

1 Samuel 31:1-6; 2 Samuel 1

Aim of Lesson

To show that Saul's death came as a direct result of his disobedience to God, and to show David's grief at the death of Saul and Jonathan.

Background study

1 Chronicles 10; 1 Samuel 13:13-14; 15:23. Find a map of the kingdom that shows Mount Gilboa, Beth-shan and Jabesh-Gilead. A modern photograph of the ruins of Beth-shan may help to show that these were real events at real places.

Suggested outline of lesson

Remind the children of the young king Saul, and of his handsome appearance and fine character. Contrast this with the man he had become - older but not wiser, consumed with hatred, unstable and afraid. Samuel the prophet was now dead; and Saul, recalling Samuel's words of reproach and rejection, knew in his heart that God was no longer with him. He had also lost the confidence of the people and he had driven away David, the champion of his army, together with those who chose to follow David. Increasing attacks from the Philistine army, with their superior weapons and horses, was a challenge the demoralized Israelites could not hope to meet.

The battle was doomed from the start. The Israelite resistance could not be sustained, so that they fled and were relentlessly pursued. In telling the story, convey the confusion of the Israelites and their desperate attempts to escape death at the hands of the cruel Philistines. You should be sensitive to the feelings of the children in the class towards a war story of this nature and temper the narrative accordingly. It was for fear that the enemy might take him alive that Saul appealed to his armour bearer to kill him and, on being refused, killed himself. It is noteworthy that, in spite of the extenuating circumstances, the armour bearer could not bring himself to accept the responsibility of ending the king's life. Moreover, his loyalty to Saul was such that he preferred to die with him rather than fight on without his leader.

Among the many who died that day was Jonathan, the prince. It is tragic that this fine young man also died because of his father's faithlessness and wilful disobedience.

David, meanwhile, was fully occupied in successfully resisting an attack from the Amalekites in another part of the country and was, therefore, unaware of the turn of events. Any satisfaction at his own victory was short-lived as he received news of the crushing defeat of his fellow-countrymen and the tragic loss of both his king, and his closest friend.

Think how the Amalekite, who brought the news, must have rehearsed what he would say to David, convinced that David would honour him for bringing the "good" news of the death of his "enemy", Saul. So anxious was he to curry favour with the successor to the throne that he went so far as to elaborate on the truth and make false claims regarding his own involvement. Imagine his surprise and horror at David's reaction. His lie cost him his life. If he had been a man of Israel, he would have known of David's constant loyalty to the king.

Far from rejoicing that Saul was dead, David was deeply grieved. In his youth, he had expressed his inner feelings in psalms. Now he was moved to write a song of lament in order to express his sorrow. His generosity of spirit is also seen here, in his equal tribute to the man who had hated him and the man who had loved him. Children will appreciate something of the beauty of the poetry and the depth of David's feelings, although not necessarily understanding all the words.

Relevance to the children's lives

Jesus says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). David lived a long time before Jesus, but he showed this kind of love to Saul, who had for many years tried to harm him. By living the way God wanted him to do and relying on God to guide him, and by returning good for evil throughout this life, David grew to be wise, and a great king.

The way we treat other people has an effect on the kind of people we become. Isn't it true that when we have been angry we feel bad for the rest of the day, but when we are kind or loving, forgiving or unselfish, we feel happy? That is the way God wants us to be. Every time we do something kind for somebody else our own character improves.

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we want to grow to be like David, who was forgiving and kind and obedient to you. Please help us to become kinder, and more thoughtful day by day. Amen.

Memory verse

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).