

SALVATION IN ISRAEL

1 Samuel 11:1-15

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But Saul said, "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has worked salvation in Israel" (1 Sam. 11:13).

American military commanders follow a standard procedure for planning their operations that has proven effective over many years. The operations order consists of five paragraphs, the most important of which are the first two: the situation and the mission. Above all else, a successful battle plan requires a proper understanding of the situation and a grasp of the correct mission for the unit to perform.

It would have been a good idea for King Saul to have evaluated his situation and mission, having been just acclaimed as Israel's king. He faced two grave matters, both of which threatened the nation's existence. The first was Israel's internal division. The tribes of Israel were physically divided, some in the north and some in the south, most of the nation to the west of the river Jordan but some tribes left on the east bank. Worse, the tribes were morally and spiritually divided, as is shown at the end of the book of Judges. Saul's hometown in the land of Benjamin had been the cause of a brief civil war, resulting in thousands of Israelite deaths (Judg. 19:1-20:48). Moreover, there was opposition to Saul's selection as king from some "worthless fellows" who doubted his leadership and "despised him" (1 Sam. 10:27). Unless Saul could unite the tribes and work out a means of effective coordination, Israel could not hope to survive against its enemies. These outside enemies were Israel's other threat, consisting of the neighboring Philistines to the west and the Ammonites to the east, both of them fierce and well-armed foes.

These twin problems presented the situation Saul faced. His mission, then, was to heal the petty grievances that divided Israel, unite the tribes under his royal leadership, and strike a blow at Israel's enemies that would secure peace for his generation.

1 Samuel chapter 11 presents Saul's response to these challenges, including a new threat from the Ammonites. Saul's effective action put his kingship on a good footing for the future. Behind Saul, however, it was the Lord who saved his people. The word for "save" or "salvation" occurs three times in this chapter, making this its major theme. Perhaps most important is Saul's apparent realization of what every leader needs to know – whether it be a leader on a large scale in society or on a small scale in the church or home – that in the face of threats and danger, our hope for success lies ultimately with the Lord.

NAHASH AND THE SIEGE OF JABESH-GILEAD

After his coronation, Saul returned home to Gibeah and resumed his normal life. Perhaps he was keeping a low profile while waiting for an opportunity, in keeping with the practice of the judges before him. But trouble was brewing in the Israelite lands east of the Jordan River: "Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-Gilead" (1 Sam. 11:1).

We have an interesting textual matter here, since one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QSam^a) includes material missing from all other Hebrew texts. Josephus alludes to this material in his history, stating that Nahash, the Ammonite king, had reduced the Transjordan Israelite cities into slavery.¹ The Dead Sea Scroll addition states that Nahash "had been oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites grievously, gouging out the right eye of each of them and allowing Israel no deliverer." Nahash had conquered the whole region across the Jordan, but seven thousand men had escaped and fled to Jabesh-Gilead.

Whether this addition is authentic or not, the Bible informs us that the Israelite fugitives were desperate enough to seek terms with Nahash: "Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you" (1 Sam. 11:1).

¹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 6.5.

Nahash was willing, but only on one condition: “that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel’ (1 Sam. 11:2). According to Josephus, warriors of that day fought in formation with interlocked shields, so that the left eye was covered by the shield. By gouging out the right eye, Nahash rendered them unfit for battle, though still eligible for slave labor.² If Nahash succeeded in reducing Jabesh-Gilead and disarming its garrison, Israel could have permanently lost its territory east of the Jordan. Furthermore, William Blaikie comments, “The mutilated condition of that poor one-eyed community would be a ground for despising the whole nation; it would be a token of the humiliation and degradation of the whole Israelite community.”³

This episode reminds us what a dangerous world we live in. We often hear that it is a “dog-eat-dog world,” comparing human society to hounds fighting over food. Indeed, if one is not prepared to defend what he possesses, he may not long expect to enjoy it. George Washington departed from public life saying, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” If man is given the chance he will kill, steal, and enslave those who are weak around him.

