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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 (see Second Samuel 1:14)? When then did each take his own life? Why do the Philistines cut off Sha'ul's head (see 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 [Dq - 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 Jonathan's life? Do you think suicide is an unpardonable sin (see my commentary on The Life of Christ [Em - Whoever Blasphemes Against the Holy Spirit Will Never Be Forgiven](#))? Was Sha'ul numbered with the righteous of the TaNaKh? Why? Why not? Jonathan 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? What will be your legacy be?

**Sha'ul's career began with promise, but ended in tragedy;
it began with victory, but ended in defeat;
it began with hope but ended with despair.**

The Philistine threat hung like a dark cloud over **Isra'el** throughout **First Samuel** almost from the beginning (**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 (**13:5**). **Sha'ul's** divine commission had been to save **Isra'el** from **their** hand (**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, **Philistines** still would have been defeated. However **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.⁴³⁹ **The Israelites fled before the Philistines, and as all too often under Sha'ul's erratic leadership, many fell dead on Mount Gilboa (2 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 (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 Jonathan, 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 (First 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 engaged 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.

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 news 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 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 (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 Jonathan's death, retrieved the bodies, and brought them back to Jabesh Gilead. And then they fasted for seven days (2 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.⁴⁴⁰ 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.⁴⁴¹

Jonathan's legacy: As John MacArthur relates in his book, *Twelve Unlikely Heroes*, Jonathan 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 Jonathan who led the charge. When Sha'ul was doubtful and disobedient, Jonathan 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, Jonathan 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 Jonathan'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, Jonathan 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 Jonathan 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.

Jonathan'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 (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"** (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 **Jonathan'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 (John 15:13)**. Without question, **Jonathan** would have sacrificed **his** life in death to protect **his friend**. This is the ultimate sacrifice. **Jonathan 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.⁴⁴²

*Dear heavenly **Father**, what an awesome, loving and wise **Father You** are! There is much to learn from **Sha'ul's** fall from grace. **You** are full of steadfast love, and have given us the freedom to choose our actions. But we are not free to choose the consequences of our actions. Even though we may try to minimize or even justify a sinful decision, just like **Sha'ul**, we will eventually have to face the consequences. May **You** heavenly **Father** give us the foresight to carefully weigh the outcome of our choices. **Your** graciously offer the wonderful gift of salvation to all who come to **You** in love. **Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28) But whoever did receive Him, those trusting in His name, to these He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).***

*But that does not make anyone immune to the consequences of their choices, for **Your** gracious offer must be received with a heart of love (**John 14:23**) that trusts and obeys **You** as their **Lord** and **Savior**. **For if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart it is believed for righteousness, and with the mouth it is confessed for salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever trusts in Him will not be put to shame."** (**Romans 10:9-11**)*

Do not be deceived - God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that he also shall reap. For the one who sows in the flesh will reap corruption from the flesh. But the one who sows in the Ruach will reap from the Ruach eternal life (Gal 6:7-8). Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, and drive out demons in Your name,

*and perform many miracles in Your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Get away from Me, you workers of lawlessness (Mt 7:21-23)! Thank **You** for **Your** wonderful gift of salvation. I choose to love and to follow **You** - no matter what pain or earthly trials that brings me; for someday I will then go to be with **You** in **Your** eternal home in heaven. In **Messiah's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*