

THE MORNING OF THE MONARCHY
STUDIES IN FIRST SAMUEL
LESSON 13

WHEN GOD GRACIOUSLY OVERRULES
1 Samuel 29-31

INTRODUCTION:

The final chapters of the book of 1 Samuel describe one of the saddest stories of ancient Hebrew history. Approximately forty years earlier a young man from the tribe of Benjamin was chosen and anointed by Samuel as Israel's first king. He was a man with physical strength and military capability. The legal, spiritual, and military fortunes of Israel were placed upon his shoulders; but one thing was not taken into account on the part of Israel in those early days of optimism.... Samuel sounded a warning concerning the danger of putting trust in human capacity alone. The real success of Israel did not lie in her production of capable men, but in her faith in Jehovah. -- Davis

Israel got what she had asked for: a king just like the kings of other nations. Chapters twenty-nine through thirty are a pathos-filled commentary on Samuel's warning and a frightening contrast to the enthusiasm of chapter ten. The man of the hour proved to be only the man after man's heart. When Chrysostom in the fourth century wrote that "as a moth gnaws a garment so doth envy consume a man," he could have been describing Saul. Envy played havoc with the aging king. Like Nabal, Saul's days were now numbered. Like a king who would later rule in Babylon, he was "weighed in the balances, and ...found wanting" (Dan. 5:27). His kingdom, too, like that of Belshazzar, would be given to another who would, as prophesied, "do great things."

At the same time, David has just proven himself to be one of the most enigmatic figures in history. It is doubtful whether anyone before the age of thirty has experienced what he did. But it is not so much the circumstances of his existence that tend to astound as the fluctuations of his spirit. The Psalms bear this out. They show an undulating emotional pattern that at one moment soars in rapture and the next plunges to almost suicidal despair.

During the first millennium B.C., war was almost a way of life. There was little attempt at diplomacy, and when there was it was not accepted (Jud. 11:11-28; 1 Sam. 11:1-2). There simply seemed to be times "when kings went forth to battle" (2 Sam. 11:1), and thousands died, cities were sacked and burned, slaves were taken, and territory was occupied until the vanquished returned to challenge the victor once again. Life was cheap in this vicious circle. And now it was time for the Philistine kings to once again challenge Israel.

Whatever the reasons for this particular war, several major issues were at stake: the control of the Jezreel valley, which was the main east-west trade artery from the Mediterranean to the Jordan; the dividing of the Israelites in the Galilee from their brothers to the south; Saul's leadership; and David's loyalties. God, though pushed into the shadows, was still keeping watch upon His own.

I. DAVID IS REJECTED BY THE PHILISTINES 29:1-11

A. The Preparation for the Battle 29:1-2

This narrative continues that which was begun in 28:2. The march of the Philistine armies led them northward to Aphek, which was an important Philistine military post used as a rallying point for the various contingents of the army as they marched northward to the plain of Jezreel. Some commentators locate it in the northeastern Jezreel valley, but more probably it was near the modern city of Joppa. On the eve of the battle, the Philistines had rendezvoused at Aphek, precisely where they had defeated Israel and captured the ark about 90 years earlier (4:10-11). Israel took up positions by the spring in Jezreel, on the flank of Mount Gilboa, some 40 miles northeast of Aphek.

The Philistines organized their forces into companies of hundreds and thousands. The principal leaders of the organization were the "lords of the Philistines." Each Philistine, including Achish,

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was to bring his own section, pass in review and be sent forward. David, trudging reluctantly along with Achish, formed the rear guard.

B. The Question about the Hebrews 29:3-5

As the military maneuvers continued, the "commanders" of the Philistines noticed that Hebrews were among the Philistine forces. The "commanders" are to be distinguished from the lords mentioned in verse 2. They evidently were company leaders who immediately recognized the presence of David and his men. The term "Hebrew" was used commonly by foreigners to identify an Israelite.

These military leaders demanded that David return. They were concerned that in the heat of battle, David, rather than being an ally, would turn on them and become an "adversary." (The Hebrew term for adversary is *satan*, which is interesting, for in this context an adversary would be one who would make out to be an ally, but at a crucial time would turn and bring disaster (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14; 1 Tim. 5:14-15)). The commanders remembered well the exploits of David and the popular tune about him. The song the Jewish maidens had sung once before made the Philistines drive David away from the court of Achish (21:11-15); here it made them drive him from the army.

