

I Samuel 27, 29, 31
“David’s Banishment & Saul’s Demise”

Introduction:

These chapters bring the story of Saul and David to a conclusion. They record how God brought the reign of Saul to an end, and how God set the stage for the reign of David in his place. The author continues the contrast between Saul and David by showing that whereas God was against Saul and brought about the promised punishment that Saul had earned, God was graciously with David to bless him and give him success in everything he did, even giving the future king time to learn about the role that he would soon receive so that he could succeed in it.

I. David’s Departure to Philistia: (27:1-7)

In this chapter we read how David fled for a second time to king Achish in Gath, and for the second time he misled the Philistine king. Previously, out of fear of what the king would do to him, David had escaped by deceiving the king into thinking that he had gone insane (ch.21), and this time he deceived the king into thinking of him as a trusted ally, and convinced him to assign David to a relatively distant outpost, where he could operate free of Achish’s scrutiny. From that outpost David raided non-Israelite peoples to acquire food and other provisions for his men and their families. While doing this he was telling Achish that he was raiding the Israelites and their allies (like the Kenites). These details make it clear that David was never in a quandary regarding where his loyalties lay. David’s purpose throughout his sojourn in Philistia was to give Achish the impression that he had genuinely switched his loyalty to the Philistines. Throughout the accounts of David’s dealings with the Philistines, we read that by God’s providence, David continually outwitted them, advancing God’s agenda while thwarting theirs.

Some of the important details this chapter illustrates are:

- David’s ingenuity and ability to succeed in the most hostile of situations
- That during this time David was busy learning from the Philistines regarding their techniques in military engagements, as well in how they administered their kingdom (a kingdom that was more culturally advanced at this time than Israel was).

First Chronicles 12:1-7 gives a parallel account of this time in David’s life. It provides a list of the men who were with David in Ziklag.

In verse one we read, *“And David said in his heart, ‘Now I shall perish someday by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape to the land of the Philistines; and Saul will despair of me, to seek me anymore in any part of Israel. So I shall escape out of his hand.’”* After David’s confrontation with Saul had ended (recorded in the latter portion of chapter 26), he begrudgingly came to the conclusion that as long as he remained in the land of Israel, Saul would continue to pursue him. He decided that the only way to put an end to Saul’s pathological pursuit of him was to move to the land of the Philistines. This move would accomplish two important objectives:

- it delivered David and his men from any possible danger from Saul
- it ingratiated him with the Philistines, so he had no further need to fear them

Some interpreters have suggested that David's choice here is evidence that his faith in Yahweh was beginning to waver at this point, and that his choice contradicted what David himself had earlier said to Abishai during their encounter with Saul, that God would deal with Saul in His way and in His time (26:10). Therefore, these interpreters conclude that David was taking his safety into his own hands rather than trusting in God. However, there is nothing in the text itself that supports this conclusion. Having faith in God's protection does not mean that one is not responsible to act wisely in one's situation. What David concludes here is perfectly harmonious with what he said during his confrontation with Saul, for when David confronted Saul, David had said that Saul's pursuit was going to ultimately result in David and his men departing from the land of Israel (26:18-20), and he said this shortly after having made his statement of faith in Yahweh to Abishai. Since David came to the conclusion that Saul's promise not to pursue him couldn't be trusted, he went ahead and did precisely what he had suggested he would do. That he made a wise choice is illustrated in the notation in verse four where we are told that Saul only gives up on the idea of pursuing David when he learns that David had gone to Philistia (vs.4). It is likely that one of the things that might have motivated David's decision here was that it was becoming more and more impractical for David and his men to stay on the run since their families were with them.

There are some linguistic details to note in this verse. The Hebrew word translated as "*destroyed*" literally means to sweep something away (12:25; 26:10) and conveys the idea of perishing. And the Hebrew expression translated as "*there is nothing better for me than*" was an idiom that conveyed the idea of slipping away, and in it is the same verb that is used again in the verse and translated as "*escape*", making this an emphatic statement about getting away from mortal danger (II Chron.16:7; Jer.32:4; 34:3; 38:18, 23; Dan.11:41). Therefore, this verse makes it clear to the reader that the only reason for David's departure from Israel was Saul's unjust and relentless pursuit. This would guard against the original readers thinking that David had divided loyalty.

Thus, with David's departure from Israel, the cycle of the Saul/David story is complete. David had come into Saul's life in large part through the Philistines (ch.17), and now he moved out of Saul's life through the agency of the Philistines. The difference is that when David entered Saul's life, he did so as an ally of Saul, now David would become an ally (in appearance only) of Saul's enemies.

In verse two we read, "*Then David arose and went over with the six hundred men who were with him to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath.*" So, David and his men, along with their families, went to the Philistine city of Gath, some twenty-five miles northwest of the Desert of Ziph which had been the area they were dwelling in during the time of Saul's pursuit. The process of moving his men and their families the twenty-five miles to Gath would have involved considerable hardship for the entire group, but having domestic stability for a time made the trip worth the effort.

