

Death of Saul and Sons

Key Verse:
“But if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”
 Isaiah 1:20

Extra: What evidence can you find that Saul only had himself to blame for his death?

Level 5 lesson 33

Read: 1 Samuel 31:1-13, and 2 Samuel 1:1-16
Further Reading: 1 Chronicles 10

What a sad lesson we have to consider today; Israel completely and utterly defeated by her arch-enemy, the Philistines; and Saul along with his three sons, Abinadab, Malchi-shua and Jonathan, all meeting their deaths. We know very little of Abinadab and Malchi-shua and can only say that, to their credit, they died fighting Israel’s enemies. However, for Jonathan (a truly honourable man and David’s dearest friend) we can feel only the greatest sorrow. We would have liked to have seen him survive and be amongst those who later saw David crowned as King, and be rewarded for his faithful friendship. Some even think, if Jonathan had left the palace and joined David’s band he might have been spared to share David’s glory later. However, it was not to be.

TRAGIC END

The Philistines fought a terrible battle against Israel and slowly but surely gained the upper hand. They drove the men of Israel backwards, up the slopes and over the crest of Mount Gilboa. Thousands were killed that day as the fierce battle raged. The Philistines’ prime targets of course, were Saul and his sons; whom they were intent on killing. Finally, the three sons were overpowered and killed. Saul himself was hit by the pursuing archers and mortally wounded. No longer able to fight or run, and knowing full well the atrocities and indignities he could expect at the hands of the barbarous Philistines, Saul appealed to his armour-bearer to kill him and so save him from further insult. The armour-bearer however, was afraid and refused. Desperate not to be taken alive, Saul drew out his own sword and fell on it. So we read in v6, “Saul died, and his three sons, and his armour-bearer and all his men that same day together.” A tragic end for the King who had commenced so well, but who failed so badly to be the godly leader the Israelite nation needed.

BRAVE ACTION

With the battle lost and their leader dead, the people of Israel were in disarray.

Many towns and cities were simply abandoned as the Israelites ran from the advancing Philistines, who soon took possession of them. The day after the battle, the Philistines found the bodies of Saul and his sons where they lay on Mount Gilboa. From their despicable treatment of his corpse, we can see Saul was right to fear being taken alive by these barbaric people! They cut off his head, removed his armour and then dragged his body to a village called Bethshan, where they proceeded to hang it, and the bodies of his sons, on a wall in a public display of their contempt.

However, there were still brave, honourable men in Israel. When the men of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done, they gathered together and despite the danger, resolved to retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons from their position of dishonour and humiliation. After marching all night, they came to Bethshan, took the bodies of Saul and his sons down from the wall and cremated them honourably. These men had once been saved from a shameful fate by Saul (see chapter 11) and had not forgotten his kindness.

DAVID’S ANGER

In Chapter 1 of 2 Samuel, we learn how David came to hear the sad news of Saul and Jonathan’s death and the defeat of the Israelite army. A young Amalekite man arrived in Ziklag in a terrible state – clothes torn and bloodied and covered in dust. Brought before David, he blurts out the sad news that many soldiers are dead, including Saul and Jonathan, and people have fled their towns and villages. David immediately asked him, “How do you know that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?” The Amalekite claimed to have discovered Saul on Mount Gilboa. He said that Saul called out to him, begging him to end his misery, for despite falling on his sword, he was still alive. The Amalekite claimed to have killed Saul in response to his desperate request.

He then showed David Saul’s crown and bracelet, as proof of his statement. It seems the Amalekite thought he would gain David’s favour by telling him that he had killed Saul. Instead, however, David was angry that he had taken the life of Saul, the ‘Lord’s anointed’ and ordered him to be executed immediately. David had himself had several opportunities to kill Saul in the past, but was never willing to lift his hand against the ‘Lord’s anointed.’

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why did Saul appeal to his armour-bearer?	.....
2. How had Saul failed so badly as King of Israel?	.....
3. How did the men of Jabesh-Gilead repay Saul’s kindness?	.....
4. What did the Amalekite claim?	.....
5. What was David’s response?	.....

My Name is Age

David's Lamentation

Read 2 Samuel 1:17-27; 2:1-11

Further reading: Acts 7:54-8:8

Key Verse:

“Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.”

Acts 8:2

Extra: Can you find any other tributes to fine men in the Bible?

Level 5 lesson 34

GRACIOUS TRIBUTE

What a stirring lament David gives in the next section of our passage at the news of Saul and Jonathan's deaths. (v19-27) Of course, it is normal custom when people die to say the best about them; to extol their virtues and refrain from mentioning their failings.

However, a less generous heart than David's would have been silent about Saul, who had been so cruel and unjust; and express sorrow for Jonathan only. However, David graciously couples Saul and Jonathan together in his expressions of grief and sorrow.

“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights,” he begins in v19. Saul had been anointed by Samuel, as God's chosen leader, in response to the demand of the people. We know he was an imposing man endowed with a tremendous physical presence and intellect and initially, blessed with the presence of God's Spirit. As such, he was in a real sense, the 'glory of Israel' and certainly much admired by the people.