C. The Request by Achish 29:6-7

Achish, who trusted David so implicitly, was a dupe, fooled by David; and yet it was his fellow Philistines who, in all their shrewdness, rescued David from the cruel necessity of fighting against his own people. Achish could not risk his political future for the sake of David and his men.

"As the LORD lives" (v.6) seems strange coming from the mouth of a Philistine. Perhaps he was attracted to David's God, or wanted to impress David with his sincerity, or out of respect to David swore by David's God. In any case, he sent David away with utmost courtesy.

D. The Protest of David 29:8

David protested against his dismissal, which may seem to be carrying the deception considerably further than was necessary. But to quickly agree with Achish's request would be to raise questions concerning his loyalty to the Philistine cause. On the other hand, to object too vigorously might cause Achish to relent and force his hand. Deception had become his way of life while in Philistia, but God could rescue His chosen leader from moral difficulties and failures just as easily as from physical dangers.

E. The Insistence of Achish 29:9-10

A man who has once deserted can hardly be trusted not to do so again. Achish is confident that David is loyal, but he must yield to the decision of the military advisors. In verse ten the expression "the servants of your lord" is more than likely a reference to King Saul, and the clans of Manasseh who had come over to David rather than fight the Philistines with Saul (1 Chron. 12:19-21). This phrase would be a strange description of David's own men, but it would exactly describe a band of deserters. Another interpretation is that Achish did not consider David his vassal any longer, but intimated that David was at liberty to leave Philistia if he so desired. Achish may have used the expression in a purely non-political sense, referring, perhaps, to David's ethnic or religious relationship.

II. THE RETALIATION OF THE AMALEKITES 30:1-31

A. The Amalekites Raid Ziklag 30:1-5

When the fighting men of Philistia and Judea were marching away to war, the Amalekites were only too glad to take the opportunity to spoil the defenseless country. David had killed all of his Amalekite prisoners, lest they betray him (27:11). The Amalekites spared the lives of their captives, not because they were more merciful than David, but because women and children were valuable as slaves. All the best would be picked out and probably sent to Egypt for sale.

The chronology seems to be this: on the second day's march the Philistine leaders objected to David; he was back at Gath in two days and on the third day he reached Ziklag (30:1). They found the town burned and abandoned. David was taken completely by surprise by this event. Nor did the Amalekites expect him and his troops to return so swiftly. Once again we see God's controlling hand in the whole affair. God had saved David from being forced to attack his own countrymen and his return to Ziklag was in the very nick of time.

B. David's Troops Become Bitter 30:6a

In their initial distress at losing their entire families, David's men came close to murdering him on the spot, possibly for leaving their wives and families absolutely defenseless.

A man can only lead to the extent that he is allowed to do so. Ultimately leadership can only be by consent -- at least, the consent of a sufficient number of people to support the person at the top. Leaders often need to exercise the power of persuasion, but in this case David could not have turned disaster into triumph by mere persuasion. Strong and effective action was needed, and thanks to God's help, he was able to provide it. - Payne

C. David Seeks the Lord 30:6b-8

It was a critical moment. While the people were embittered and hostile, David turned to God. Notice the phrase "the LORD his God" -- the name representing the specially close relationship. In 6b there are two evidences of repentance:

1. His renewed confidence in God

He realized that his sin/deception had caught up with him. To escape one problem by sin only brings more problems of the same and other kinds.

2. His renewed guidance by God

Both David and Saul were at their point of extremity, but Saul turned to a medium for guidance while David turned to God. God is under no obligation to reveal His unknown will to anyone when they will not follow His known (moral) will. But man's extremity is often God's opportunity. He is the God of all comfort.

Though he did not know it, these events were to close a long chapter in David's life. The days when he would haunt the caves and desolate places of the land were over. He was about to return from the wilderness. The walls of Ziklag where he had sought protection were no longer standing. But it was there that he found himself when his men murmured against him, and he "encouraged himself in the Lord his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). Perhaps a little like the prodigal son, David had gone into a "far country." Though he was faithless, God was not. The heart for God that was in David enabled him to respond and regain the path on which he was meant to walk. By means of the ephod God told David to pursue.

