

Lecture #9 – Exposition of I Samuel 27-31

Chapter 27 – David in Philistia – 1059 B.C.

vs. 1-4 – David Departs to Philistia

David again gives into despair and fears that Saul will continue to hunt him. He runs to the same place that he ran to six years¹ before. Just as then, this does not appear to be directed by God but rather David's fear of Saul.

This time there is no suspicion on Achish's part. He welcomes David in. Some speculate it is because they need soldiers for their battles against Saul.² He must believe that David will fight against Saul though there is no evidence that he fought against any people of Israel.

In verse 4 we see that Saul gives up his search for David, likely believing him to be out of reach among the Philistines.

♪ Psalm 18 / II Samuel 22

vs. 5-7 – David Receives Ziklag

☪ I Chronicles 12:1-7

For David's service, he is given the outpost of Ziklag ("winding")³ that on the border with Judah and the Negev wilderness. This becomes his home base until he is crowned king.

Note the time marker in vs. 7 – one year and four months is the total time David was in service to Achish.

vs. 8-12 – David the Mercenary

It would appear that David is acting as a mercenary for Achish. He is supposed to be raiding Judah, but instead is attacking Israel's enemies in the wilderness. Achish receives the spoils of war and believes David has turned against his own people. However, David is playing a con game with him.

Davis makes an interesting observation:

¹ Reese's Chronological Bible

² Israel: From Conquest to Exile by John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb. p. 246.

³ Smith's Bible Dictionary

“Again we have an excellent example of God’s providential preparation of a man. In many respects, David’s time in Philistia was parallel to Moses’ days in Egypt. While Saul’s pursuit of David was fully intended for evil, God meant it for good (cf. Gen. 50:20).”⁴

Chapter 28 – Saul and the Witch at Endor

vs. 1-2 – Philistines Prepare for War

The stage is being set for the coming Philistine offensive against Israel that will be the background for the next few chapters.

David puts himself in a tough position. He and his men are expected to go into battle with Achish as his personal bodyguard. His deception of the past year and four months of playing the enemy of Israel is about to unravel.

vs. 3-25 – Saul at Endor

Give Saul credit where credit is due to him. He did at some point before this attempt to drive out witchcraft from Israel. This campaign is unrecorded in Scripture except here. For commands against witchcraft, see Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:31, 20:27; and Deuteronomy 18:10-12.

We must not overlook Saul’s desperation. The man he fears most, David, has gone over to the enemy. He feels that he and Israel are not match for the coming invasion by the Philistines. It is likely that the Philistines had grown stronger because he had not fought against them as he should because he was so obsessed with David. He has no one left to turn for counsel to since Samuel is gone.

The Philistines are marching far northward into Israel. It is a new strategy as they typically fought against Judah or the other southern/central tribes. They move their forces into the Jezreel Valley, perhaps to divide and conquer. If Saul had been doing his job, they would never have made it this far. Saul has also likely heard that David is with them and fears that David will take his throne with his defeat.

Saul attempted to get God’s direction but too late. He is not acting out of repentance.

Note the three methods that God spoke to men at this time: dreams, Urim and Thummim, and prophets.

A witch is found at Endor (“fountain of the age”)⁵ and Saul goes in disguise to see her. He even swears by God’s name that no harm will come to her!

⁴ Israel: From Conquest to Exile by John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb. p. 247.

⁵ Easton’s Bible Dictionary

There is a lot of debate as to what happens next. Is it really Samuel? Is it all a sham? My opinion is that Samuel really appeared here but at the witch's beckoning. This was completely unexpected by her.

Edersheim writes:

“‘I saw gods’ (or rather, *Elohim*) ‘ascending out of the earth.’ The expression *Elohim* here refers not to a Divine, but simply to a supernatural appearance, indicating its *character* as not earthly. But in that supernatural light she has also recognized her visitor as the king of Israel. Verses 13 and 14 show that Saul had *not* himself seen the apparition. The question whether the vision of the woman was objective or subjective, is really of no importance whatever. Suffice that it was *real*, and came to her *ab extra*.”⁶

He also notes:

“As will be seen, we regard the apparition of Samuel not as trickery by the woman, but as real - nor yet as caused by the devil, but as allowed and willed of God. A full discussion of our reasons for this view would be evidently out of place. Of two things only will we remind the reader: the story must not be explained on our modern Western ideas of the ecstatic, somnambulist, magnetic state (Erdmann), nor be judged according to the standpoint which the Church has now reached. It was quite in accordance with the stage in which the kingdom of God was in the days of Saul.”⁷

Saul had been rejected twice: once at Gilgal when he usurped the place of the priest and offered sacrifice (I Samuel 13:13), and again when he failed to destroy the Amalekites (I Samuel 15:26). This is the third and final rejection.

Some have issue with “to morrow” in vs. 19, saying that the battle was further off than just one day. However, the Hebrew word (Strong's H4279) can be used to simply mean a future time (see Joshua 6:21 or Proverbs 3:28 for examples). After all, it would be years before all of Saul's sons were slain (see Ishbosheth in II Samuel 4).

Chapter 29 – David Dismissed by the Philistines

vs. 1-11 – David Dismissed from the Upcoming Campaign

☪ I Chronicles 12:8-22

We turn our attention back to David and the final battle of Saul is about to begin.

The Philistine leaders besides Achish do not trust David and do not want him to take part in the battle to come. Achish gives into the peer pressure and lets David depart back to Ziklag.