Until this last humiliating defeat, both he and Jonathan had displayed great courage and skill in battle against the enemies of Israel, bringing a measure of peace and prosperity to the land. David alludes to this aspect of their lives by referring three times during his lament to “How the mighty have fallen!” However, David did not want Israel's enemies to gloat over the fact that Saul and Jonathan had both been killed and Saul's dynasty was effectively over. Instead he cried, “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon.”

David then cursed the scene of the terrible defeat; “You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew, neither let there be rain upon you, etc,” before making a most gracious statement: “Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives.” We know this to be certainly true of Jonathan, but Saul? Here David displays a wonderfully forgiving and loving heart; overlooking Saul's shameful behaviour towards him at times, he generously honours the better side of Saul's character, which he had known earlier. After this, David implores the “daughters of Israel” to “weep over Saul” - the one who treated them so sumptuously, decorating them with scarlet and gold, etc (v24).

Finally, he ends his lament, with an outburst of love and grief for Jonathan alone: “I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.” A beautiful tribute to a wonderful friendship and an honourable man.

CROWNED KING

After this, we find David, as we would expect, wondering about his future. He wisely enquired of the Lord, “Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?” (Ch 2:1) David of course, belonged to the tribe of Judah, and in response to God's clear directive (v1) David, his family and his band of men left Ziklag and travelled to Hebron, the ancient, sacred city of that tribe. There, “The men of Judah came and anointed David King over the house of Judah.” At last David was king - at least over Judah. However, the rest of Israel would not acknowledge him as such for many years afterwards, as we'll see in our next study.

One of David's first acts as King, was to send a message to the men of Jabesh-Gilead, who you'll remember had retrieved Saul's body from the Philistines and given it an honourable cremation. David thanked them, and promised to reward them for this, advising them at the same time, that he had just been made King of Judah (v7). This was another demonstration of his generous and godly character towards those who were loyal to Saul, and showed he had truly borne Saul no malice.

DOOMED OPPOSITION

Despite David's generous treatment of Saul's sympathisers and his gracious lament at Saul's death, opposition to David continued. Abner, the former captain of Saul's army, declared Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, to be King over the eleven remaining tribes of Israel (v8-11). This opposition was certain to fail, as David was God's chosen king; destined to rule with all of God's authority and backing. Abner's actions led only to civil war between Judah and the eleven tribes, during which both he and Ish-bosheth were violently killed. It does not pay to oppose God's purposes - especially in regard to His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom David was a type.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. How did David show a generous and gracious spirit?

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2(a). What expression appears 3 times in David's lamentation?
2(b). What did this mean?

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3. Why do you think David spoke so kindly of Jonathan?

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4. Over which tribe was David first made King?

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5. Why was Abner's opposition to David certain to fail?

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David: King Over Israel

Read 2 Samuel 5:1-10

Further reading: Psalm 20

Key Verse:

“The Lord God will give Him (Jesus) the throne of His father David,and His Kingdom will never end.”

Luke 1:32-33

Extra: What qualities do you think made David a suitable King?

Level 5 lesson 35

CIVIL WAR

At last David had attained the high office to which he had been appointed by God. But what a bitter and trying time he had to get there! For years, he'd been persecuted by King Saul and following Saul's death, he was opposed by the other eleven tribes of Israel for a considerable time. 2 Samuel 3:1 tells us "Now there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David, but the house of David grew stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker." This civil war was mainly the result of the conduct of Abner, Saul's loyal but misguided army captain.

Abner took Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, and declared him King over Gilboa and all the other tribes of Israel. Abner, you may remember, was the one who David had taunted for not looking after Saul (his master) properly, when David had crept up and taken Saul's spear and water bottle - right from under Abner's nose! (see 1 Samuel 26:15-16). Abner was of course, fiercely loyal to Saul as you would expect, but he had also heard Saul's own declarations on several occasions that the kingdom belonged to David. It may well be that Abner never forgave David for humiliating him before his master, and therefore there was a degree of revenge in all his actions.

DIVINE APPOINTMENT

However, it is God who is "sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes" (Daniel 4:17) and despite their resistance and opposition, Saul's house was ultimately fighting a losing battle. Abner was slain by Joab, David's servant (see ch3:27), and Ish-bosheth was murdered by his own men while he was lying in bed (ch 4:7). The death of these two men brought the long civil war to an end, and in the first verse of our reading today, we find all the tribes of Israel came to Hebron and said to David, "Behold, we are your own flesh and blood." They then proceeded to acknowledge David's services to them - even during the days when Saul was King over them. In a remarkable admission, they told David, "You led Israel."

Not only this, they added, "The Lord said, 'You shall shepherd my people Israel and you shall become their ruler.'" This was an amazing statement by the people, of David's leadership in the past, and his divine appointment to be their King.

These frank and enlightening words were quickly followed by actions. There in Hebron, the elders of Israel entered into an agreement with David, before the Lord, and anointed him "King over Israel." Finally, the whole nation of Israel was united in support of David! He was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he ruled for a period of forty years over the people of Israel.

