

UNIT FIVE

1 SAMUEL 13-31

THE SIMPLICITY OF SAUL'S RULE

- **Saul made no attempt to transform Israel into a centralised state, levied no taxes and imposed no military conscription, but did gather the beginnings of a standing army.**
- **Two companies were formed, one led by Saul and the other by his son Jonathan.**
- **Despite this, he still depended on amateurs who were called to support the army in times of crisis – his military strategy was a combination of old and new.**
- **With no taxes, Saul struggled to provide for his standing army in any satisfactory way.**
- **Saul was a Benjamite, and ruled from Gibeah.**
- **The only named official is Abner, Saul's cousin, who appears after Saul's rift with Jonathan.**
- **Abner seems to have become Saul's right hand man in military matters, with Jonathan remaining heir to the throne.**
- **Saul had limited resources, and was not able to indulge in the extravagance often associated with royalty – having no palace or splendid court.**
- **It is difficult to know the exact length of Saul's reign but he was a young man when he was chosen and had adult sons by the time of his death.**

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SAUL

- **Saul was specially appointed to save Israel from the Philistines, and the degree of success he had in doing this was the chief achievement of his reign.**
- **Saul inherited a difficult position, with the Philistines able to move at will through Israelite territory.**
- **Israel had few weapons, and the Philistines had a considerable technological advantage.**
- **The Philistines maintained garrisons in the hills, with many more men who could be called up from the coast for support if needed.**
- **Despite this, Saul was able to expel the Philistines from the central hill country in chapter 14.**
- **In chapters 15-17 he secured the south by defeating the Amalekites, and following David's victory over Goliath routs the Philistines again, this time in the lower ground.**
- **Finally, in chapters 28-31, Saul dies after a failed attempt to break through the Philistine cordon which separates the north and the south.**
- **The Philistines were keen to prevent this unification of Israelite land, but despite his failure here Saul had laid a strong military foundation for David.**

THE FAILURE OF SAUL

- **In some ways Saul was a great man, but chapters 13-31 shows flaws appearing in his character which he cannot control - his personality disintegrates and he gradually loses control.**

- **Chapter 13:**
 - Saul very quickly loses *prophetic* support – through Samuel, the LORD rejects him, largely due to his disobedience to Samuel’s word.
- **Chapter 14:**
 - Saul loses *popular* support – he is upstaged by Jonathan, and loses face when he brings himself into conflict with his son, who is seen as hero by the people.
- **Chapter 15:**
 - Loss of prophetic support is confirmed – again Saul disobeys Yahweh’s spokesman, and also sets up a monument in his own honour.
- **Chapter 16:**
 - Saul’s rejection is irreversible, and Samuel is told to anoint David as his successor – Saul had been empowered by the Holy Spirit but has now lost this.
- **Chapter 17:**
 - Saul loses more popular support following David’s victory over Goliath.
- **Chapters 18-26:**
 - These chapters focus on Saul’s attempts to find and destroy David before he can replace him – he now loses *family* support as his heir Jonathan bows to divine will and supports David.
- **Chapters 18-26:**
 - In these chapters Saul also loses *priestly* support after slaughtering the ex-Shiloh priesthood – ironically his only support is from David, who is prepared to wait for his time to come.
- **Chapter 28:**
 - Saul is now so devoid of theological direction that he resorts to a witch, contradicting his own earlier policies – he is now in the final stages of breakdown.
- **Chapter 31:**
 - Finally, Saul takes his own life when facing military defeat by the Philistines.

DEBACLE AT GILBOA: THE CLIMAX OF 1 SAMUEL

- **CONTEXT**
 - From chapter 16 onwards, 1 Samuel is as much about David’s rise as Saul’s decline – the focus shifts towards the man who will replace Saul on the throne.
 - Saul’s emotional state and actions are of interest as they impinge on David and the succession.
 - In this context, Saul’s death in chapter 31 remove the last major obstacle to David’s rise.
- **THE ‘HISTORY OF DAVID’S RISE’?**
 - Some scholars suggest that 1 Samuel 16 – 2 Samuel 5 come from a distinct source, ‘The History of David’s Rise’.
 - David’s progress is traced from his anointing at Bethlehem to his being installed as king over all Israel in Jerusalem.
 - Such a source may have been written to defend David against charges of involvement in the deaths of members of Saul’s family.

