

Sha'ul Takes His Own Life

First Samuel 31:1-13

and First Chronicles 10:1-14

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 (see Bt - Sha'ul and the Medium at Endor)?

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 (see my commentary on The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer)? 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? What will 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 Sam 31:1; First Chron 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 Israel 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 Israel: 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.

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 Israel'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 (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 (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 (2 Samuel 31:11-13; 1 Chron 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 Israel 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