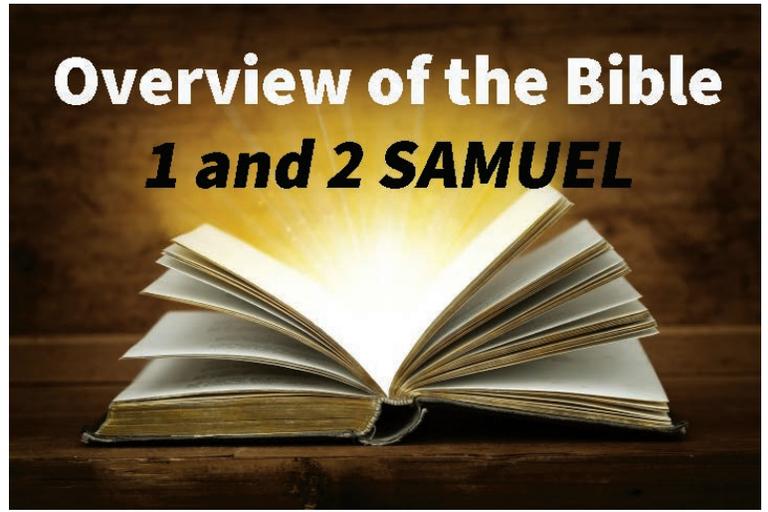


Overview of the Bible

1 and 2 SAMUEL



SALVATION IN ISRAEL

1 Samuel 11:1-15

Lesson 52

Wednesday, August 4, 2021

It would have been a good idea for King Saul to have evaluated his situation and mission, having just been 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, with most of the nation to the west of the river Jordan but some tribes left on the east bank. Even 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 to Israel's enemies that would secure peace for his generation.

First 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, indicating its major theme. Perhaps most important is Saul's apparent realization of what every leader needs to know—whether on a large scale in society or on a small scale in the church or home—namely, that in the face of threats and danger, our hope for success lies ultimately with the Lord.¹

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).

An interesting textual matter arises here, since one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QSama) 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 to slavery. 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.

Works Cited

¹Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken and Richard D. Phillips, Duguid Iain M., 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 169–170.

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). Nahash was willing, but on only one condition: “that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel” (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. If Nahash succeeded in reducing Jabesh-gilead and disarming its garrison, Israel could have lost its territory east of the Jordan permanently. 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.”

This episode reminds us what a dangerous world we live in. We often hear that it is a “dog-eat-dog world,” an aphorism 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 a 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 one of his daughters after their flight from the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19:38). The Israelites did not hold the Ammonites in high honor, to say the least, so that the ill-feeling was reciprocated. During Israel’s wilderness passage in the exodus, the Ammonites had refused to offer needed provisions (Deut. 23:4), and they are listed among the traditional enemies of Israel (see Isa. 11:14; Jer. 9:25–26; Ezek. 25:1–7). Finally, during the judgeship of Jephthah the Gileadite, the Ammonites made war in these same regions. Jephthah defeated the Ammonites and captured twenty of their cities (Judg. 11:33). The antipathy between Israel and Ammon was long-standing.

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. Dale Ralph Davis writes, “This arrogance, this hatred, never ceases. Nahash may become historical furniture, but the ‘Ammonite mind,’ that is, to maim, destroy, and strangle God’s people, is always with us.”

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, news of the Ammonite siege arrived at Gibeah. It seems that the messengers were unaware of Saul’s new kingship, since they went to the people in general, rather than approaching the king directly. At the news, “all the people wept aloud” (1 Sam. 11:4). Behind this grief was a particular bond between Gibeah and Jabesh-gilead. In the war against Benjamin recorded in Judges 21, Jabesh-gilead had refused to participate. As a result, all the unmarried maidens of Jabesh-gilead had been 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 had been the very concern raised by Saul’s opponents: “How can this man save us?” (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). The coming of the Spirit makes a remarkable point, because it shows the Lord’s favor toward this king who had been installed as a result of the people’s rebellion. The Lord would give Saul every opportunity of serving in God’s own strength; he 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 with a violent resolve to strike out in defense of God’s people. Saul’s counterattack 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” (Matt. 5:39). Some Christians have wrongly concluded that we must therefore stand by passively when others are being threatened or harmed, failing to note the difference between defending ourselves and protecting others from harm. But when God’s Spirit came upon Saul, the result of this divine influence was a holy zeal to make war on the evil tormentor of his fellow Israelite. 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.” 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—in terms of both his need to establish his authority and Jabesh-gilead’s urgent need to be rescued—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).

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 thirty to fifty men and thirty Judean units of thirty to fifty 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” (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” (11:10). The apparent effect of this message was to lull Nahash’s forces into an inattentive overconfidence. 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” (11:11).

One lesson that 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.

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 had 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 demand may 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. This was the high point of Saul’s entire life and reign, as 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. The prophet quickly 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 Jabesh-gilead, “and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal” (11:15).

There is some question about Samuel’s exact meaning when he summoned the people to “renew the kingdom” (1 Sam. 11:14). It is obvious that he meant the public confirmation of Saul, given that Saul was “made king” there (11:15). 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.

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 Nahash the Ammonite was in the day of King Saul.²

Works Cited

²Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken and Richard D. Phillips, Duguid Iain M., 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 177–178.