But Nahash also had a grudge against the Israelites, wanting to “bring disgrace on all Israel” (1 Sam. 11:2). The Ammonites were Israel’s cousins via incest, having descended from the illicit union between drunken Lot and his daughter after their flight from the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19:38). We can guess that the Israelites did not hold the Ammonites in high honor, to say the least, so that the ill-feeling was reciprocated. During Israel’s passage in the exodus, the Ammonites refused to provide needed provisions (Dt. 23:3) and they are listed among the traditional enemies of Israel (see Isa. 11:14; Jer. 9:25-26; Eze. 25:1-7). Lastly, during the judgeship of Jephthah the Gileadite the Ammonites made war in these same regions. Jephthah defeated the Ammonites and captured 20 of their cities (Judg. 11:33).

For these or other reasons, Nahash delighted in causing the Israelites of Jabesh-Gilead to writhe in fear before him. In this, he depicts the hatred of the world for God’s people in every generation. Ralph

² Ibid.

³ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 172-173.

Davis writes that “This arrogance, this hatred, never ceases. Nahash may become historical furniture, but the ‘Ammonite mind,’ that is, to main, destroy, and strangle God’s people, is always with us.”⁴ The classic example is the unjust murder of Jesus Christ. Jesus told his disciples, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:19).

It is because of this hostility from an evil and hateful world that God’s people need a Savior. It was in pursuit of salvation that the Israelite leaders in Jabesh-Gilead appealed to Nahash: “Give us seven days’ respite that we may send messengers through all the territory of Israel. Then, if there is no one to save us, we will give ourselves up to you” (1 Sam. 11:3). This is the plea that Christians often pray to God, as we see modeled in the psalms: “O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers and deliver me, lest like a lion they tear my soul apart, rending it in pieces, with none to deliver,” (Psalm 7:1-2). To be a Christian is to realize your need for God’s salvation – not just forgiveness from our sins but salvation from the dangers and malice of this world – and to call out to God to deliver you in times of fear and dread.

KING SAUL KINDLED

It is probably a measure of the contempt in which Nahash held the Israelites, and his confident desire to spread terror in their nation, that the Ammonite king permitted the Jabesh-Gileadites to send messengers calling for their salvation. Realizing the stakes for the entire nation, and seeking help wherever it might be found, they sent messengers “through all the territory of Israel,” assuring Nahash that if no help came in seven days, “we will give ourselves up to you” (1 Sam. 11:3).

In this manner, the news of the siege arrived at Gibeah. It seems that the messengers were unaware of Saul’s new kingship, since they went to the people in general. At this, “all the people wept aloud” (1 Sam. 11:4). Behind this grief was a particular bond between Saul’s Gibeah and Jabesh-Gilead. In the war against Benjamin recorded in Judges

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 93.

21, Jabesh-Gilead refused to participate. As a result, all the unmarried maidens of Jabesh-Gilead were given to provide wives for the men of Gibeah (Judg. 21:12-14), so that many of the people in Saul's town were the sons and daughters of women from Jabesh-Gilead. Hearing the tumult inspired by this bond, Saul inquired, "What is wrong with the people, that they are weeping?" (1 Sam. 11:5), so the news was told to him.

With this news, a decisive moment had come to newly enthroned Saul. It was the threat of invasion that had largely motivated the elders' demand for a king (1 Sam. 8:20). Now that such an invasion had occurred, it was the king's duty to save Israel. This was the very concern raised by Saul's opponents: "How can this man save us?" (1 Sam. 10:27). So this episode would be a key turning point for the new regime.