DAVID AND JESUS

There are a number of interesting comparisons between the life of David and the life of Jesus, which it is good to notice at this point:

1. David means "beloved." Jesus was God's "beloved" Son.
2. Both David and Jesus were born in Bethlehem.
3. David was suddenly brought from obscurity into publicity at his anointing. So was Jesus, when He was anointed by the Holy Spirit at His baptism.
4. Shortly after his anointing, David met and defeated Goliath the giant. Immediately after His baptism, Jesus met and defeated the temptations of Satan.
5. David suffered a long period of persecution and rejection by Israel. Jesus was likewise persecuted and is still rejected by Israel.
6. David was hated without a cause. This was also true of Jesus.
7. At last, however, David became King of a united Israel. This will certainly one day be the case in regard to Jesus (see the Key Verse).

You will no doubt be able to think of other comparisons, but the ones above are certainly most interesting and thought-provoking.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why did Abner make Ish-bosheth King?	.....
2. What did the tribes do immediately after the death of Abner and Ish-bosheth?	.....
3. Mention a comparison between the life of David and the life of Jesus.	.....
4. Which comparison do you like best?	.....
5. What blessings did you gain from this study?	.....

The Kindness of God

Key Verse:

“That in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”

Ephesians 2:7

Extra: Find out why it is necessary for people to return to God.

Level 5 lesson 36

Read 2 Samuel 9:1-13

Further Reading: Luke 15

GREAT KINDNESS

David was now established as King of Israel, with practically unlimited power over his subjects and able to do largely as he pleased. This kind of power tends to bring out the worst in human character, but David’s first thoughts were to show kindness to others. In startling contrast to the rulers round about who eliminated the families of their predecessors, David wanted to show kindness to Saul’s family! He had not forgotten his promise to Jonathan and despite all the suffering Saul had caused him, David asked if there was anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom he could show “the kindness of God.” This was yet another way in which David can be seen as a ‘type’ of Jesus who “while we were yet sinners, died for us.” This is the kindness of God, which enables Christians to forgive and love their enemies.

GREAT NEED

In response to his enquiries, David is told of a man named Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s son. This poor man was a helpless cripple, due to an unfortunate accident as a baby. He lived in Lo-debar which means “no pasture,” in apparent poverty and desperate need. David was delighted to have an opportunity to repay Jonathan for his kindness and loyalty through the difficult days of Saul’s reign, and to honour the vow they had made to each other.

David immediately sent messengers to Lo-debar to find Mephibosheth and bring him to the palace. Mephibosheth couldn’t come by himself, as he was a cripple; so he had to be carried. What a picture of the sinner who needs God’s kindness! We as sinners are helpless cripples too; because of sin we cannot, of ourselves, walk in a way pleasing to God. Mephibosheth’s crippled state was due to a fall (2 Samuel 4:4) and so is ours - the fall of our first parents into sin. Our incapacity is total; we need to be brought like Mephibosheth, and so God draws us to Himself through the preaching of the gospel by His faithful servants.

All Mephibosheth had to do to experience the “kindness of God” David was wanting to show him, was agree to come; and so it is with us. Despite his obvious fears about David’s motives, Mephibosheth agreed to be brought to David and immediately bowed low before him, paying him his rightful homage as God-appointed King of Israel. David immediately put him at ease with the words, “Don’t be afraid; I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father’s sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually!” Mephibosheth, the helpless cripple of an enemy household, was brought from poverty to wealth; made not merely a servant, but treated as a son; made to sit continually at the King’s table. What a marvellous illustration of the kindness of God to us poor sinners!

GREAT GRACE

We too, belong to an enemy race; sinners, separated from a righteous, holy God. We too, live in a barren desolate land, spiritually; unable to partake of all God’s goodness and blessing. We are helpless to approach Him, but God in His kindness sends us the Gospel to bring us to Himself. Through the gracious working of His Holy Spirit, He opens our eyes to the truth of the Gospel and draws us to Himself, where we cast ourselves wholly on Him to do with us as He wills. And like Mephibosheth we find that, instead of judgement and punishment; He wants to bless us with “all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus.” We find ourselves the beneficiaries of His wealth and the blessings of redemption; recipients of His everlasting life. Not merely servants, but members of His family. What grace! What kindness!

How sad if Mephibosheth had refused to obey King David’s call - if he had stubbornly clung to the idea that David only wanted to harm him, make his life even worse, and keep him in poverty and need. Dear friends, this is the lie which the Devil, our enemy, places in the minds of so many today. Don’t let his lies keep you from the presence and blessing of God, and the promise of an eternity free from the penalty of sin. Come today and cast yourself at His feet in repentance. He is waiting to forgive your sin and bless you in ways you can’t even imagine! Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), God is waiting, ready to receive and welcome all who will return to Him. Will you?

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did David want to do in this lesson?	.....
2. Why was this such a contrast to other rulers round about?	.....
3. How is Mephibosheth’s physical condition like our spiritual condition?	.....
4. What did David’s kindness do for Mephibosheth?	.....
5. What will God in His kindness do for us?	.....