As on the previous occasion when David fled to Gath, he came before the Philistine king of that city who is identified as “*Achish*”. It is likely that Achish was not a personal name, but rather a royal title among the Philistines. This is supported by the fact that the name “*Achish*” seems to have been attested as a Philistine royal name at a later date in Assyrian records of the seventh century B.C. This would make the title “*Achish*” similar to the title “*pharaoh*” that is applied to many different individual Egyptian rulers in the Old Testament. And this also may not have been the same individual who was identified as “*Achish*” in the account of David’s earlier trip to Gath (ch.21). This seems to be why this man was identified here not only as “*Achish*”, but also by the personal name “*son of Maach*”.

One of the reasons that this king welcomed David, and his predecessor did not, was because this time David did not come alone, but was accompanied by an experienced fighting force of 600 men. This would have made David and his men a possible powerful resource that would enhance the strength of the king of Gath because they could be employed as mercenaries. Also, the first time David had entered Gath he had come from the royal household in Gibeah—a circumstance that would have appeared threatening to the previous king Achish, who knew nothing at the time of the conflict that had arisen between Saul and David. However, this time David was entering as an infamous outlaw—a would-be usurper of Saul’s throne who was so feared by the Israelite monarch that he had repeatedly sent thousands of men into the desert to track David down. The Philistines’ awareness of this conflict is evidenced by their timing a raid on Israel to coincide with one of Saul’s forays against David (23:27–28).

In verse three we read, “*So David dwelt with Achish at Gath, he and his men, each man with his household, and David with his two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the Carmelitess, Nabal’s widow.*” Family members accompanying David into Philistine territory included his two wives: Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail of Carmel. No doubt David took them along to protect them from persecution and abuse at the hands of Saul and his sympathizers, because David had learned the hard way what Saul would do to wives he left behind in Israelite territory (25:44).

Although the exact location of Gath has not been firmly established, the current view of scholars at this time places Gath five miles south of Ekron in the northern Shephelah. Its pre-Philistine existence is attested in the El Amarna letters and was traditionally tied to the Canaanite Anakim (Josh.11:22).

In verses four and five we read, “*And it was told Saul that David had fled to Gath; so he sought him no more. Then David said to Achish, ‘If I have now found favor in your eyes, let them give me a place in some town in the country, that I may dwell there. For why should your servant dwell in the royal city with you?’*” We are told specifically here that after learning of the flight of David and his group to Gath, Saul “*no longer searched for him*”. As with all David’s previous choices, God providentially caused this one to lead to David’s further success.

Based on the cultural standards of the day, David’s conversations with Achish that are recorded in these chapters always reflect the highest standards of

politeness and protocol. But the reader is meant to observe that David's words to Achish always fall short of full disclosure and precise language.

David's words about finding favor in the eyes of Achish would imply that he was inquiring if Achish had come to trust him, and thus this conversation took place sometime after David and his men first came to Gath. Hiding his true reasons under a cloak of humility, David approached Achish and told him he was unworthy to live in the royal city with the mighty king. He suggested that instead of living in the prestigious city of Gath, he requested that a place be assigned to his group of exiles. As David spoke with Achish, he was not asking for a certain city in which to dwell, because the Hebrew phrase does not refer to any specific location. Instead, the Hebrew phrase means he was simply asking for "*a safe haven*" for he and his men. Among other things, having their own place would mean that David and his men could worship Yahweh in harmony with the instructions of the Law of Moses in their own community, something that would be difficult to do in the midst of a dense Philistine community. Also, since the size of David's company (counting women and children) would have been over one thousand individuals, this would represent a large enough group to have disrupted life in Gath, which would have created resentment among some of the city's residents. No doubt David was aware of this and recognized the threat it posed to their ability to remain beyond Saul's grasp in Philistia. Furthermore, David and his men would have also wanted some distance between them and this Philistine king who was as much their enemy as their ally. David never forgot how God had ordained a future for him as king in Israel, and in pursuit of that destiny, David would have known that there were things he would need to do that could more easily be done if he was not under the close scrutiny of Achish.

The nature of David's request seems to have been for a land grant. The idea here was that David, and his men were hiring themselves out as mercenaries in return for land that would be given to them. Asking a king for land was not unusual in that era. It was a common feudal practice for a king to give his servants land. This was true in both Israelite and Philistine cultures. And the use of mercenary troops was also quite common in the ancient world (Jer.46:20-21). Very often these men were political fugitives, like David, and their loyalty to a new king was based on their hatred of the ruler who had exiled them (many of the fifth-century B.C. Greek tyrants joined the Persian army after being expelled from their positions and fought against the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon). Thus, Achish's misplaced trust of David was based on the known enmity between David and Saul, but it would be reinforced by the amount of booty which David would bring him from David's raiding expeditions. But for the reader, the irony continues, for David had previously referred to himself as the "*servant*" of Yahweh (23:10-11), of Saul (26:18-19), but now of Achish. The implication to Achish was that David had shifted his allegiance to him, while the reader knows that David's allegiance was always with Yahweh.

