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Sha'ul Takes His Own Life
First Samuel 31:1-13
and First Chronicles 10:1-14

Sha'ul takes his own life DIG: Why does Sha'ul ask his armor-bearer to kill him? Why did the armor-bearer refuse Sha'ul's request (Second Samuel 1:14)? When then did each take his own life? Why do the Philistines cut off Sha'ul's head (17:51)? Why do the Philistines put Sha'ul's armor in their temple (see **5:2 and 21:9)? Why do the people of Jabesh Gilead risk harm to retrieve the bodies of Sha'ul and his sons (**see **Chapter 11)? Is Sha'ul in heaven or hell (to see link click Bv – Sha'ul and the Medium at Endor)? Why?**

REFLECT: As part of their witness as believers the Puritans stressed the importance of "dying well." What relation between "living well" and "dying well" is typified by Sha'ul's life? By Y'honatan's life? Do you think suicide is an unpardonable sin? Y'honatan took to heart the words of the LORD; Sha'ul took to heart his own sword. What will you take to heart from this first book of Samuel? Sha'ul began his reign so well, so promising, but he didn't finish well. How do you want to finish your life. What will be your legacy be?

1011 BC

The Philistine threat hung like a dark cloud over **Isra'el** throughout **First Samuel** almost from the beginning **(First Samuel 4:1-11),** and the end had not come until now. **The Philistines** attacked **the Israelites** on **Mount Gilboa**, which lay at the head of the great east-west Valley of Esdraelon, below Galilee. Its loss by Isra'el enabled the Philistines to penetrate to the Jordan and even beyond.

The Death of Sha'ul and His Three Sons: Now the Philistines fought against Isra'el, as **they** had done at the beginning of **Sha'ul's** reign **(First Samuel 13:5)**. **Sha'ul's** divine commission had been to save **Isra'el** from **their** hand **(First Samuel 9:16)**, but ironically **he** died at **their** hand, and thus a

reflection of **his** failure. **The Israelites** were no match for **the Philistine** army with its large divisions and its many chariots. **The Philistines** preferred to fight on level ground because **they** depended on **their** chariots, while **Isra’el** tried to lure them into the hill country around **Mount Gilboa**. **Isra’el** was outnumbered and outclassed. But even if **they** had boasted superior forces, they still would have been defeated. Sha’ul’s hour of judgment had come. Without Samuel’s prayers and **David’s** anointed leadership, the army of Isra’el was destined to defeat.[179]

The Israelites fled before the Philistines, and as all too often under **Sha’ul’s** erratic leadership, **many fell dead on Mount Gilboa (Second Samuel 31:1; First Chronicles 10:1).** This was in stark contrast to **David’s** killing of Goliath that galvanized **the Israelite** army with the result that **the Philistines dead were strewn** along the roadside **(First Samuel 17:52)**.

Samuel’s prophecy was about to be fulfilled. **The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Sha’ul and his sons, and they killed his sons Y’honatan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. Sha’ul’s** youngest son Ish-Bosheth, probably wasn’t present on the battlefield. Once **his sons** were **killed, the Philistines** concentrated **their** efforts to **kill the king of Isra’el** and **the fighting grew fierce around Sha’ul.** With **Sha’ul** helpless and virtually alone, **the Philistines** moved in for the **kill**. **And when the archers overtook him,** and in shooting range**, they wounded him critically.** At that point, **he** was afraid of being tortured before **he** died. Therefore, **Sha’ul said to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and make a mockery of me** while **I** am still living**.” But his armor-bearer was terrified** to lay **his** hand upon **the king, and would not do it.** Since **Sha’ul** was determined to **die** on **his** own terms, **he** had no alternative but to take **his own sword and** fall **on it. When the armor-bearer saw that**

Sha’ul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. Therefore, Sha’ul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and his royal bodyguard **died together that same day (Second Samuel 31:2-6; First Chronicles 10:2-6).**

The Defeat of Isra’el: When the Israelites along the north side of the **valley** of Jezreel **and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Sha’ul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled.** The fact that **the Philistines** were focusing **their** efforts to **kill Sha’ul** and **his** three **sons** allowed many of the **Israelite** soldiers to escape. **And the Philistines came and occupied them (Second Samuel 31:7; First Chronicles 10:7).** The rest of **the Israelites** managed to escape as a result of **the Philistines’** concentration on the pursuit of **Sha’ul**.

