

1 Samuel: Samuel to King David, ch. 31: How are the mighty fallen!

[New King James version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

It is not often we see the need to draw attention to a punctuation mark at the end of a well known expression such as the exclamation mark in the title for today's Talk: "How are the mighty fallen!" The expression could equally be stated as a question: How are the mighty fallen? This would take on a different meaning!

We read about the statement three times in 2 Samuel chapter 1, verses 19, 25, and 27 in a lament composed by King David on the occasion of the death of King Saul and his sons. David's composition marks the end of an old regal regime and the beginning of a new one. We will consider this in more detail later in the Talk.

In today's Talk on Chapter 31, we conclude this Truth for Today Series on "1 Samuel: Samuel to King David." The Battle of Gilboa in chapter 31 and David's response to the news from that battle mean that we can structure today's Talk under the following headings:

- 1. King Saul and his legacy.**
- 2. King David and his magnanimity.**
- 3. Kingly lessons on the fall of the mighty.**

First, we will consider both the outcome of the events at Gilboa and the ramifications for the royal House of Saul.

1. King Saul and his legacy

A newspaper headline today reporting on the occasion of the Battle of Gilboa would probably go along the following lines: "Saul and sons slaughtered; fighters flee from Philistines!" A description that hints at a humiliating defeat and the gruesome details of the battle though not at the history that lies behind it to which David draws our attention in a thrice repeated exclamation in the lament that he composed and from which we have the title of today's Talk: "How are the mighty fallen!"

We have in the thirteen verses of chapter 31, the briefest of details about the Battle but we can in three sections, show how history visited Saul in his final moments.

Section 1 - Saul and his sons sought and slaughtered - verses 1 -7

Section 2 - Victory "trophies" in temples displayed - verses 8 -10

Section 3 - Gallant Jabesh-Gileadites' gratitude disguises the disgrace - verses 11 -13

Saul and his sons sought and slaughtered

Let's read vv.1-7. I am reading from the new King James version:

"Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. Then the

Philistines followed hard after Saul and his sons. And the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons. The battle became fierce against Saul. The archers hit him, and he was severely wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armour bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me." But his armour bearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword and fell on it. And when his armour bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him. So Saul, his three sons, his armour bearer, and all his men died together that same day. 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."

We know from 1 Samuel 28:4 that the Philistines had penetrated deep into Israel's territory and Saul's army assembled and prepared for battle at Mount Gilboa. We also know that as a result of Saul's rebellion against the Lord, he (Saul) was not ready for battle. 1 Samuel 28:5 reads :

"When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly."

One instance of Saul's rebellion against the LORD was when, instead of taking his fear to the LORD, Saul made things worse by seeking God's voice through a spirit medium. Strangely, God did speak to Saul, but He spoke the words of judgement through an unusual appearance of the prophet Samuel. Samuel told Saul that he and his sons would die the next day (1 Samuel 28:19; 31:1).

Other details of Saul's rebellion can be found in previous Talks in this series, e.g., Talks T1314, T1345, and T1384 on chapters 13, 19, and 28 respectively.

After that fatal message from Samuel, Saul knew that he was living his last day on earth but in despair, still took back his army for the last time.

Saul was the target of the archers, and the arrows reached him without escape. Ironically, you might say, Benjaminites of whom Saul was one, were reputed to be good archers but God's judgement on Saul could not be thwarted. Then he realised that the fight was lost and asked his weapon bearer to deal him the final blow so he could die in order to leave the tragic scene quickly. Saul had a disdain toward the "pagan" Philistines and a justifiable fear of humiliation. The armour-bearer did not obey. Perhaps he remembered that David had not dared to lay a hand on the "LORD'S anointed."

Not a lot more detail is given about this battle, but the defeat was total and three of Saul's sons perished. Only one survived, Ishbosheth who, presumably, was not in combat. In 1 Chronicles 10:6 we read:

"So Saul and his three sons died, and all his house died together."