In verse six we read, "*So Achish gave him Ziklag that day. Therefore Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day.*" Achish did not just give David some

territory, but in light of the considerable size of David's company, the king gave him the city of Ziklag. Achish was probably both flattered by David's words, and relieved to have an excuse to move that group of foreigners away from his city's food and water resources. Ziklag was approximately twelve miles north of Beersheba, and approximately twenty-five miles southwest of Gath. The city had been designated as a part of Israel's land during the time of the initial conquest of Canaan by Joshua (Josh.15:31), and it was part of the territory given to the tribe of Simeon by God. However, sometime after that, this city and most of the territory that had belonged to Simeon had come to be under the control of the Philistines. This was because, though the city was allotted to the Israelites by Yahweh, they had never actually conquered it. So here in this situation, David's cleverness did what previous military campaigns failed to do; it brought Ziklag into Israelite hands. Thus, David redeemed his time in exile, using it to resume Israel's conquest of Canaan. But at this point, receiving that city would be advantageous mostly because it would place David and his men far enough from Philistine territory that it would allow them to operate without much scrutiny by the Philistine kings.

In this exchange, a relationship of lord and vassal was established between Achish and David. According to the terms of the covenant they made, David pledged loyalty to Achish which would be expressed through giving him a portion of what they gained through raids against Philistine enemies in return for having dominion over Ziklag. The land grant represented a permanent transfer of the city to Israelite control, and through this, Ziklag became the property of the royal family of Judah. The comment "*to this day*" also indicates that this was still true in the time when this book was written.

In verse seven we read, "*Now the time that David dwelt in the country of the Philistines was one full year and four months.*" David used this opportunity not only to escape Saul, but to raid the enemies of Judah, obtain wealth for he and his men, and to give booty to the elders of Judah so he could ingratiate himself to them (30:26). By leaving no survivors, David eliminated any witnesses and thus maintained Achish's trust until the time when he would return to rule in Judah. And David also used this sixteen-month period (from the time of his Philistine sojourn until the death of Saul) to give himself the opportunity to develop even further his combat and leadership skills in preparation for his role as Israel's next king. Ziklag remained David's headquarters until the death of Saul and David's subsequent move to Hebron (II Sam.1:1-2). David and his group apparently entered Gath sometime in 1012 B.C. and stayed there until David ascended to the throne as king of Judah in 1010 B.C.

II. David & His Men Excluded from the Battle with Israel: (29:1-11)

Brief as it is, this chapter is nonetheless exquisitely crafted. The account in it begins and ends at "*Jezreel*" (vs.1, 11). Its repeated use of other key words and phrases, which will be noted as they appear, is impressive. Finally, Achish's triple vindication of David's honor and dependability is spaced evenly throughout (vs.3, 6, 9). And it contributes significantly to the conclusion to the story about both Saul

and David's rise to the throne, for it demonstrates another way in which God providentially guided David's destiny. If David, in any capacity, had fought in the battle for the Philistines in which Saul and his sons died, it would have been virtually impossible for David to have rallied the northern tribes (which were loyal to the house of Saul) to then support him as king.

In verse one we read, "*Then the Philistines gathered together all their armies at Aphek, and the Israelites encamped by a fountain which is in Jezreel.*"

Chronologically, the account in this chapter took place prior to the events recorded in chapter twenty-eight. This is made clear because at the beginning of chapter twenty-eight (vs.4) we were told that the Philistines were already gathered at Shunem, which was forty miles north of Aphek, and thus this account refers to things that happened prior to the Philistines reaching the place where they would be facing the army of Saul in preparation for battle. The narrative takes us to events that happened a few days prior to the Philistines' arrival at Shunem. At this point David and his men were still among the Philistine forces who were camped by the spring in Jezreel. On the eve of the battle the Philistines had rendezvoused at Aphek, precisely where they had defeated Israel and captured the ark about ninety years earlier (4:10-11). Therefore, this location is associated with the first and last battles between Israel and Philistia that are recorded in First Samuel.

There are a number of different sites named Aphek in various parts of Canaan. This one is qualified by its identification with a spring in the Jezreel Valley. This Aphek was in the southern Sharon plain and specifically at the site of the source of the Yarkon River.

In Verse two we read, "*And the lords of the Philistines passed in review by hundreds and by thousands, but David and his men passed in review at the rear with Achish.*" Linguistically, it is helpful to understand that the title "*lords*" that is used here, referred to the five kings of the Philistine confederacy. And that among the troops of Achish, lord of Gath, were David and his men. Finally, the use of the terms "*hundreds*" and "*thousands*" implies that the Philistines were moving in a very orderly manner in set columns.

The Philistines, up to this point, had been traveling through territory they controlled. As they did so, David and his men accompanied Achish king of Gath, at the rear of the Philistine army. The personal involvement of the Philistine "*lords*" demonstrates their perception that the present battle was a crucial one.

