great man. He was royal material! We're given no specifics about his death, just a bare notice. If it were given, Jonathan's obituary should read: **he was a true friend 2 David & a faithful son of Saul. He surrendered his kingdom 2 David & sacrificed his life 4 Saul.**

Was this a real tragedy or was it simply a tragedy of human expectation? We see all of Jonathan's potential & think, "What a great loss 4 Israel" but is that accurate? As human's, we view nearly every death as a tragedy but the value of human life is not found in how, why or when 1 dies but in **how 1 lives!** In this hopeless scenario, Jonathan was nowhere else but in the place **YHWH** had assigned 4 him – **at his father's side**. Honestly, what's **tragic** about **staying faithful** in the calling that God's assigned us? What's so **tragic** about Jonathan **laying aside** a kingdom he could not keep in order **2 enter into** a kingdom he could not lose? The real tragedy in this story occurred years b/4 when Jonathan's father decided he didn't need 2 obey **YHWH's** word; that he could get along just fine w/o it.

We view this death as a **tragedy** b/c we assume we can accurately see what could have been 4 Jonathan but that's not necessarily the case. In **II Kings 20**, King Hezekiah became gravely ill & was facing certain death. In fact, the prophet Isaiah was sent 2 him by **YHWH** 2 tell him 2 get his affairs in order b/c his death was near. Well, Hezekiah must have thought this 2/b a real tragedy b/c the Bible says he turned his face 2 the wall & prayed 2 the Lord 2 spare his life. The Lord did! He gave him another 15 yrs. Was **tragedy** averted? In Hezekiah mind it was & in ours as well. But here's the thing: sometime during that 15 yr extension, Hezekiah got it into his mind that it would be neat 2 impress the Babylonian ambassadors that were visiting from Nebuchadnezzar. He invited them in & showed them all the wealth & riches that he had obtained in his kingdom. Well, it wasn't long b/4 old Nebu came around knocking & he helped himself 2 all those riches. Not every death is a tragedy & not every gift of life is a blessing.

3-6- This scene is very graphic, gory & grim but it offers us an important **spiritual principle**. Saul's mortally wounded; there's no hope 4 him so he pleads w/ his armor bearer 2 finish him off. The guy refuses, no doubt b/c Saul is the Lord's anointed. So, Saul "**falls on his own sword**" literally & then his armor bearer does the same 4 himself. Now, Saul's dead, his sons are dead, his armor bearer's dead & his royal guard is dead. Basically, **Israel is whipped!** Of course, all of this matters not just b/c it's sad but, more importantly, b/c it makes up the **fulfillment** of **YHWH's** word 2 Saul as spoken by the **disturbed** ghost of Samuel (**28:19**). Just as the word of **YHWH** announced the demise of Hophni & Phineas (**2:34**) & it eventually caught up w/ them (**4:11**) so **YHWH's** word has done w/

Saul & his men. But here's the kicker: Israel may **fall** on Mt. Gilboa, Saul may **fall** on his sword but the word of **YHWH** will **never fall**.

I'll grant you, this is **not** a **pleasant** fulfillment of **YHWH's** word but it's not w/o its **comfort**. It's a dark, dreadful time 4 God's people but God's word shows that even this darkness is not outside God's purposes. Its still well w/in the parameters of what God's already revealed. Here's what we must remember: if **YHWH's** word of judgment against Saul is true then His word of promise 2 David is equally true! In darkness or light, thru good times or bad, what should really matter 2 us is that we have a God who only speaks a true & faithful word.

7- This disaster on Mt. Gilboa stands as a testament 2 the folly of Israel's national **idolatry**. Not **bowing down 2 idols** but their desire 2 have a king "**like all the nations**." Israel was no longer satisfied w/ **YHWH** being their king; they claimed they needed a new system. In their opinion, the real issue was defense & the solution must be a political 1. They called it **progress** but **YHWH** called it **idolatry**. **Ch31** shows us explicitly where complete trust in the **political process** will bring a people. Some idols, like Dagon' lay broken b/4 the ark of God, others lie slain on Mt. Gilboa. This is a word of caution 2 believers: we have a political process going on right now & as Americans, we should **participate** in it. But, as Christians, we should never **trust** in it. Granted, we don't have much 2 choose from this go around but truth is, if Reagan, Lincoln & Washington came back in 1 person, they still wouldn't be trustworthy. No, the only time this world will experience real, lasting peace is when the Prince of Peace arrives on the scene.