The author of 1 Chronicles does not add "on the same day", as we read earlier in 1 Samuel chapter 31, but implies that the Saul dynasty ended that day, despite the "long war" between Ishbosheth and David that ensued. (2 Samuel 2:28 and 2 Samuel 3:1) The death of the sons of Saul was tragic and yet important in God's plan because it cleared the way for David, "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

The logical heir to Saul's throne, Jonathan, would have gladly yielded the throne to David

(1 Samuel 18:1-4 and Talk T1344) but the same could not be said of the other sons.

Not only did Saul's sons perish in the battle, but we also read in verse 6 that all his men died together that same day. And so it is that when great leaders fall, they tend to take many others down with them and leave a trail of destruction behind them. The Israelites who fled (verse 7) were not the fighters but the inhabitants of the cities. These were deserted and then inhabited by the enemy. In our Christian lives, the enemy is always ready to take residence when we neglect to be vigilant

Victory Trophies in temples displayed - verses 8 - 9

On the morning after the battle, the Philistines returned to the scene of their victory to plunder the corpses. They were intent on desecrating the body of Saul and displaying their trophies. That which Saul had feared most during his lifetime came true after his death: dishonour for his body. His death was used to glorify pagan gods and to mock the living God.

This is how they disgraced it - verses 9 and 10:

“And they cut off his head and stripped off his armour, 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 armour in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.”

This was the ultimate insult against Saul. In that culture, to have your dead body treated in this way, left unburied, was considered a fate worse than death itself. The bodies were to be violated in the same way Goliath had threatened to deal with David's flesh; they were to be given to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. In contrast, Goliath's head was carried to Jerusalem. (1 Samuel 17:44 and Talk T1343).

Gallant Jabesh-Gileadites' gratitude disguises the disgrace – verses 11-19

What the men of Jabesh-Gilead did and what David did next meant that 1st Samuel chapter 31 did end with a ray of light in an otherwise dark picture of King Saul's life. The men of Jabesh-Gilead had not forgotten that Saul, in his first victory, had unexpectedly saved them from the hands of the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11:1-11 and Talk T1312). After his death, the Gileadites courageously rescued the bodies of Saul and his sons and then took them to Jabesh. They did this, it would seem, of their own accord and not looking for any reward since Saul was dead. For these people, despite the lapse of time, the feeling of gratitude had not grown cold. Mournfully and reverently,

“They took their bones, and buried them under the tamarisk at Jabesh, and fasted seven days” (1 Samuel 31:13).

Later, King David would order the re-burial -

“In the tomb of Kish, Saul's father” (2 Samuel 21:14).

So what was king Saul's legacy?

1 Chronicles 10:13-14,

“So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the LORD because he did not keep the word of the LORD, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance. But he did not inquire of the LORD; therefore He killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.”

In the New Testament, Acts 13:21-22, the Apostle Paul's devastating brevity about one of his own tribe underscores the little that there was for God in Saul's reign:

“After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.’ From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour—Jesus.”

“Sin, when it is finished, brings forth death” (James 1:15, KJV).

2. King David's magnanimity - Death and distress herald the new reign

News about impending changes in government sometimes comes during the strangest of circumstances. On 6 February 1952, Princess Elizabeth, later the long reigning Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, received the news of her father's death and her own accession to the throne while on an official visit to Kenya, the first country of her Commonwealth tour. The Queen was later succeeded by her elder son after a very long reign. When the news of Saul's death came,

“David had returned from the slaughter of the Amalekites, and David had stayed two days in Ziklag, on the third day, behold, it happened that a man came from Saul's camp with his clothes torn and dust on his head” (2 Samuel 1 -2 and Talk T1387).

We must note here 4 things:

1. The man came from the camp, in apparent distress, so he was in the position to give a first hand report.
2. His coming to David is evidence that David was generally recognised as being the next king of Israel.
3. He “fell to the ground and prostrated himself” (verse 2).
4. He gave an account to David supported by proof:

“And I took the crown that was on his head and the bracelet that was on his arm, and have brought them here to my lord” (verse 10).

David's first response upon hearing the report was humble mourning:

“Therefore David took hold of his own clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son, for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword” (2 Samuel 1:11- 27).

David's Lament over lives lost

“Then David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the children of Judah the Song of the Bow; indeed it is written in the Book of Jasher.” (Verses 17–18).