In verse three we read, "*Then the princes of the Philistines said, 'What are these Hebrews doing here?' And Achish said to the princes of the Philistines, 'Is this not David, the servant of Saul king of Israel, who has been with me these days, or these years? And to this day I have found no fault in him since he defected to me.'*" Most commentators distinguish between the titles, "*lords*" (vs.2) and "*princes*" (vs.3). However, this is a misreading of the text, for if one evaluates what we read in regard to those designated by these titles (comparing verses 3-4 with verse 6) one can find no objective reason for making a distinction between these titles. Instead, the better conclusion is that these titles are synonymous, both referring to the five kings of the Philistine city-states. The four kings who speak here, refer to the

Israelites as “*Hebrews*”, a title that was normally used in a disparaging way by the nations that surrounded the Israelites. The origin of this term seems to suggest that it previously had a more generic meaning, similar to the terms “*Habiru*” and “*Apiru*” in Akkadian and Egyptian texts, where it was applied to a people without leadership or a defined political state (a state that would have applied to David and his men at that time). So, when the other Philistine kings learned that these Israelites were in their ranks, they immediately raised some serious questions about their presence, as they were understandably wary of them. After all, in a previous battle against Saul and the Israelites, the Philistines had allowed some Hebrews who had been under their protection to join their army, and the results had been catastrophic. Hebrew soldiers wearing Philistine markings and armed with Philistine weapons had turned against their hosts in the heat of battle and had begun killing them (14:21). The chaos and confusion that resulted from that situation had caused the Philistines to kill many of their own men (14:20). Though Achish was undoubtedly aware of that military disaster, he was convinced that David and his men would not recreate it. After all, the Philistine king had observed David and his men for a significant time, during which he had received gifts of plunder from him that Achish believed had come from Israelite settlements. Through it all, Achish had found no fault in David. In fact, Achish was so confident of David’s loyalty that he would make David his bodyguard for life (28:2). The Hebrew expression translated as “*these days, or these years*” refers to a period of a year and longer, and this complements 27:7 which states that David was with the Philistines for a year and four months. Achish’s statement about David not being at fault indicates that the king was not aware of David’s pro-Judean raids from Ziklag that were written about in the latter portion of chapter twenty-seven.

In verse four we read, “*But the princes of the Philistines were angry with him; so the princes of the Philistines said to him, ‘Make this fellow return, that he may go back to the place which you have appointed for him, and do not let him go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become our adversary. For with what could he reconcile himself to his master, if not with the heads of these men?’*” Despite Achish’s confidence in David, the other kings of the Philistines outvoted him, forbidding David to fight at their side against Saul, for they were understandably afraid that in the heat of battle David would turn on them and instead fight for Israel. The idea of them outvoting Achish is rooted in the political structure of the Philistines. They were a confederation of five city-states, with each city having its own king. Therefore, there was no single king over the entire kingdom. Also, no king of one city had any direct authority over any of the other cities. It was a voluntary and profitable relationship for all five cities. Therefore, the other kings could not require Achish to send David away, they could only state their hostility to the idea of him remaining among them. This verse tells us that these other Philistine kings were angry with Achish for endangering the lives of their soldiers by putting “*the servant of Saul*” (vs.3) in the Philistine army. These kings recognized that David might have a motive for betraying his Philistine hosts, the desire to regain his former master’s favor. The Hebrew, like the English translation

is unclear concerning whom the Philistine lords were angry with. Grammatically, the pronoun could refer to Achish or David. However, the context suggests the other four kings were angry with Achish for what they saw as his stupidity. They specifically suggest that if David was allowed to stay among them, he might take their heads as trophies for Saul. Also, the repetition in the verse of the title “*princes of the Philistines*” may suggest that there was a conference among them, after which they spoke to Achish.

In verse five we read, “*Is this not David, of whom they sang to one another in dances, saying: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?’*” The wording “*sang to one another*” refers to antiphonal singing (two distinct groups singing back and forth in response to each other). This is the third time the words of this chant have been quoted in this book (the previous times being 18:7; 21:12). Originally these words served as a mark of distinction for David and a source of Saul’s jealousy and hatred toward him. Among the Philistines, the chant is used as a reminder and a warning that David cannot be trusted to serve Achish loyally. The chant certainly demonstrated that David had proven to be a dangerous opponent for the Philistines. Unlike Saul, these Philistines took the chant as a celebration of solidarity between David and Saul, sharing credit for success in military campaigns. Therefore, it is understandable that they would be uncomfortable with someone with that reputation being in their ranks.

In verse six we read, “*Then Achish called David and said to him, ‘Surely, as the LORD lives, you have been upright, and your going out and your coming in with me in the army is good in my sight. For to this day I have not found evil in you since the day of your coming to me. Nevertheless the lords do not favor you.’*” Achish was not willing to risk the Philistine alliance over David, and so he went to David and told him about the concern that the other kings had about him. But he also assured David of his personal confidence in him. To assure David of the truth of what he was about to say, he took a solemn oath in the name of David’s God. This is the first time in this chapter that the covenant name of God is used by anyone, and ironically it is used by the pagan Philistine king. The best explanation for why this king made reference specifically to Yahweh is that the oath “*as Yahweh lives*” was to show that Achish had respect for David as an honorable man, and that the oath reflected David’s (not Achish’s) devotion to Yahweh that Achish believed would compel David to act justly toward him. Achish then went on to give an effusive affirmation of David’s service record. David had proven himself reliable and a profitable ally (27:9). Achish found no evil in David. However, though he expressed that he would be personally pleased to have David fight at his side, he was not going to resist the will of the other Philistine kings.