Fortunately for Saul, his greatest need was met at this very moment: "The Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled" (1 Sam. 11:6). This makes a remarkable point, because it shows the Lord's favor towards this king who had been installed due to the peoples' rebellion. Yet the Lord would give Saul every opportunity of serving in God's own strength; the Lord was graciously willing to remain Israel's Savior through the kingship of Saul. Just as God's Spirit had rushed into Samson, giving him a supernatural strength to smite the Philistines (Judg. 14:6, 19; 15:14), and just as the Spirit had empowered Othniel, Gideon, and Jephthah in their victories, now the Spirit came to empower Saul with courage and vigor to lead Israel in this time of crisis.

The coming of God's Spirit filled Saul with an attitude of righteous anger for Nahash's evil and a violent resolve to strike out in defense of God's people. This makes an important statement that opposes the idea of Christian pacifism. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that we are to avoid striking back at those who do us personal injury. "Do not resist the one who is evil," Jesus said. "But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt. 5:39). Some Christians have wrongly concluded that we must therefore stand by passively when others are being threatened or harmed. But when God's Spirit came upon Saul, the result of this divine influence was a holy zeal to make war on the evil tormenter of his Israelite neighbors.

John Woodhouse writes: “This was God-inspired rage. The anger inspired in Saul by the Spirit of God was obviously directed at the threat posed to the people of Jabesh-Gilead by Nahash and the Ammonites.”⁵ This righteous anger reflects God’s own wrath against evil, for which sake the Lord has given the sword to civil officials (Rom. 13:1-4).

Saul’s situation – both in terms of his need to establish his authority and the urgent reaction needed to rescue Jabesh-Gilead – called for bold and decisive action. Saul acted accordingly: “He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!’ Then the dread of the LORD fell upon the people, and they came out as one man” (1 Sam. 11:7).

Inspired by the Spirit, Saul spoke with authority, just as God’s servants should speak boldly in proclaiming divine truth today. Yet Saul was not harsh, threatening not death to those who opposed him (as had been done when Israel was summoned to make war on his own tribe and hometown, in Judges 19:29), but only the civil punishment of death to their oxen. This reminds us that it is not necessary for church leaders to be harsh or insulting when reproofing or exhorting God’s people, but that those charged with spiritual authority may be forthright but also moderate in their church discipline. It is always God’s Spirit who makes his people willing to repent or obey. In this case, the Lord put his awe upon the nation and the Israelites “came out as one man.”

This link between the godliness of a nation and the well-being of the nation as a whole reminds us why a government is wise to encourage biblical religion, and why government intolerance for Christianity is harmful to its own good. Matthew Henry observes: “Religion and the fear of God will make men good subjects, good soldiers, and good friends to the public interests of the country. Those that fear God will make conscience of their duty to all men, particularly to their rulers.”⁶

⁵ John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 197-198.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:264.

Again, aided by God's Spirit, Saul quickly organized the people: "When he mustered them at Bezek, the people of Israel were three hundred thousand and the men of Judah thirty thousand" (1 Sam. 11:8). Since the Hebrew word for "thousand" is also used for a company-sized military unit, it is possible that these numbers were significantly lower – three hundred Israelite units of 30-50 men and thirty Judean units of 30-50 men – though still a significant military force. Saul then sent a message to the besieged town: "Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have deliverance" (1 Sam. 11:9). The Jabesh-Gileadites were made confident by Saul's bold and effective leadership, and they sent a message to Nahash stating, "Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you" (1 Sam. 11:10). The apparent effect was to lull Nahash's forces into an inattentive over-confidence. Thus when Saul's forces arrived – well ordered in three lines of battle – "they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. And those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together" (1 Sam. 11:11).