D. David Pursues the Amalekites 30:9-20

1. The army

Having marched some sixty miles to get home and now moving at a furious pace, it is no surprise that two hundred men were too exhausted to continue. They were left with the baggage to keep the nomads from repeating the crime while David and the four hundred kept up the pursuit.

2. The informant

The area south of Ziklag is of shifting sand dunes. God provided guidance through an Egyptian slave. That an Egyptian was a slave to an Amalekite indicates that the arrogant Amalekites had even raided parts of Egypt and had taken slaves from there as well. His life being of too little value for them to mount him on a camel, or even to leave with him supplies of food, they left him to die and so their inhumanity led to their own destruction. Required by David to act as his guide, the Egyptian consented upon condition that David not kill him or turn him over to his master. One of the customs of ancient warfare was to put deserters, persons forced to act as guides, and even noncombatants, to death to save trouble.

3. The battle

Since the slave had eaten nothing for three days and three nights, the Amalekites had a start of at least this time. When David and his men reached the Amalekite camp, they found them spread across the desert, eating, drinking and dancing in celebration of their victory. David and his men rushed upon the Amalekites who were in no position to defend themselves. It has been debated whether verse 17 means the evening or the morning twilight but the words which follow, literally "of (or for) their morrow," seem to prove that it was in the evening that David arrived. In the morning they would have been sleeping not feasting. David slew all within reach until nightfall. The next morning the battle was renewed. Saul, when ordered to put the Amalekites to death had failed to do so and was rejected; David, given the opportunity, put the matter right and thereby revealed himself as fit for kingship. The escape of the camel troops was unavoidable.

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E. David Divides the Spoil 30:21-31

Recovering the families and the cattle carried off by the Amalekites, David also took all the flocks and herds belonging to the enemy. Besides the sheep and oxen, there would be camels and other animals, arms, gold and silver, clothing and other personal property. Certain men among the four hundred felt that only those who actually fought in the battle should divide the spoil which they had recovered. This was the very thing which David wanted to avoid, namely, assuming that victory came by human effort alone. David reminded his men that their victory had been given to them by the Lord. In a sense this was David's first military action as king. He would go on to win many other victories in the years that followed, and it was important to establish at the outset how he meant to handle the spoils of battle. In the war with the Midianites, Moses had ordered that half of the spoil should belong to the combatants and half to the congregation who remained in the camp (Num. 31:27; Jos. 22:8). David enacted legislation in the same spirit. Each task within the army was of equal merit and importance. David's firm stand on this issue commended itself to the great majority; only the greedy few held a different opinion.

There were sufficient spoils not only to pay the troops, but also to repay past benefits, showing his gratitude to the citizens of those towns in Judah where he and his men had wandered when being pursued by Saul.

The spoil taken from the Amalekites and assigned to David must have been very large, as it was worth distributing so widely. He did not, however, send to all the elders of Judah, but only to such as were his friends. In comparing the list of David's heroes (1 Chron. 11:26-47) with this catalogue of friendly towns, it will be found that several of them came from them, and had probably shared his exile at Ziklag. We find David in this narrative acting justly as a soldier, generously to those who had been kind to him in his wanderings, and forming friendships which he retained and cherished long afterwards, when from being a fugitive he had become a king. -- John Davis, The Birth of a Kingdom

Another import of the gifts was that it re-established contacts with the leaders of Judah and demonstrated his loyalty to them. This was made necessary because of his long association with the Philistines.

III. THE DEFEAT AND DEATH OF SAUL AND JONATHAN 31:1-13

A. The Battle at Gilboa 31:1-2

As Saul's star was fading in the north, David's star was rising in the south. Chapter 31 continues the history begun in 28:1. Saul fought his last battle on the crossroads of Jezreel. The coast road to the plain of Esdraelon, or Jezreel, had been under Philistine control throughout Saul's reign. It afforded them easy passage through friendly Canaanite and Phoenician territory and the plain was an ideal battleground. Some of the major armies of the world have fought on this triangular-shaped plain. Chariots probably opened the attack on the Israelites on the lower slopes of Mount Gilboa, and when the Israelites retreated into the mountain, the archers took over.