In verse seven we read that Achish said to David, “*Therefore return now, and go in peace, that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines.*” Having affirmed his personal approval of David, Achish then gave David two brief orders: “*return*”, specifically to Ziklag, and “*go in peace*”, then Achish explained what he wanted to accomplish by David doing these things, “*that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines*”. He wanted David to act immediately to calm the concerns that his

presence had aroused among his fellow rulers. For the reader, ironies abound in Achish's relationship with David. A study of the author's portrayal of the Philistine king suggests that Achish was intended to serve simultaneously as a type and a foil for Saul. Both kings made David their personal bodyguard (22:14; 28:2); both were impressed with David, particularly with his fighting abilities, yet both ended up removing him from the ranks of their armies; both were responsible for David making his home in southern Judah; and both badly misjudged David. Saul considered David his mortal enemy, yet he was in fact his most loyal subject; Achish considered David his most trusted subject, yet he was in fact his most dangerous enemy. Both kings also made inappropriate use of oaths taken in Yahweh's name (14:39; 29:6). These parallels between Saul and Achish indicate that Saul was indeed a king like those who ruled over the pagan nations that surrounded Israel (8:5).

In verse eight we read, "*So David said to Achish, 'But what have I done? And to this day what have you found in your servant as long as I have been with you, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?'*" The question that must be answered is, was David being sincere or deceptive when he said these words? Linguistically, it is possible to interpret these words to mean that David was expressing genuine disappointment in response to being told that he would not be allowed to fight alongside Achish. However, the overall narrative argues against this and compels the interpreter to conclude that David was being necessarily deceptive. The latter part of chapter seventeen made it clear that David was not serving Achish faithfully but rather was serving his own people instead. David's refusal to kill Saul because he was Yahweh's anointed makes it clear that David's ultimate loyalty was to his God. Therefore, David would never have fought against Saul and Israel. It is almost certain that he intended to do precisely what the Philistine lords were afraid of, he and his men would attack the Philistines from within their own ranks. However, in God's providence, David's path was re-directed. Whatever David was thinking in his own mind, the idea in the narrative is that David's protest was a part of his deception. He would have known had he accepted too readily the king's dismissal of him from fighting that it might give the king the impression that David was not interested in fighting on the king's behalf after all. Inquiring into the nature of his offense against the Philistines, David asked to know what complaints had been raised against him that prevented him from being able to fight against the enemies of Achish, his adopted king. The enemies David said he wanted to fight against were those of "*my lord the king*", words that were intentionally ambiguous. The situation would have led Achish to assume David was referring to Achish as his king. But David was actually thinking secretly of Saul as his lord and king (24:8; 26:17). The Hebrew phrase translated as "*as long as I have been with you*", more literally means "*before you*", and it referred to someone who was in full view of someone else and thus was eligible for critical appraisal. The conclusion is that God used the wisdom of the other Philistine lords to keep David out of the battle.

In verse nine we read, “*Then Achish answered and said to David, “I know that you are as good in my sight as an angel of God; nevertheless the princes of the Philistines have said, ‘he shall not go up with us to battle.’”* Having issued the difficult orders to David, Achish returned to his compliments. For the third time (vs.3, 6) Achish vindicated David’s honor and dependability. The idea that Achish was conveying by referring to David as “*an angel of God*”, was that David was as faithful a servant as one of God’s angels.

In verse ten we read, “*Now therefore, rise early in the morning with your master’s servants who have come with you. And as soon as you are up early in the morning and have light, depart.*” The use of the Hebrew word translated as “*now*” underscores the urgency of Achish’s request to David to return to Ziklag before he needlessly angered the Philistine rulers even further. The words of the Philistine king emphasized that David should leave with his men and return to Ziklag, and that they should depart at first light.

In verse eleven we read, “*So David and his men rose early to depart in the morning, to return to the land of the Philistines. And the Philistines went up to Jezreel.*” The events of this chapter must be viewed as the providential supply of an alibi, absolving David from any involvement in the death of king Saul. This chapter answers any who might have accused David of conspiring with the Philistines to bring about the downfall of the Saulide dynasty. The events indicate that David could not and did not assist the Philistines in armed hostilities against the Israelites or their king. In fact, on the day of Saul’s death David and his men were a hundred miles away killing Amalekites, fulfilling a Torah command that Saul had neglected (15:18–19; Ex.17:15–16; Deut.25:17–19).

Interestingly, the phrase “*return to the land of the Philistines*” reflects the narrator’s judgment that Aphek, though controlled by the Philistines, was not genuinely Philistine territory.

The next chapter (ch.30) will reveal that there was an additional providential reason (beyond keeping David from fighting Saul) that God had in sending David back to Ziklag. Chronologically, the events narrated in this chapter are followed immediately by the events recorded in 28:3-25, and this verse is parallel to the account in I Chronicles 12:19-22.