One lesson we might draw from Saul's victory over Nahash is the importance of gifted and able leadership. But the better point to note is the vital role played by the Spirit of God in equipping such spiritual leadership and animating the people in godly obedience. Dale Ralph Davis notes: "Salvation came not because Israel had a king but because the king had Yahweh's Spirit; it is not the institution of kingship but the power of the Spirit that brings deliverance."⁷

It is sad that the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, preceded every sermon with a prayer for God to send the Spirit, which explains much of his remarkable effectiveness as a gospel herald. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the Word of God mighty for salvation (Eze. 36:25-26), who empowers Christians for growth in holiness and grace (Gal. 5:15; Eph. 1:16-20; 3:16-19), and who bears the fruits of righteousness, peace, and joy (Rom. 14:17; cf. Gal. 5:22-23). The rule among God's people is ever that which was stated to Zerubabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of

⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 95.

hosts” (Zech. 4:6). Thus it is that whenever God’s people resort to worldly stratagems they begin to fail in power, but whenever God’s Spirit comes to believers, we are fortified in power and grace.

How, then, do Christians gain access to the power and blessing of God’s Spirit? It may please the Lord unexpectedly to grant his Spirit, as he did in this case with King Saul. But the New Testament gives us two consistent rules. First, we are to pray for the ministry of God’s Spirit within us. Thus Jesus concluded his teaching on prayer in Luke 11 by saying, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk. 11:13). Second, God’s Spirit attends to faith in God’s Word. Thus Paul challenged the Galatians, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Gal. 3:2). The answer is that it was faith in God’s Word that brought God’s Spirit.

The Spirit is the author of God’s Word (2 Pet. 1:20). Jesus said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63). Therefore, the way for us to have the Spirit is to be devoted to the Word; it is those who are relying on God’s Word who enjoy the blessing of the Holy Spirit’s power. Therefore, if Christians hope to be renewed with power to face the challenges of sin and unbelief in our day, we will require the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who comes to God’s people through prayer and devotion to the Bible.

THE KINGDOM RENEWED

Saul’s victory at Jabesh-Gilead established his kingdom among the Tribes of Israel. The people responded by appealing to Samuel, demanding violence against the faction that he opposed Saul at his earlier coronation: “Who is it that said, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Bring the men, that we may put them to death” (1 Sam. 11:12). This might have expressed their newfound devotion to Saul, although it may also have been a calculated concern to rid the nation of internal dissent. Whatever the motive, the answer came not from Samuel but from Saul: “Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has worked salvation in Israel” (1 Sam. 11:13). Here was more inspired leadership from the new king, showing the restraint and magnanimity that alone can bring true unity to any people. It was, I

think, the high-point of Saul's entire life and reign when he reminded the people that it was not he but the Lord who had saved them, so that the people should honor the Lord with godliness rather than honor Saul with violence against his critics. "The LORD has worked salvation in Israel," he said. Here is the only basis for true unity and strength: the confession of God's saving power and the resolve to honor his sovereignty through submission to his Word.

These events seem to have brought satisfaction to Samuel. Israel had rejected him as well as the Lord in demanding a king. But now God's Spirit had come to Saul, so that Samuel might hope for godliness and faith in the new ruler. Samuel took advantage of the situation: "Then Samuel said to the people, 'Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom'" (1 Sam. 11:14). So the people went to Gilgal, a traditional gathering ground near to Jabesh-Gilead, "and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal" (1 Sam. 11:15).

There is some question as to Samuel's exact meaning when he summoned the people to "renew the kingdom." It is obvious that he meant the public confirmation of Saul, given that Saul was "made king" there. But it seems that Samuel likely meant more than this: he intended for the people to renew their fidelity to God's sovereign kingdom, under King Saul. Gilgal was where Joshua had brought Israel after crossing the Jordan River, setting up memorial stones there to God's faithfulness and renewing their covenant with the Lord (Jos. 4:20-24). Samuel's purpose was to tie this new victory with God's ancient faithfulness, reminding them that victory and blessing come only through faith in the Lord (cf. 1 Sam. 12:14).

Thus, "they sacrificed peace offerings before the LORD" (1 Sam. 11:15), reaffirming their appeal to God's grace for their blessing. No wonder that this chapter ends with a statement of remarkable happiness: "there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly" (1 Sam. 11:15). This is also the way for our churches to be happy and blessed: for God-honoring leadership to receive the approval of God's people, as the whole church renews its commitment to God's grace, in accordance with the teaching of God's Word. Jesus thus advised us, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," and all other things "will be added to you" (Mt. 6:33).