8-10- When the Philistines went back 2 collect the trophies of battle, they discovered the greatest prizes of all & they mutilate them 2 their liking (Saul). They sent parts of Saul 2 parts of Philistia & sent messengers back 2 proclaim the gospel of victory in their temples & 2 their people. Their message was simply this: **our idols have won! Astarte has carried the day! YHWH's** anointed has lost his head = **YHWH's** been defeated! Saul's armor is in our temple= **YHWH** couldn't protect His king. At least that's how the Philistine media would explain it. If **YHWH's** king & people are defeated, so is their God. As far as they were concerned, **YHWH** was a loser. Was this true? Of course not! **YHWH** was using the Philistines 2 execute judgment on His rebellious king but you can't expect pagans 2 understand the workings & ways of an Almighty & holy God. His own people can't even keep up w/ what He's doing.

The sadness of the text is not just in Israel's loss, which is sad enough. No, the deeper sadness is in the fact that **YHWH** is **mocked!** Every true Israelite would mourn over that. Worse than Israel's **defeat** is **YHWH's disgrace**. Saul's sin, hardened rebellion & eventual ruin affected far more than himself & his immediate family. It endangered the entire nation of Israel & gave opportunity 4

the Lord's enemies 2 disparage His character & disgrace His name.

This is why the lifestyle of the Christian is so critical. It's pivotal not only 2 their own testimony but 2 the effectiveness of the gospel 2 everyone around them. The Bible gives us many good reasons 4 living a holy lifestyle but upholding our Lord's reputation is the most important. Whether as individual Christians or as a body of believers in a church, the honor of Jesus Christ should always be at the top of our daily agendas. We have no greater concern.

11-13- When Saul's army was destroyed at Gilboa, Israel evacuated the area (even east of Jordan). The Philistines had now effectively cut off the northern tribes from the southern. In the midst of all this tragedy is a small glimpse of tenderness. Residents of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done 2 Saul's body so some of their best men took an all night hike 2 Beth Shan, pulled down the rotting bodies from the walls & high-tailed it back home. These guys had stamina: it was a 22-22 ml trip, crossing the Jordan twice. They also had courage b/c they hazarded their own lives 2 break thru the philistine lines & recover these bodies. They also had memories; which explains it all.

You see, we might've forgotten about Nahash the Ammonite, but Jabesh-Gilead hadn't. When Nahash came against their city, he gave them 2 options: **1)** if they resisted, he'd kill them all; **2)** if they surrendered, he'd take all their right eyes. When word got 2 Saul who was recently installed as king of Israel, the Spirit of **YHWH** came upon him, he mustered the army of Israel & marched 2 their rescue – a night march. So, Saul's reign began w/ his deliverance of Jabesh-G & it ends w/ Jabesh-G's deliverance of Saul's body. The Spirit may have departed from Saul & **YHWH** may not answer him but they remember the time Saul was their savior & they remained grateful 2 the end.

Sure, paying their debt of gratitude didn't change the outcome 4 Saul but at least something right was done in this big mess. Gratitude bears its own necessity, whether it changes anything or not. The women who kept watch at the cross couldn't do anything 2 help Jesus, but they were there. When they watched Him being placed in the tomb, they couldn't do anything, but they saw. When they took spices 2 anoint His body, they didn't know how they were going 2 accomplish it, but they went. Love offers the kindness it can't forget the King even in death.

The saddest part of this scene is the absence of any sorrow, repentance or crying out 2 God on Saul's part. He was told the previous day that he would die & yet he failed 2 prepare his soul in any way 2 meet God. That's a **tragedy!** What's worse, these events happen some 20 yrs after Saul 1st hears the

announcement of judgment against him from Samuel. Since God's announced judgment didn't happen immediately, maybe Saul thought time was on his side. **It wasn't!** Time was actually against him b/c in the 20 yrs since, his heart had become more hard against God.

You see, at the end of his life, Saul had become so hardened in sin that he **didn't want 2 repent**. Many folks put off getting right w/ God until a later, more convenient time. They do this b/c they **assume** they'll still **want 2** get right w/ God then. This is a dangerous assumption. Repentance is a gift from God: if it's being offered today, it should be received today – it's not guaranteed 2/b here tomorrow. 3Xs the writer of **Hebrews** warns us, "**Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...**" (Heb 3:7, 3:15, 4:7). This is as dangerous 4 believers as it is 4 unbelievers.

Christians: are we willing 2 ask the Lord 2 **break** hardened hearts? Are we willing 2 **watch** hardened hearts be broken? 2 **suffer** alongside the broken-hearted & be **prepared** 2 help them pick up the broken pieces of their lives & offer them 2 Jesus 2 save & redeem, 2 heal & restore? We can stand on the side lines & fret over the sorry state of our world or we can pray 4 God 2 do His work & prepare ourselves 2/b used by God in that work. **Are we willing?**