III. The Philistine Defeat of Israel: (31:1-13)

This chapter and the one that preceded it (ch.30) record events that happened simultaneously. And the story of defeat and death in this chapter is rendered that much more poignant by contrast to the story of God’s provision of rescue and success in the previous chapter. In the far south of the Promised Land, David and his men were engaged in saving their families and all that they had accumulated over the past sixteen months, while in the far north Saul and the Israelite army were perishing (II Sam.1:1–4). While David fought the Amalekites and made them flee before him (30:17), the Philistines fought with and killed Saul and his sons, and they made Israel flee before them. The focus in this chapter is on the death of Saul and his sons. And the way the chapter was written, it is divided into two parts: a

description of the battle itself (vs.1-7), and then an account of the aftermath of the battle (vs.8-13). In a slightly abbreviated form, the same content found in this chapter is repeated in First Chronicles 10:1–12, where it serves as an introduction to the Chronicler’s story of David (which is the content of the rest of that book). In addition, this chapter must be read in light of Samuel’s proclamation to Saul that he and his sons would die the next day. A statement that the prophet had expressed when God raised Samuel’s spirit from the realm of the dead (ch.28). And finally, there is a parallel here with chapter four of this book. The two chapters are the only ones in the book that chronicle a Philistine victory over the Israelites who flee before them. Both narratives record the end of a dynasty. In chapter four it was the end of the priestly dynasty of Eli, and here it is the end of the royal dynasty of Saul.

In verse one we read, “*Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell slain on Mount Gilboa.*” This section resumes the narrative story line of 28:25, and just as Samuel had prophesied (28:19), the Philistines quickly and easily defeated Israel in the broad plains of the Valley of Jezreel where they, with their chariots, had an overwhelming tactical advantage. The fact that so many of Saul’s men were slain on the slopes of Mount Gilboa demonstrates that the Israelite army was quickly forced to flee before a superior Philistine force. Some who fled to the hills may have been seeking to restore order by regaining the high ground in the battle, but without the leadership of Saul’s sons they were quickly cut down. The Hebrew participle translated as “*fought*” would be better translated as “*were fighting*”, because it emphasizes the simultaneous actions of the Philistines over-running the Israelites (ch.30), and David over-running the Amalekite bands that attacked Ziklag. This present scene stands in marked contrast to what happened after David slayed Goliath. The victory that David won by God’s provision galvanized the Israelite army with the result that the Philistines’ dead were strewn along the roadside (17:52). This time, just the reverse was happening.

In verse two we read, “*Then the Philistines followed hard after Saul and his sons. And the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons.*” The dual use of the title “*the Philistines*” and the plural form of the Hebrew verbs convey that the author was presenting that description as the setting for what is said next, specifically that it was in that setting that Saul’s sons were killed. Not content merely to push the Israelites back, the Philistines wanted to bring an end to the dynastic family that had caused them so much trouble over the past forty years (Acts 13:21). Now at last they scored a dramatic success: Saul’s three oldest sons all died at the hands of the Philistines. In this verse we find the only reference in this book to Saul’s son Malchishua. The only other references to him in the OT are in genealogical citations in the book of First Chronicles (8:33; 9:39). There is no mention of it here, but one of Saul’s sons survived who was not present at this battle, Ishbosheth (II Sam.2:8, where he is mentioned for the first time).

In verse three we read, “*The battle became fierce against Saul. The archers hit him, and he was severely wounded by the archers.*” The verse informs us that some

Philistine archers overtook a fleeing Saul and inflicted him with a mortal wound. The text implies that Saul knew that his time to die had come (which he had been anticipated because of Samuel's prophecy). The Philistines were quickly advancing toward him and would be upon him within minutes. The narrative further suggests that though Saul himself did not know that his wound would be fatal, he did know that his wound would not allow him to escape from the battlefield.

In verse four we read, *"Then Saul said to his armorbearer, 'Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me'. But his armorbearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword and fell on it."* Saul's plea to his armor-bearer was not rooted in the fear that the Philistines would kill him right away, but what they would do to him if they took him alive. In that era, it was common for captured kings to be mutilated and subjected to a life of humiliation. Among the things that would be done to important captured prisoners were putting out someone's eyes, cutting off their thumbs and big toes, and other body parts. As a sign of their shame and dishonor, such prisoners were doomed to spend miserable years begging and fighting for scraps under the triumphant king's table (Judg.1:6-7) or displayed in public places for whatever abuse passersby might invent. Torturous practices were continued by the Babylonians, Assyrians and Persians, and their literature is full of the gruesome acts performed on captured enemies. Also, Saul would have been aware of what the Philistines had done to Samson after they took him prisoner (Judg.16). Therefore, fearing that he might be found by the Philistines and slowly tortured to death, Saul asked his armor-bearer to kill him, an order his attendant refused to obey. The fear that the armor-bearer had was righteous, and at the beginning of the Book of II Samuel, it is clarified that it was a fear of killing Yahweh's specially anointed servant (the same fear that kept David from killing Saul). Though some commentators try to build a theological perspective on suicide in this verse, the text itself doesn't provide us with anything objective with which to do this. It was certainly a violation of a taboo in Israel, because it was considered wrong in their culture to commit suicide. Because of this it was an act rarely known among Israelites in the Old Testament. But Saul's death by his own hand climaxed a life which had been led in independence of God, and so doing something morally questionable was not new for him. Others who also chose to do this were:

- Abimelech (Judg.9:54)
- Samson (Judg.16:30)
- Ahithophel (II Sam.17:23)
- Zimri (I Kings 16:18)

There is a definite parallel between Saul and Abimelech, as both accounts contain similar language to ask their armor bearers to slay them. A difference between the two men is that Abimelech seized royal authority on his own, while Saul had been Divinely chosen. However, Saul's eventual choices made him in character, no better than Abimelech. A significant difference between the accounts of Abimelech and Saul are the responses of their armor-bearers. Abimelech's young man willingly killed his ruler (Judg.9:54), but Saul's was unwilling to kill his. Regardless of this

ethical question, the text is clear that the Philistines did in the end kill Saul, since their archers wounded him beyond hope of recovery. Thus, the man who had originally been introduced as the one who would deliver God's people from the hand of the Philistines (9:16), instead met his end by dying at their hands.

There is a different account of what took place when Saul died that is given by an Amalekite youth (II Sam.1:6-10). As to which is correct and why, that will wait until we examine that chapter.

This verse concludes with Saul having lost not only his own life, but he had lost the lives of his sons, and many of the soldiers who fought under him. This establishes that the prophecy expressed by Samuel had now been fulfilled (28:19).

In verses five and six we read, "*And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him. So Saul, his three sons, his armorbearer, and all his men died together that same day.*" In a tragic show of solidarity with his king, Saul's armor-bearer followed his king's example and took his own life. The most tragic aspect of the episode is that Jonathan whose courageous faith led Israel to an earlier victory over the Philistines was now dead as a consequence of his father's sin.

In verse seven we read, "*And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, and those who were on the other side of the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them.*" Twice in this verse we find the phrase "*the men of Israel*", and each time the title refers to two distinct groups. The first time this phrase appears it refers to the Israelite people, and the second time it is used it refers to the Israelite soldiers. The implication in the verse is that when the Israelites who lived in that portion of Israel learned that their king was dead, they abandoned their cities and took to the wilderness as war refugees. The areas affected were the Jezreel valley and the Transjordan territory of Manasseh. Therefore, the immediate consequence of the Philistine victory was that they made deep inroads into Israel's territory. This part of the narrative reveals that at the end of Saul's reign, the Philistines were once again in a dominant position over the majority of Israelite territory, just as they had been at the beginning of Saul's reign. The Philistines controlled the plain of Jezreel and the region along the Jordan River. What remained was that the central hill country to the south was still under Israelite control, and though the Philistines had penetrated beyond the Jordan River during the battle, their incursion was neither so deep or so permanent that it prevented Saul's son Ishbosheth from finding a place there to pull together the remnants of his father's kingdom.

In verse eight we read, "*So it happened the next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa.*" In the latter portion of the previous verse (vs.7) the narrator wrote that following the battle, the Israelites "*forsook the cities and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them*". In light of what the narrator now describes regarding what happened on the following day, we can assume that the Philistines occupied the abandoned towns of Issachar and Manasseh in order to profit as fully as possible

from their military success. No doubt the victorious army looted the hastily abandoned Israelite homes and villages as long as they remained in the area. It was generally part of the overall looting process for the victorious army to return to the battlefield and strip the dead soldiers of the army that they had just defeated. We are told here that in the process of doing this Philistine soldiers came across the corpses of Saul and his three sons on Mount Gilboa. The fact that the bodies of the royal family were left overnight on the battlefield suggests the magnitude of the Israelite defeat. Because it was the custom of the day to make every effort to remove the corpses of such prominent individuals before the enemy could get them (I Kings.22:34–38; II Kings 23:30).

In verses nine and ten we read, “*And they cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and sent word throughout the land of the Philistines, to proclaim it in the temple of their idols and among the people. Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.*” When the Philistines found Saul’s body, they decapitated his corpse. The head of a king was a treasured prize in the ancient world used as a means of boasting of one’s conquests. The Philistines also stripped off Saul’s armor as an additional war prize. After looting the battlefield for treasure and trophies, the Philistines sent messengers to proclaim the news of their victory in the temple of their idols and among their people. It was a major victory for the Philistines because not only had they decisively defeated the Israelite army, but they had also decimated Israel’s dynastic family and gained control of the most strategic portion of a well-travelled trade route.

Two insights come from this verse. One, there is a key observation that the false gods of the Philistines had to be informed about the victory just like the populus, and two the degree of the Philistines’ celebration indicates that they saw Saul as having been a particularly significant adversary who had won some significant engagements against them. The rationale behind why the Philistines placed trophies in their temples was because, in their culture, wars were not only between human armies, but between the competing gods the various peoples worshipped. Placing the war trophies in their temples was a way of acknowledging their gods for the victory these deities were thought to have provided. Also, the narrator, in choosing to use the term “*idols*” to refer to the Philistine gods was being intentionally pejorative. The title “*Ashtoreths*” is plural, and refers to various images of the goddess Ashtaroth, who was understood to be a god of war, and is the same god known by other peoples as Ishtar.