BATTLE PLANS, NOT BUSINESS PLANS

Saul's victory over Jabesh-Gilead presents a challenge to Christians and churches today. The first challenge is for us to realize that no matter how congenial our circumstances may seem, on the spiritual plane God's people are always on a war footing. Paul warns Christians that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). These spiritual foes are just as eager to destroy and humiliate God's people today as was Nahash the Ammonite in the day of King Saul.

In fact, Nahash may be viewed as a type of the power of sin, so that the plight of Jabesh-Gilead warns us against capitulating to the vicious power of sin and temptation. William Blaikie writes: "If we regard Nahash as a type of another tyrant, as representing the tyranny of sin, we may derive from his conditions an illustration of the hard terms which sin usually imposes."⁸ Nahash wanted to remove the Israelite's right eye; likewise sin would disarm us and render us unfit to fight in God's causes. How happy we will be to realize, as the men of Jabesh-Gilead realized just in time, that surrender to sin only subjects us to injuries and humiliations that may mark us for the rest of our lives.

Yet, despite the warning of this text, the reality is that the church today does not see itself engaged in deadly spiritual warfare. John Woodhouse remarks that this can be seen in the fact that most churches conduct themselves according to business plans rather than battle plans. He writes:

"Going to do battle" is *not* how we like to think of our evangelistic efforts. In many ways the business world has replaced the battle field as a source of categories for thinking about this work. Gospel work is then not war but *commerce*: we go to sell a product, not to fight a battle. We are marketers, not soldiers. We have merchandise, not weapons. We face potential customers, not an enemy. We are out to expand our market share and increase our customer base, not to capture, defeat, and destroy a foe... The language of war, weapons, and battle is too extreme for the

⁸ Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 173.

way we think about evangelism. We are more like advertisers than fighters.⁹

If this is how we are thinking about the work of our church, then God's Word would have us radically rethink our approach. Our challenge in evangelism is not merely to present an appealing product to a consumer culture. Rather, Paul says, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). If we realize this, then we will wage warfare with the weapons of prayer and God's Word, not relying on merely fleshly appeals for approval. Paul writes: "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5). This teaching argues that the sign that we have awakened to the reality of spiritual warfare will be our renewed commitment to the power of God through his Word (Heb. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:23).

The same is true on an individual level. The reason so many Christians live so closely to the world, casually participating in worldliness and sin, is our failure to appreciate the danger to our souls. Peter warns, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). This being the case, he urges us to "be sober-minded; be watchful... Resist him, firm in your faith" (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Thus Christians who recognize the violent threat of our spiritual enemies will eagerly make use of the means of God's grace for the growth and soundness of their faith, resisting the urges of sin that bombard our culture.

Lastly, this chapter presents the theme of salvation in Israel, and thus reminds us that God's people need a Savior to deliver us from the Nahashes of this evil world. Realizing this, we should draw near to the true Spirit-empowered King whom God has sent into our world. Jesus Christ began his ministry saying: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the

⁹ John Woodhouse, *I Samuel*, 192.

poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). It is in the kingdom of Christ, entered through faith in Jesus, that we are defended and delivered from our spiritual foes – from Satan, sin, and the death our guilt has deserved – receiving the liberty of salvation and the blessing of sight to believe on Jesus.

Then, as we walk closely with Christ, strengthening our faith by his Word and continual prayer, and receiving the power of God's Spirit that he graciously sends to those who seek his will, we may know even in this world the joy of our salvation, as Israel celebrated her kingdom renewal at Gilgal. Jesus said, "He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (Jn. 3:34). Through faith in Christ and in God's Word, the Spirit will empower us to stand firm in these evil days of spiritual warfare, and he will use us to bring this same salvation to others besieged by darkness and unbelief.