⁶ Bible History: Old Testament by Alfred Edersheim. Book 4, p. 141-142.

⁷ Bible History: Old Testament by Alfred Edersheim. Book 4, p. 142.

Gabelien notes:

“David’s words expressing his great willingness to stay with the enemies of God show how deep a believer may fall when he has wandered away from God. He calls wicked Achish ‘my lord the King’ and his own people Israel, whose anointed king he was, ‘the enemies.’ God’s mercy kept him from plunging deeper than that.”

Indeed, it was God’s providence that removed David from the battlefield. None could say that David took the kingdom from Saul. God took it from him using the tool of the Philistines.

Chapter 30 – David and Ziklag

vs. 1-2 – Amalekites Sack Ziklag

This is likely the price David paid for his dishonesty with Achish. Had he not presented himself as so faithful and trustworthy to the pagan king, perhaps he would not have been taken on the Philistine campaign.

vs. 3-20 – David’s Victory

Note vs. 6. This was one of the lowest of times for David, and he was a man well acquainted with hardship. He was in despair. His faithful company were about to mutiny and kill their leader. Yet in that moment David turned to the source of strength and guidance that always proved true. He didn’t just improve his mood, he was “in-couraged” by God when his own strength failed.

David enquires again of the Lord and pursues the Amalekites. An Egyptian slave that was left for dead revealed the place of the Amalekite camp.

vs. 21-31 – David Divides the Spoils

The enemy was celebrating their spoils and were completely caught off guard by David’s attack. In other circumstances it would be counted a wonderful victory. All the families and possessions are recovered, along with other riches the Amalekites had taken.

When it comes time to divide the spoils some wicked men in David’s company (aren’t there always a few of them around?) do not want to share the victory with the 200 men that did not go into battle. David establishes a principle that day that those who fight and those who stay behind to guard are all entitled to a like share for their faithful duty. It is a wise move that even his son Solomon would have approved of.

When David returns to Ziklag, he sends gifts from the spoils to the elders of Judah. David must not have known that his victory in the south was overshadowed by Saul's defeat in the north.

Chapter 31 – Saul's Defeat

☪ I Chronicles 10:1-10

Davis writes:

“The final chapters of the book of I Samuel describe one of the saddest stories of ancient Hebrew history. Approximately forty years earlier a young man from the tribe of Benjamin was chosen and anointed by Samuel as Israel's first king. He was a man with physical strength and military capability. The legal, spiritual and military fortunes of Israel were placed upon his shoulders; but one thing was not taken into account on the part of Israel in those early days of optimism. Samuel sounded a warning concerning the danger of putting trust in human capacity alone. The real success of Israel did not lie in her production of capable men, but in her faith in Jehovah, as well as complete obedience to His revelation. The tragic events recorded in the concluding chapters of the book of I Samuel are in direct contrast to the optimism and enthusiasm of the tribes recorded in I Samuel 10. When Saul was selected king and publicly recognized as such at Mizpeh, the future indeed looked bright, at least from a human point of view. Saul appeared to be the man of the hour, a man with the promise of a bright future. As the book of I Samuel concludes, however, Saul is viewed in a heap, wounded and bleeding on Mt. Gilboa. Disobedience and constant insensitivity to the will of God led to this tragic end.”⁸

vs. 1 – The Battle of Mt. Gilboa

The battle is a disaster and Israel is driven from the field. The Philistines were likely better fighters on the plains and made use of their chariots. Israel's army retreats to Mt. Gilboa, perhaps hoping that the hillier terrain would slow the advancing enemy.

vs. 2-6 – Death of Saul and His Sons

The Philistines pressed hard and focused on Saul and his family. Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua fall. The enemy archers focus their volleys on Saul's position. He is wounded, and his pride would not allow him to fall to his enemies. Perhaps he feared a similar fate as Samson's (Judges 16:21). He commits suicide and dies.⁹

⁸ Israel: From Conquest to Exile by John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb. p. 259.

⁹ Yes, he dies here. We'll get to the other story in the next lecture.

vs. 7-13 – Desecration and Recovery of Saul’s Body

↻ I Chronicles 10:11-12

The men of Israel flee before the Philistines and abandon their homes to the invaders. It is an utter disaster.

The Philistines desecrate the bodies of Saul and his sons. His armor was kept as a trophy in the pagan temple to Ashtaroath and his body displayed on the wall of Bethshan.

Yet there is one spark of goodness in this story. The men of Jabesh-Gilead surely remembered how Saul had delivered them from Nahash the Ammonite in I Samuel 11. They repay his heroism by recapturing the bodies of Saul and his sons. They go against their own customs and burn the bodies in order to prevent their further desecration.

Evaluating Saul

Davis summarizes Saul’s career:

“While the life of Saul is a study in contrasts, and at times impossible to fully understand, there is a sense in which Saul wins our sympathy. He was a hero in Israel and a man who was necessary for the unification and strengthening of the nation. Unfortunately, while Saul resolved military conflicts, he was unable to care for the inner conflicts of his own soul and the spiritual problems which he encountered throughout his life. In the classical sense, Saul could not be called a great king, but that his achievements were many is clear from David's exquisite elegy recorded in II Samuel 1. Whatever military and judicial victories may have been attributed to Saul, they are overshadowed by his tragic spiritual failures.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Israel: From Conquest to Exile by John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb. p. 268.