Ha’Shem had protected **David** from fighting against **his** own **people** (**to see link click Bt – Achish Sends David Back to Ziglag**). If **David** had been in the battle on **Mount Gilboa**, **he** might have had to fight and kill **his** best friend **Y’honatan** and **the king of Isra’el**. God can do the same for us, even when we don’t know it. **David** didn’t know when **he** was sent back to **Ziglag** that **he** would be spared the agony of fighting against **Y’honatan**, **the king** and **the Israelites**. **ADONAI** is merciful and **He** opens and shuts doors on our behalf. **For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD (Isaiah 55:8).**

The Desecration of the Bodies: The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Sha’ul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. As **David** had earlier **cut off the head** of Goliath, **they** now cut off **the head** of **Isra’el’s king** (don’t think for a minute **they** had forgotten about that national humiliation). **They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the good news** (Hebrew: *basar*, ironically this is word used in proclaiming the Good News of **the Messiah** in **Isaiah 61:1**) in **the temple of their idols and among their people. They put his armor in the temple of their god** of sex and war**, the Ashtoreth, and fastened his** mutilated **body** and **his** severed **head** (**Sha’ul’s** suicide did not in fact prevent **his body** from being abused) **to the wall of Beth Shan in the Temple of Dagon** as a public warning to others **(Second Samuel 5:2-5; Second Samuel 31:8-10** and **First Chronicles 10:8-10).**

The Rescue of the Bodies: When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Sha’ul, all their valiant men (Hebrew: *ish*,

meaning *man*, actually in the singular because they were of one mind) marched fifteen miles **through the night to Beth Shan** (a major city between Gilboa and the Jordan) **and went to Jabesh. Sha'ul** had previously rescued them from the Ammonites **(First Samuel 11:1-11)**. Even though more than thirty years had passed **they** still remembered the good deed that **he** had done. That rescue preceded this rescue and **they took down the bodies of Sha'ul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and took them** back **to Jabesh where they burned them. They took their bones and buried them under a great tamarisk tree at Jabesh.** Cremation is not a Jewish practice, normally only reserved for criminals **(Joshua 7:25)**. Jews do not normally embalm dead bodies and the deceased are usually buried within twenty-four hours of death. So **they** probably **burned their bodies** to prevent the spread of disease since it had been possibly weeks until **they** heard of **Sha'ul's and Y'honatan's** death, retrieved **the bodies**, and brought them back to **Jabesh Gilead**. **And** then **they fasted for seven days (Second Samuel 31:11-13; First Chronicles 10:11-12).**

The two books of Samuel were originally one, and the division of the two was a matter of scribal convenience rather than literary skill. But the death of Sha'ul the first king of Isra'el forms a fitting conclusion to the first book, as the history of David's reign is an appropriate opening to the second.

Sha'ul's legacy: Sha'ul died because he was unfaithful to ADONAI. The accusation of faithlessness is especially severe. The Hebrew word used is *ma'al*, which is normally reserved for serious sin against **God**, often associated with idolatry and carrying with it the **death** sentence. It is the seriousness, rather than the particular kind of sin, that the word implies.[180] **He did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted with a medium for guidance, nor did he inquire of YHVH** but **did what was best in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). So Ha'Shem put him to death and turned the Kingdom over to David son of Jesse (First Chronicles 10:13-14). His** career began with promise, but ended in tragedy; it began with victory, but ended in defeat; it began with hope but ended with despair.[181]

Y'honatan's legacy: As John MacArthur relates in his book, *Twelve Unlikely Heroes,* **Y'honatan** functioned both as a foil to **his father** and **a friend** to **his father's** successor. When **Sha'ul** should have been initiating the attack on **the Philistines**, it was **Y'honatan** who led the charge. When **Sha'ul** was doubtful and disobedient, **Y'honatan** displayed faith and courage. **His** levelheaded response to

his father's violent mood swings and irrational behavior set **him** apart as a striking contrast to **the reckless king**.

Early in **Sha'ul's** reign, **Y'honatan** learned that **his father's** kingdom would never belong to **him**. A typical response to that kind of disappointment would include anger and resentment. But **Y'honatan's** response was far from typical. Rather than fighting against **his** future, **the prince** embraced it – to the extent that **he** became a loyal **friend** to **the man** who would one day be **king** instead of **him**. While **his father** tried to destroy **David**, **Y'honatan** bravely protected **David** and defended **his** reputation – demonstrating heroic loyalty to **him** at every turn. Though **Sha'ul's** legacy is one of disobedience, distrust, and disappointment; the legacy of **Y'honatan** is completely the opposite. Here was **a man** who had every reason in the world to be threatened by **David**, just like **his father** was. Yet **he** let **his** crown go with no remorse and lived for the well-being of **the one** who would take **his** place, as **YHVH** had determined.

Y'honatan's first recorded words revealed **his** absolute faith in **ADONAI's** will and power, when **he** told **his** armor-bearer: **Come, let's go over to the Philistine outpost on the other side . . . perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. Nothing can hinder YHVH from saving, whether by many or a few (First Samuel 14:1** and **6).**

His last recorded words, spoken to **David**, highlight **his** confidence in **ADONAI's** perfect plan for **his** future and for **Isra'el. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Sha'ul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Isra'el, and I will be second to you. Even my father knows this" (First Samuel 23:17).**

Unlike **his** selfish **father**, this noble **prince** was eager to obey **YHVH**. So out of the tragic account of **Sha'ul** comes the legacy of **Y'honatan's** heroic selflessness and unwavering friendship. **Yeshua** said: **Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends (Yochanan 15:13).** Without question, **Y'honatan** would have sacrificed **his** life in death to protect **his friend**. This is the ultimate sacrifice. **Y'honatan chose** this sacrifice of gladly giving up all personal honor, power and position for **a friend** who takes those things because it is **the Lord's** will to do so.[182]