

Prayer

Lord God, speak to us above the noise of our world. Speak clearly so that we might not mistake Your voice, as we have so often done in the past. Speak wisdom so that we might hear, and learn, and do what You have said. Speak to our hearts so that we know for sure that the voice we have heard is Yours. Speak to us, Lord Jesus, speak. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Internet Church

Pray this coming week about the way in which people use internet churches. There are many experiments of this kind; pray for the Lord to give wisdom to leaders and designers.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the growing divisions between countries in our world*
- *Give thanks for friendship*
- *Pray for Zimbabwe and ask God to bring it just government*

Meditation

You know all things about everything, O lord;
and yet You give of Your time to me.

You hear the sounds of the Universe, O Lord;
and yet You listen to what I say.

You are truth and justice personified, O Lord;
and yet You save me from my sin.

You create new things every day, O Lord;
and yet You rejoice in all I do.

You speak Your Word to the Universe, O Lord;
and yet You whisper in my ear.

Forgive me when I am selfish, O Lord,
and fail to give anything to You

Bible Study - 1 Samuel 31:1-7

¹ Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines, and many fell¹ on Mount Gilboa. ² The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and they killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua, the sons of Saul. ³ The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them.

⁴ Then Saul said to his armour-bearer, 'Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and kill me, and make sport of me.' But his armour-bearer was unwilling; for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. ⁵ When his armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. ⁶ So Saul, his three sons and his armour-bearer and all his men died together on the same day.

⁷ When the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley and those beyond the Jordan saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook their towns and fled; and the Philistines came and occupied them.

Review

Our passage describes Saul's last battle, and his death. Saul had won the hearts of the people of Israel through military means (1 Samuel 11), and since then, despite a few victories (largely in his early days), his military career had been difficult and full of failure (1 Sam 13). Even when he had won a battle, he fought against the advice of the prophet Samuel and sinned against God (1 Sam 14,15). Since he threw David out of his court, little had gone well for him, and now he faced the largest ever army of Philistines, arraigned in battle in the valley of Jezreel, a wide fertile valley near Mount Gilboa in the north of Israel. It was the worst place for a battle, given that the Israelites were used to fighting in the hills and the Philistines were used to the plains.

Once the action started, the Philistines with their chariots were triumphant in the battle in the wide plains of Jezreel, and forced the Israelites to flee 'to the hills' (31:1). With the army in disarray, the Philistines ran rampant over the Israelites, killing many people including Saul's son Jonathan, the natural heir to his throne and the close friend of David. Other sons of Saul were killed as prophesied in 1 Sam 28:19 (31:2), but not all Saul's sons died. One son named Ishbosheth remained who Saul's supporters attempted to make king in his place, after Saul's death (see 2 Sam 2:8f.).

Saul was still standing after the rout of the army and the death of his sons, having attempted to lead his army in this shambles of a lost cause. In verse 3 Saul is described as badly wounded by the archers, but this is not a straightforward translation. Ancient authorities, including those of the Greek Old Testament called the 'Septuagint' (available in Jesus' day), suggest that Saul was shot by the archers 'in the stomach', meaning he could well have endured a very painful few hours before his death; but Saul would not want to have been captured. The ancient story of Samson (Judges 16) was testimony enough of the cruelty of the Philistines towards captured Israelite leaders.

In the end, Saul's tragic end took place on the field of battle. He 'fell on his sword' (31:4), to the horror of his armour bearer. The story is straightforward enough, but what really happened is not clear, as we will discover when we read the report of the story in 2 Samuel 1 (we will discuss this in our next study). We can understand why Saul should want to 'fall on his sword' however, and today, we might even hold the idea that it was honourable. In scripture, however, it was not: it was sacrilege for a man to commit suicide even in battle, because to do this was to take one's own life, an act of 'self' murder forbidden by the '10 commandments'. Saul, in truth, had long since departed from the Lord's ways, and his apparent suicide denied the possibility of any glory from his captivity and death, as we find in the story of Samson, for example! Saul died a frightened and lonely man.

The result of the whole battle was that the Philistines were rampant over northern Israel, occupying many towns and cities and causing widespread panic and disruption to the life of Israel. Saul left the kingdom in as bad a state, if not worse, than when he found it; and Israel's first King was a failure.

In this story we see the outworking of God's justice upon a man who went his own way, having been chosen by God. The end is tragic, and pathetic. The Old Testament is full of stories of the leadership of Israel by great people, but this is not one of them. It teaches us that when leadership strays from God's path, for whatever reason, it will ultimately fail and painfully drag God's people down. Examples of this are all too evident today, even within

the church. Samuel always hoped Saul would repent and turn to the Lord again; but Saul was hopelessly self-centred; and Saul always hoped that Samuel would relent and turn up to 'save the day', but he did not. When there is such a breakdown between God's leaders, little good will come of it.

The story of the end of Saul is not really the climax of the book of 1 Samuel, neither is it a glorious ending for Israel's first King in heroic defeat. It is the unpleasant backdrop to God's greater plan for the salvation of His people through the reign of David (as we see at the beginning of 2 Samuel) and this will show the way for His salvation of all people through Jesus Christ. The only thing to do with bad leadership is to recognise it and allow it to come to an end, keeping our eyes fixed on God's greater purposes.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What was your initial reaction to the death of Saul? Does the study change your view?
2. Look back through the book of 1 Samuel and assess the battles Saul fought. How many did he lose and how many did he win?
3. How can we identify bad leadership in the church today. Does the story of Saul help us? In what ways?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Saul's death comes like a great relief at the end of the book of 1 Samuel. It is as if his presence has held back God's work through his chosen, David, for many years, yet Saul's longevity meant that David learned much before he became king, and his time was well used in God's service. Frankly, the story is a real mystery, and is full of many questions about how and why God should work in such ways. All of the questions are worth pursuing!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *There are times and places for things to happen in our lives, and we do not always spot them until they are upon us. Sometimes, though, we know what will come if we stop and think about it. Take time to pray and ask the Lord to show you the consequences of where your life is heading at the moment.*
- *Investigate the wars going on in the world at the moment, and together with others, discuss whether God's will may come out of any of them.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, You are the King of my life; You rule my mind, You care for my feelings, You plan for my life, You direct my conscience, You advocate me to the Father, and You deliver my soul from death. Glory be to You. AMEN