

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, I searched and I found You there in the midst of Your creation, waiting to be found. Forgive me for straying from the pathways of the soul and failing to look, and thank You for reminding me to search. Lead me on to discover more about You and Your glorious work throughout the world. Alleluia, AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Internet Church

Pray that God will be able to use the internet and the internet church facilities currently available and planned for the greater glory of His Kingdom and for the good of all.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those you know who endure personal tragedy*
- *Give thanks for rest and sleep*
- *Pray for the people and government of Afghanistan*

Meditation

Lord, I learn about You through opening my heart
To appreciate what is happening all around me.

Through smiling, and seeing other people smile too;
through silence in the face of deep suffering.

Through watching a child learn to walk;
through steadying the hand of an elderly person.

Through eating a meal with friends and family
through sharing what I have with those who have less.

Through listening to the song of birds;
through enjoying the rhythm of a popular song.

Through finding faith and hope and love;
through resting in peace because I know my Lord.

Bible Study - 1 Samuel 31:8-13

⁸ *The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹ They cut off his head, stripped off his armour, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the houses of their idols and to the people. ¹⁰ They put his armor in the temple of Astarte; and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.*

¹¹ *But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹² all the valiant men set out, traveled all night long, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. They came to Jabesh and burned them there. ¹³ Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.*

Review

The end had come for Saul, and he lay dead on the battlefield. The final six verses of 2 Samuel describe the result of Saul's final battle with the Philistines; the triumphant and gory celebrations of the victorious army of the Philistines, and the brave actions of the men of Jabesh-gilead in retrieving their fallen leader in order to give him as dignified a burial as possible. It is a sad story.

In the clearing up of the battle, the victorious soldiers exercised their rights of pillage. They 'stripped the dead' and took what they could for themselves. The great prize of war, however, was to find the evidence of their comprehensive victory; the body of their enemy Saul and also his sons, the dynastic Israelite heirs whose death they believed would give them safety from swift vengeance. When they were found, the details are gory. Saul's head was cut off and his armour removed from his body. His head, body and armour were then used to herald the Philistine victory in different ways. Although verse 9 in our translation does not say so directly, the implication behind the Hebrew is that Saul's head was carried around Philistia to bring 'good news' to the 'houses of their idols and the people' (v9). It sounds horrible to us, but it was quite normal in those days; David had cut off Goliath's head and paraded it around Israel as a sign of his victory (1 Sam 17:51ff). Especially important to any people would be the display of victory at their religious temples; for the Philistines, this was the temple of their god Dagon where Sampson had met his end (Judges 16:23) and where the Ark of the Covenant had been displayed after an earlier Israelite defeat (1 Sam 5:2ff). We do not know what then happened to his head.

The armour was eventually placed in a 'temple of Astarte'. Although it does not say where this is, it would not have been in Philistia where Dagon was worshipped. Astarte (or Ashtarothe) was a Canaanite female goddess of war, and temples to her have been discovered in northern Israel in the regions where the battle was fought, so this is likely to have been the destination of the armour. It would have served to display to the Israelite communities still living in that area (Zebulun, Naphtali, Issachar) that the Philistines were in charge. Saul's body was placed on the wall of Beth-shan, a town/city at the intersection of the Jezreel valley and the Jordan valley, a prominent cross-road for trade even in those days. The display of the body was the fulfilment of the curse uttered by Goliath in his challenge to David (1 Sam 17:44). The display was also a further indignity, for Saul had feared 'sport' with his body in his last moments (1 Sam 31:4).

The men of Jabesh-gilead had much to thank Saul for, and came to Beth-shan to recover his body. Saul had saved them from the Ammonites (1 Sam 11) in his first act as King, and they now repaid a debt of thanks. What is extraordinary is the way they dealt with Saul's body as described in verse 12. The culture of the Israelite people was that the dead be buried, so that their souls might exist in Sheol, the place of the dead, which was presumed to be 'under' the earth. In our story here, the men of Jabesh-gilead 'burned' Saul's body (31:12) and those of his sons; it was an apparently sacrilegious act. There has been much debate about this, and some believe that burning was out of the question for Israelites, so they seek to find a different way of translating the Hebrew (some versions have 'they anointed his body'). However, I believe that the original understanding is correct, and that despite the ethical horror of cremation, they burned Saul as a desperate act of kindness to prevent his body being used as a trophy of war again. Having been burned, they could bury Saul's bones and avoid any further retribution on the part of the Philistines.

This is a sad tale which illustrates a long history of wars between the Israelites and the Philistines, but despite the heroics of the men of Jabesh-gilead, Saul's end was not glorious. To die, be burned and buried in such a fashion was probably regarded with

distain by God's people in later generations, and an indication of the sins of the man who was the first to be anointed leader of God's people.

In truth, Saul's end was not itself significant for the greater plan of God presented by the book of Samuel. The story is set against, and enables, the rise of David; the man who would become the King that Saul could never be; and our story indicates the work that David would have to do to build the nation of Israel again. In later years, a greater 'Son of David' would have to fight against a greater evil in order to bring salvation to the whole world.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. The details of the end of the battle are unpleasant. What spiritual truths can you find from them in the context of the whole story of Saul's death?
2. The men of Jabesh-gilead burnt Saul instead of burying him. Is it ever right to go against what we believe to be 'God's law' in order to be expedient?
3. Consider the wider story of the book of Samuel. Why did David not 'come to the rescue' in this battle, to take the glory of victory and the crown?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This story is a sad conclusion to the Kingship of Saul, a man who was evidently suitable when he was chosen but proved to be inadequate for the task as time went by. Sadly, it is not clear in 1 Samuel why Saul fell as he did. We have some stories, but would love to know more. Too often we choose people for high office and then come to regret the choice. Certainly, God's people should ensure that one who fails as he did is removed from office, but cared for.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Take the opportunity to scan back through the story of Saul and look again at his rise and fall from grace (1 Samuel 9f.). What does this teach you about the leadership of God's people today?*
- *Saul had to fight against many enemies of Israel in order to keep the infant nation of Israel together. Make a list of the enemies you face, physical and spiritual, in your journey of life.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, deliver me from all evil, I pray. Cleanse me, for my thoughts and deeds have been corrupted; liberate me, for an enemy has ensnared my path and darkened my way, and lead me to liberty because Satan has been defeated on Calvary and I have found life through You! Thank You, Lord Jesus; AMEN