The proper order of events is: Saul gathered his army at a spring at the foot of Jezreel, while the Philistines rallied at Aphek in the Sharon plain...from there the Philistines advanced along the Via Maris to Shunem at the foot of the hill of Moreh, while Saul deployed his army opposite them on Mount Gilboa, favoring the mountainous area as more convenient for his lightly armed Israelite warriors. It was from here that Saul went to the medium of Endor in the darkness of night. - Macmillian Bible Atlas

It was the morning after Saul's visit to Endor that the battle took place. The Israelites assumed that the Philistines would limit their battle to the valley of Jezreel where they could use their chariots. In previous struggles with the Philistines, Saul's battlefield skills and the inspirational feats of Jonathan and David had won the field for the Israelites. This time it was not to be. Even knowing that the outcome would be defeat and death, Saul played out his end like a man. He was a truly courageous warrior and a loyal king. At the end he was with his army on the plain of Jezreel. Fighting by his side was Jonathan, true to his father as he had been true to David, as faithful a son as he was a friend.

B. The Death of Saul 31:3-6

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But nothing could prevent the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy. As the battle continued in the area surrounding Gilboa, Saul and part of the army including three of his sons were separated from the rest on the other side of the valley. The Philistines probably had sent out a specially trained detachment to find Saul. Jonathan fell, as well as his two brothers, Abinadab and Malchi-shua. "And the battle went heavily against Saul, and the archers hit him" (1 Sam. 31:3). Mortally wounded, he ordered his armor bearer to kill him. Saul's great fear was that the Philistines would take him captive while still alive and abuse him (like Samson) to the shame of Israel. Josephus believed that the armor bearer was Doeg, the Edomite. If so, he who had readily killed the priests at Nob could not bring himself to kill his master. Saul fell on his own sword, and the armor bearer followed suit. Suicide was rarely known among Israelites in the Old Testament, and never among one in the will of God. There are only four others recorded, if Samson is considered a suicide (Abimelech in Jud. 9:54; Samson in Jud. 16:30, Ahithophel in 2 Sam. 17:23, and Zimri in 1 Kings 16:18).

C. The Violation of Saul's Body 31:7-10

The Philistines returned to the field and cut off Saul's head, a common procedure in this period. (Remember David had decapitated Goliath.) They sent his head and weapons on a victory tour of the Philistine cities and hung his body on the wall of Bethshan. They then took Saul's armor and placed it in a temple of Ashtaroth to encourage faith in their gods. Recall that the Ark of the Covenant had been placed in the house of Dagon as a war trophy (1 Sam. 5:1-2); David had taken the head of Goliath and placed it in Jerusalem (1 Sam. 17:54) and the sword of Goliath was found in the sanctuary at Nob (1 Sam. 21:9). Some have speculated that the reason for the Lord's refusal to permit David to build the temple was to prevent him from turning the temple into a house of war trophies following Philistine customs.

D. The Desertion of the Cities 31:7

With the death of Saul and the defeat of his contingent, the men on the other side of the valley fled east across the Jordan, joined by the armies of that region. The Philistines settled in the abandoned cities of the fertile valley. Israel was back where she started from before she asked for a king. The monarchy itself could not save Israel. Only the right king acting in the will of God could do that.

E. The Burial of Saul's Body 31:11-13

Bethshan was approximately two miles from the battle area. It was a very important fortress city controlling the major trade route in the Jordan Valley. Its importance can be seen by the fact that the Egyptians had had a great interest in this city. Both Biblical and archaeological data show that it was occupied by the Philistines after 1050 B.C. A temple (which many feel might be the "house of Ashtaroth" mentioned in 1 Sam. 31:10) has been discovered in the northern part of the mound of Bethshan.

Some of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, a city directly across the river from Bethshan, were Benjamites by marriage after the great Benjamite war (Jud. 20-21), and thus felt a kinship with the Benjamite Saul. Over thirty years before these events, Saul had intervened on their fathers' behalf when they were threatened with dismemberment by the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11). The children now risk their lives to show their gratitude.

It is not easy to assess Saul and his reign. We know little of him as a man and a king. David had a high regard for him as a soldier (2 Sam. 1:17-27), he inspired the loyalty of his sons, the service of great men like Abner, the compassion of the witch at Endor, and the people of Jabesh-gilead were prepared to risk their lives just to rescue his corpse. But his jealousy and his self-will made him a complex and driven man.