David would not have the enemy gloat over this disaster verse 20:

“Tell it not in Gath, Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon — Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.”

The lament has three distinct emphases each of which is marked by the words, “How are the mighty fallen!” (verses 19, 25 and 27, KJV).

In the first cycle, vv.19-24:

(i) David laments for Saul and Jonathan as together in death as in life. He attributed to them bravery in battle, using eagles and lions as metaphors of strength and agility (Verses 19 and 23).

(ii) He wished barrenness upon Gilboa, the scene of the tragedy so that it might physically reflect the immense indignity suffered by the nation then. Verses 21 and 22,

“Let there be no dew nor rain upon you, Nor fields of offerings. For the shield of the mighty is cast away there! The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil. From the blood of the slain, From the fat of the mighty, The bow of Jonathan did not turn back, and the sword of Saul did not return empty.”

(iii) He refers to the bounty of Saul (v.24) - reminding them how much they owed to Saul - although he caused disaster and trouble to many, obviously clearly there were also those who benefited under Saul's reign.

Cycle 2

Speaking about Jonathan exclusively, David expresses special sorrow for a friend who was like a brother throughout their lives (T1344 and T1346).

Cycle 3

A lament for the nation - verse 27,

“How the mighty have fallen,
And the weapons of war perished!”

The battle had been lost at Gilboa. So at the beginning of David's reign, he inherited a defeated nation, one which was left looking weak before its adversaries.

3. Kingly lessons on how the mighty fall

As we come to the end of our Talk for today, we can see that there are lessons we can learn from our consideration of the characters of King Saul and King David. An old English proverb states, “The higher the climb the harder the fall.” In the world of politics, entertainment, media, and even in Christendom, we have many examples of people who have “fallen from grace” - having once been elevated by the people for their excellence or might in their field; they can fall and find themselves outright outcasts through miscellaneous crimes committed.

How do the mighty fall?

Saul had already fallen short of God's standard by the time of his death on Mount Gilboa. Saul was a man who had at his disposal:

- (i) the guidance and help of a true man of God in Samuel
- (ii) a new heart from God (1 Samuel 10:9)
- (iii) the Spirit of God who came upon him (1 Samuel 10:10; 11:6)
- (iv) supporters who were valiant men (1 Samuel 10:26)
- (v) the confidence of the people (1 Samuel 10:24)

Sadly he was rejected by God because of disobedience and so began the decline. At the end of his life Saul became so hardened to sin that he did not want to repent.

"He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (Proverbs 29:1).

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

None of us are immune from the sin of pride which characterised Saul.

"Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:8).

"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

David's lament and what it teaches us about our response to the demise of our enemies

At times, street parties erupt to celebrate the demise of tyrants. One could hardly blame David if such had been his response to the news of the man who had hounded him from pillar to post while he despaired of life at every turn. "Schadenfreude" is a single word in German - it describes the pleasure that someone derives from the misfortune of others! But there is no hint of rejoicing in David's response to the news. Instead, David gives himself to heartfelt mourning by word and example. Although his lament was personal, he led all of Israel in mourning the nation's calamity. (2 Samuel 1:11-27). He looked back over Saul's life without personal bitterness and even the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul out of compassion had to be killed on David's order. (2 Samuel 1:14-16). Over the years, David had restrained himself from stretching his hand "to destroy the LORD's anointed" although he had opportunity but did not avail himself of it (1 Samuel 24:6 and Talk T1363). David considered regicide as a sin.

Even William Shakespeare draws attention to the significance of this when the character of Macduff refers to the death of the king as "Most sacrilegious murder broke open The Lord's Anointed Temple and stole thence the life of the building." (Macbeth Act 2, Scene 3.)

The killing of the Amalekite also finished what Saul had failed to do (1 Samuel 15 and Talk T1316). David spoke well of Saul in death. No sour note at all as David composed the lament. We learn from this: to emphasise the good points rather than dwell on the failures of others to love our enemies - seeing them through God's eyes not rejoice in the downfall of our enemies but lament for they have also played a part in others' lives. Above all, the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:43-45:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Talk on "How are the Mighty Fallen!" - Talk Number T1388 in the Series : 1 Samuel -Samuel to King David.

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