To dismember the body of Saul and leave it unburied was the height of disgrace and shame for the victim, their family, and the nation. Improper burial was popularly thought to jeopardize an individual’s afterlife. And the practice of impaling the bodies of their defeated enemies was commonly used by armies in the ancient Near East. We are told that the naked, decapitated bodies of Saul and his three sons were then sent a few miles east to Beth Shan, a former Israelite village in the Jezreel valley area, where they were fastened to a wall. In this period Beth Shan was either controlled by the Philistines or allied with them. Since it lies in a

commanding position in the Jezreel Valley on a very tall mound, it would have been a perfect place to display their dismembered bodies. The ten-acre mound stands at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley and guarded the junction of two important roads: the east-west road from the Jezreel valley to Gilead, and the north-south road in the Jordan Valley. This town continued as an independent Canaanite enclave into the monarchy period (I Sam.31:10-12) but was incorporated into Solomon's administrative districts (I Kings 4:12). Ironically, what the Philistines did with Saul's body was precisely what Goliath had threatened to do to David's body (17:43-44).

In verses eleven and twelve we read, "*Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and traveled all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth Shan; and they came to Jabesh and burned them there.*" Though most of the Israelites in the region reacted to the Philistine victory with fear and flight, the people of Jabesh Gilead did not. Apparently, the people of Jabesh Gilead were so horrified at the thought of the desecration of the bodies of Saul and his sons, that they decided to intervene by removing their bodies from the wall of Beth Shan. The trek would have been difficult and dangerous, especially at night, since Beth Shan was about fifteen miles away from Jabesh Gilead and one had to ford the Jordan River and enter Philistine-held territory to get there. Those who engaged in this dangerous mission were designated as "*valiant men*" a Hebrew idiom that conveys the idea of one who demonstrates unusual courage (II Sam.11:16). Most likely they travelled by night to increase their chances of avoiding detection (II Sam.2:29, 32; 4:7). Undoubtedly, what motivated the residents of Jabesh Gilead to do this was something that had happened at the beginning of Saul's reign. Saul's first military action had been to rescue the people of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites (11:1–11). So here at this point, at the end of his reign, the grateful people of Jabesh Gilead paid tribute to Saul and his sons by retrieving their bodies and giving them an honorable burial (II Sam.2:4–5).

This event highlights the tragedy of Saul's life, because it reminds the reader of Saul's finest moment early in his career as king, and shows that he began as a man who had the potential to have a positive impact on Israel's history, but because of his wicked, self-oriented choices, his life ended in ruin, and Israel was no better off after his reign than it had been before his reign. It is possible that Saul may have had genealogical ties with individuals within Jabesh Gilead (Judg.21:10–12; 2 Sam 21:12–14).

David would later commend the Gileadites for their heroic act of loyalty to Saul (II Sam.2:5–7).

The choice by the people of Jabesh Gilead to burn the bodies of Saul and his sons brings up the issue of the morality of cremation. Is it sinful, or is it an acceptable alternative to burial? The simple answer is that the Scriptures do not give any specific commandments regarding how one is to deal with a human body after a person dies. There are many narrative examples that indicate (like this one) that a person's body should be treated with respect and honor, but that relates more to the

way something is done to a body and why it is done than how we are to dispose of bodies. Normally in the narrative of the Old Testament, the burning of bodies is presented as a shameful act (Amos 2:1); however here in this passage it is clearly presented as an honorable act. Also, the idea here does not seem to be that burning was seen as the way of disposing of the bodies (since their bones were later buried), but instead it seems that it related to the condition of the bodies after they were retrieved. It is very likely that a significant amount of time had passed since the men had died, and therefore there was concern about disease from the bodies. A second possibility is that the bodies were burned because they were in such terrible condition.

The only ancient peoples in the Near East known to have practiced cremation were the Hurrians of Mitanni and the Hittites (both mid-second millennium). The Israelites normally practiced burial.

As to the morality of the practice, it seems like this is something that each individual is free to determine for themselves, it is neither forbidden as sin, nor are believers encouraged to engage in it.

In verse thirteen we read, *“Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh and fasted seven days.”* Here we are informed that after the bodies were burned, the bones of the four men were removed for burial.

The final association of Saul with a tamarisk tree was possibly a symbolic gesture, made out of consideration for the fact that he had previously conducted royal proceedings under this type of tree (22:6). Saul’s grave was marked by this simple desert growth rather than a palace, capital city or kingdom. The tamarisk grows in sandy soil. It is deciduous and may reach over twenty feet in height, with small leaves that excrete salt. Its bark is used for tanning and its wood for building and making charcoal.

Out of respect for their fallen leaders, the people of Jabesh Gilead fasted seven days for Saul and his sons.

The courageous actions of the people of Jabesh Gilead would not be forgotten by David when he at last came to power (II Sam 2:4-7). And later David would have Saul’s and Jonathan’s bones exhumed and reburied in Benjamin (II Sam.21:11-14).

Conclusion:

Perhaps the fittest conclusion to the story of Saul, as well as the most appropriate transition from First to Second Samuel is the following citation from First Chronicles, *“Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David, son of Jesse”* (10:13–14).

With Saul dead along with three of his heirs, the questions for Israel would be, what’s next? What would be the future of Israel? Finally, would anyone ever be able to lead Israel into glory rather than ruin?