

about Saul

1. This is the second study on Saul in this series on people in the life of David. The first study was mostly based in First Samuel ch. 24 and was a study of Saul's life and character in general. This second study is focused on what can be said about him from his death in ch. 31.

2. Though the Philistines directly killed Saul's sons (31:1), they only seriously wound the Jewish king. This placed Saul in a moral dilemma. Would he fight on till the end, even though the situation seemed hopeless? Would he surrender to the Philistines or allow himself to be captured, mocked and tortured by them? Or would he selfishly commit suicide, instead?

3. Was Saul forced to kill himself because of his terrible situation? If the answer is yes, then various suicides can be justified. The Bible never does this, however. Notice, along this line, that the true and living God of Israel is never mentioned in ch. 31 and that Saul did not pray as Samson did in Jud. 16:28. Though there are some similarities, the situation and the violent acts of Samson in Judges 16 and Saul in First Samuel 31 are also very different.

4. The presence of the brave men from Jabesh Gilead at the end of the chapter is a reminder of one of Saul's first acts as king in ch. 11, when he rescued that city from pagan enemies. He was still probably attempting to protect God's people in ch. 31, though he was unable to defeat their enemies without God's help. Of course, he was also trying to protect himself.

descriptive terms

The list below will help you describe Saul as seen in First Samuel ch. 31. Some terms fit well, while others do not; so mark them as correct, incorrect or partly correct. Then use the list to help fill out the worksheet on the opposite page.

Israel's king

fighting the Philistines

fighting for the God of Israel

Israel's champion / representative

the father of three famous sons (31:2)

a better fighter than Jonathan?

honored in Jabesh Gilead (31:11)

a past hero of Israel (11:1-15)

a tragic figure

afraid of the Philistines (31:4)

lacking the necessary support (31:1-2)

physically strong but spiritually weak

unable to continue fighting

without the Lord's help

forced to kill himself

not all bad

selfish

a trophy for the Philistines

killed by the Philistines (31:3-4)

beheaded like Goliath (31:9, 17:51)

disarmed and displayed (31:9-10)

a poor testimony for God

totally defeated (31:6)

like Samson (Judges 16)

like Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23)

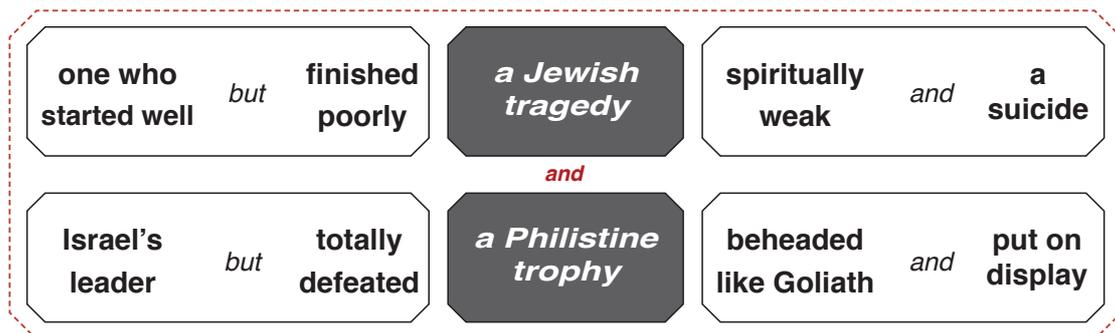
like David (1 Sam. 30:6)

like a fallen Christian leader

Saul

King Saul was a Jewish tragedy who started out well in First Samuel ch. 11, when he rescued Jabesh Gilead, but finished very poorly as a suicide in ch. 31. Moreover, as a result, his head and armor became Philistine trophies, much like Goliath and his sword became Israel's trophies in ch. 17. Thus, Saul was, above all, a poor testimony for the God of Israel.

King Saul was a poor testimony as...



Since the Philistines believed that wars between nations were really struggles between the gods of those nations, they thought of Saul as the representative of Israel's God instead of just its king. This was despite the fact that from ch. 16 onward Saul was no longer the true ruler of Israel, nor was God with him. Thus, it was Saul, himself, who was totally defeated in ch. 31 rather than the Lord. That is also probably why the true and living God of Israel is never mentioned in the chapter.

The rescue of the bodies of the king and his sons by the brave men of Jabesh Gilead in 31:11-13 is the high point of the chapter and denied the Philistines some of their celebration. It also is a reminder of Saul's early success in ch. 11. So even at the end of his life, in his final defeat in ch. 31, we are reminded that Israel's first king was not bad in every way from beginning to end.

Nevertheless, Saul's suicide is a final blot upon his record and is perhaps meant to show that his failure in general was like a self-inflicted fatal wound. It was not his enemies who killed him and removed him from office; rather he, himself, was responsible for his own sins, removal, and death. Even his armorbearer refused to kill him, much like David refused to do twice in chs. 24 and 26. (Remember that David had once been Saul's armorbearer, as well. See 16:21.) Saul killed himself and ruined his own kingdom. So it was not David's fault that Saul failed or died.

Saul is, thus, a warning to all God's servants, especially to Christian leaders, to take heed to themselves just as Paul commanded in 1 Cor. 10:12 and 1 Tim. 4:16. Samson's life and death in the Book of Judges, though thankfully somewhat less tragic, is, as well.