

Israel's Defeat by the Philistines and the Death of King Saul

1 Samuel 31

1 Samuel 31 - *"Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ² Then the Philistines followed hard after Saul and his sons. And the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons. ³ The battle became fierce against Saul. The archers hit him, and he was severely wounded by the archers. ⁴ Then Saul said to his armorbearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me." But his armorbearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword and fell on it. ⁵ And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him. ⁶ So Saul, his three sons, his armorbearer, and all his men died together that same day. ⁷ And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, and those who were on the other side of the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them. ⁸ So it happened the next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹ And they cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and sent word throughout the land of the Philistines, to proclaim it in the temple of their idols and among the people. ¹⁰ Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.^[a] ¹¹ Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹² all the valiant men arose and traveled 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 Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days."*

Background Notes

The last chapter of 1 Samuel records the tragic death of King Saul. Saul was a king who started out well. In the beginning he was humble, and the Lord was with him. 1 Samuel 11 says that the spirit of God came upon Saul mightily, and he defeated the Ammonites. But then Saul began to go downhill. His heart was lifted up with pride. He practiced partial obedience when he didn't completely remove the Amalekites. (Isn't it ironic that an Amalekite may have been involved in Saul's death, as we'll see in 2 Samuel 1?) Saul continued to go downhill as he became insanely jealous of David, and tried to kill him.

1 Samuel 31 records Saul's tragic death and the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Philistines. How sad – and it didn't need to be. If only King Saul had not turned away from the Lord! If only he had not been so proud, and had not been so jealous of David!

The Philistines defeated Israel at Mount Gilboa, which is at the southeast end of the plain of Jezreel. King Saul and three of his sons, including David's good friend Jonathan, were killed. Only one of Saul's sons, Ishbosheth, was not killed, and

we'll read about him in 2 Samuel. Saul himself committed suicide. The Philistines took Saul and his three sons and hung their bodies on the walls of Beth Shan. Beth Shan was a very impressive walled city that guarded the whole eastern end of the Jezreel Valley. The walls of the city were set high on "tel" (or mound) of Beth Shan. The bodies of Saul and his sons would have been visible for miles around. This was the ultimate triumph for the Philistines, and the ultimate putdown and shame for Israel.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Bible does not condone suicide.

The fact that King Saul committed suicide and it is recorded in the Bible does not mean that the Bible teaches it's OK to commit suicide. If anything, the Bible teaches just the opposite. Saul's destruction of his own life was the tragic end of a lifetime of self-destruction.

Every suicide in the Bible is recorded in a negative context; it is a tragic end of a life that could have been used for the glory of God. Abimelech in Judges 9, King Saul in 1 Samuel 31, Ahithophel in 2 Samuel 17, King Zimri in 1 Kings 16, and of course, Judas in Matthew 27. Let's read these other passages that we just mentioned. I'm reading about the death of Abimelech, the son of Gideon in Judges 9:50-54. *"Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez and took it. ⁵¹ But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women—all the people of the city—fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower. ⁵² So Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he drew near the door of the tower to burn it with fire. ⁵³ But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull. ⁵⁴ Then he called quickly to the young man, his armorbearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" So his young man thrust him through, and he died."*

In 2 Samuel 17:23 we read about the suicide of Ahithophel. *"Now when Ahithophel saw that his advice was not followed, he saddled a donkey, and arose and went home to his house, to his city. Then he put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died; and he was buried in his father's tomb."*

In 1 Kings 16:17-18 we read about King Zimri's suicide. *"Then Omri and all Israel with him went up from Gibbethon, and they besieged Tirzah. ¹⁸ And it happened, when Zimri saw that the city was taken, that he went into the citadel of the king's house and burned the king's house down upon himself with fire, and died..."*

And of course, we have the well-known suicide of Judas in Matthew 27:3-5. *"Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" ⁵ Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself."*

Suicide is really self-murder, and the Bible clearly condemns murder in the Ten Commandments. *“Thou shall not murder...”* Giving your life for a good cause, such as throwing yourself on a live grenade to save others, or like Samson sacrificing his life to defeat the enemy is not, by definition, suicide.

But what about cases where someone is in extreme pain or terminally ill, or as in the case of Saul here, where he didn't want the enemy to torture him and have the ultimate triumph? Are not the Jewish zealots who committed suicide at Masada considered heroes because they didn't let Rome have the pleasure of abusing them and making them slaves? And would it not be better for a soldier who is captured by an enemy that doesn't follow the Geneva Convention to take the cyanide capsule that he has in his pack, rather than be tortured and possibly give away vital information?

All of these arguments may seem valid and seem to justify suicide in some cases, However, on the other side of the coin is the fact that people can bring glory to God even in and through their extreme suffering. And God can deliver us from any situation if He so chooses. So, while we can understand why Saul and others (including some Christians) have committed suicide, we must conclude that the Bible never condones suicide.

2. The Bible does not condemn cremation.

Verses 11-13: *“Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and traveled 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. Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.”* Jabesh Gilead was on the east side of the Jordan River in the territory of the half tribe of Manasseh.

The men of Jabesh Gilead made the night march to Beth Shan to save the bodies of Saul and his sons from ridicule and from vultures. They felt great loyalty to Saul because of what he had done for them forty years before. At the beginning of his reign, back in 1 Samuel 11, Saul raised an army and went out and rescued the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead from the siege and threat of the Ammonites. So, the valiant men of Jabesh Gilead traveled all night and risked their lives to take the bodies of Saul and his sons down from the wall of Beth Shan. They took the bodies back to Jabesh, burned them there and then gave their ashes an honorable burial.

Question: What does the Bible teach about cremation? Once again, remember that the Bible's purpose is not to teach about cremation in this chapter, but rather to give us the account of what the people of Jabesh Gilead did to honor Saul and his sons, possibly because their bodies were mutilated. So, what does the Bible teach about cremation? There is no verse in the Bible condemning cremation of the body, and there is no verse in the Bible demanding burial of the body. However, the practice for God's people in the Bible was burial. Embalming and cremation seem to have been the practice of other cultures.

Burial more clearly conveys our hope as Christians, according to 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 *“So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in*

weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.”

Furthermore, burial is the basis for the meaning of Christian baptism, that we have died with Christ and are raised with Christ. This is our position as believers and is conveyed in our baptism. But of course, all of this doesn't demand burial of the body. More and more people today are choosing cremation today for reasons such as the much higher cost of burial. And, of course, the ashes can be buried, thus preserving the picture of 1 Corinthians 15. So, the answer to our question is that while the practice in the Bible was burial, the Bible doesn't condemn cremation.

Practical Application

“In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”

This practical application comes right out of the Book of Proverbs, and it is a wonderful promise for guidance. Proverbs 3:5-6 - *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and don't depend on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”*

Now let me ask you: does the phrase “all your ways” include questions about whether or not you should be cremated, or whether to have your loved ones cremated? Of course it does. “All your ways” includes all your decisions when you're seeking to do God's will. So, at the right time the Lord will give you the answers you need for all your needs, including decisions about cremation. *“In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.”*