- Such theories are difficult, if not impossible, to verify and we must deal with the text that we have – the death of Saul is an epoch making event and we must not subordinate it totally to the theme of David’s rise.
- **THE BUILD UP TO GILBOA: SAUL, DAVID AND THE PHILISTINES**
 - Events have been building up since chapter 27 – with the possibility that David and Saul could meet at Gilboa.
 - Under pressure from Saul, David takes refuge in Philistine territory, controlled by Achish, leader of Gath.
 - Gath is mobilising for an assault on Israel, and to survive David must be seen to side with the Philistines – he faces an impossible situation of death at the hands of the Philistines or fighting against his fellow Israelites.
 - David is spared this choice when the Philistines refuse to fight alongside him, and Saul eventual death is God’s doing rather than David’s.
- **THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF GILBOA**
 - Gilboa is a small range of mountains, on the southern flank of the Jezreel valley in northern Palestine.
 - Apart from agricultural importance, it had great strategic significance at the time of Saul.
 - The Jezreel valley was the key to a united Israel, and the Philistines understood that very well.
 - The Philistine position cut Israel in two, and Saul wanted to challenge their hold on the area – the Philistines heard of this and brought reinforcements to the area.
 - To fight the Philistines, Saul had to come down from the high ground – but was driven back into the hills.
- **EXPOSITION OF CHAPTER 31**

SUBDIVISION OF THE CHAPTER	
31:1	Summary of the battle: Philistines win
31:2-6	The death of Saul, his sons and his armour-bearer 31:2-6 The sons 31:2-4 Saul himself 31:5 The armour-bearer 31:6 Summary
31:7	Summary of the consequence: Philistine settlement expands
31:8	<i>The next day...:</i> the bodies of Saul and his sons found by the Philistines
31:9-10	The bodies dishonoured (by the Philistines)
31:11-13	The bodies honoured (by the people of Jabesh-gilead)

- The consequences of the battle are mentioned, but it is the death of Saul which is of major interest here.
- Only three sons of Saul are mentioned, and all die in the battle – the fourth, Ishbosheth, is ignored by the author for the time being but will appear later.
- Saul almost certainly died by his own hand – a different version given by an Amalekite in 2 Samuel was probably an attempt to ingratiate himself with David.
- The story of Samson gives an idea of how the Philistines treated captives, and Saul probably chose to kill himself rather than face this.

- **According to 1 Chronicles, Saul's head was displayed in a Philistine temple - the Philistine 'gods' had to be informed of the victory just as the citizens did – there was no victory for the gods, who were not gods at all.**
- **The true explanation is that Yahweh has judged Saul and put that judgement into effect in history.**
- **The memory of Saul's early greatness led to great loyalty to him right to the end – his sons died with him, even Jonathan despite the rift between them, and the people of Jabesh-Gilead took great risks to give him an honourable burial.**

VILLAIN OR VICTIM?

- **There was clearly a dark side to Saul's character, but he is not treated entirely unsympathetically by the author.**
- **At a period of transition for Israel, coupled with the threat from the Philistines, Saul found himself with a very difficult role.**
- **Some, therefore, may see him more as a victim than as a villain, with everyone including God against him, but several things must be said in response to this.**
- **The Bible rarely shows people as just saints or villains – it recognises the complexity of human character, so we can feel sympathy on some levels but must still recognise the seriousness of their sin and the rightness of God's judgement.**
- **The story of Saul cannot be completely removed from the context of the Song of Hannah – God's actions in raising up some people and bringing down others are not arbitrary but totally just.**
- **Saul was not just any person but Israel's first king, and so was understandably dealt with harshly as a warning to those who would follow.**