

I Samuel

Lesson 17 - Chapter 11 Continued

Last week we ventured fairly deeply into territory that may at first glance seem unnecessary, but in fact is a needed piece of the puzzle to help us understand the goings on in the book of Samuel. And that territory is the political landscape surrounding and directing so many of Samuel's and Saul's decisions.

Now we certainly won't rehash last week's lesson; but it is important to set the stage for today's study by summarizing the current condition of the 12 tribes that faced the newly crowned king of Israel.

Israel was a deeply divided family. There were three distinct factions that formed all of Israel at the time the demand for a king arose, and there is no doubt that this demand from many of Israel's tribal leaders reflected a hope that perhaps a king would become a uniting force for the 12 tribes. The three factions consisted of 1) those 2 ½ tribes who decided (centuries earlier) to make their homes on the east side of the Jordan (Reuben, Gad, and ½ of Manessah), 2) Judah and Simeon who occupied the southern end of Canaan, and 3) a coalition of about 8 tribes who occupied the fertile north.

It's not necessarily that these factions were enemies of one another; they certainly recognized that together they formed the nation founded by Jacob. However there were extremely serious rivalries, regular battles over autonomy, issues over which tribe ought to be preeminent over the others, unhappiness over territorial boundaries that some thought unfair, and constant sniping at one another over who best (and most purely) represented the true people of God and inheritors of what Moses and Joshua founded.

I know I said this numerous times last week, but I'm not sure it's possible to overstate it: if we want to actually understand what is happening from this point forward in the Old Testament, we have to become students of history. While God's providence directed mankind (and especially Israel) along a path with a very certain purpose and towards a predetermined goal, it did so largely unseen and thus unnoticed. And in miraculous conjunction with men's free will, somehow God's will was being accomplished all along the way. But always (ALWAYS!) these great and seminal events that are recorded in the Bible as the marvelous stories that some of us have heard since we were children in Sunday School, were done within the context of world, national, family and individual circumstances as they were at the time.

Saul (*King* Saul, now) was from the tribe of Benjamin; this it is understandable in the political situation of the day that a man from the tribe of Benjamin was selected to be Israel's first king. Benjamin was in an interesting geographic location; they were a buffer region. Benjamin's southern border bordered on Judah (the leader of the southern faction of tribes) and

Benjamin's northern border bordered on Ephraim (the leader of the northern faction of tribes). It put them in both an envious and difficult position. There were loyalties within the clans that formed Benjamin that cut both ways (not unlike the State of Virginia in our American Civil War). At the same time the territory of Benjamin lay in a militarily AND religiously strategic location. Some of Israel's most important and traditionally hallowed sacred sites lay in Benjamin's district. And militarily Benjamin's territory was along the Jordan River where some of its best fording points were located, and thus running through Benjamin was an important highway and trade route.

Again: God operates providentially through mankind's daily circumstances, so it was logical from a political perspective that a man from Benjamin would become king. But what SPIRITUAL reason or purpose might there be for that selection? Well there are a few we can consider. According to the God-pattern of map directions given to us in Scripture, east is always the most spiritually important and next to it, the south. The north on the other hand was not only of least status, but also we'll find that each time Israel was conquered by an empire they were exiled to the north. And in the end times, where will Israel's enemies come from? The north. Where will the battle of Armageddon be fought within Israel? In the north. Which tribes of Israel were conquered and assimilated into the gentile world (those tribes called the 10 lost tribes)? The northern tribes. Benjamin was aligned with the northern faction of tribes, who were the instigators of replacing God with a human king.

Another consideration is that Jacob, on his deathbed, essentially placed Judah in the preeminent position to become the leader over all the Israelite tribes (Judah was part of the southern coalition of tribes). Let's recall what Jacob said about Judah in Genesis 49 at the deathbed blessing of all of his 12 sons.

CJB Genesis 49:8 "Y'hudah, your brothers will acknowledge you, your hand will be on the neck of your enemies, your father's sons will bow down before you. 9 Y'hudah is a lion's cub; my son, you stand over the prey. He crouches down and stretches like a lion; like a lioness, who dares to provoke him? 10 The scepter will not pass from Y'hudah, nor the ruler's staff from between his legs, until he comes to whom [obedience] belongs;* and it is he whom the peoples will obey. 11 Tying his donkey to the vine, his donkey's colt to the choice grapevine, he washes his clothes in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.

Thus it would be altogether inappropriate for these Hebrews who were rebelling against God by demanding a king to be effectively rewarded by initially getting the leader that God intended they would eventually have (a ruler from the tribe of Judah) and thereby to receive the blessings that would naturally accrue with it.

On the other hand Jacob also prophetically described (or can we even say "divinely destined") the character of the tribe of Benjamin in this way:

CJB Genesis 49:27 "Binyamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, in the evening still dividing the spoil."

Being a ravenous wolf whereby the riches of the spoils of war is his chief concern is hardly a flattering description, and certainly wouldn't fit the divine ideal for a ruler of God's Kingdom. But devouring prey (the weak) and amassing spoils (wealth) to be divided up among those who govern is perhaps the most admired and desired characteristic of a HUMAN king. Let's read 1st Samuel chapter 11.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 11 all

This chapter begins the transition from Samuel's judgeship to Saul's kingship. And of course God's providence is very evident to us in hindsight but undoubtedly wasn't nearly as much so to King Saul or perhaps even Samuel. Here's the situation: after his coronation at Mitzpah, Saul returned home to resume a regular life. So why didn't he immediately assume his role as King of Israel? Because there were a lot of influential Israelites who either didn't want Saul to be the king, or didn't want a king altogether. The main group of dissenters was from Judah and Simeon (the southern tribes) who knew full well that a king chosen from the northern alliance of tribes would of course give preference to his constituency (to the detriment of those who weren't part of the alliance, namely Judah and Simeon).

Among human kings, perhaps his foremost purpose is to be a warlord. While this is prevalent and essential to all kingdoms it is not nearly as important as it is to a tribal society because in tribal societies there is a never ending battle among the clans and tribes for dominance. Warfare among the tribes is a given. Thus a good and timely war is the perfect platform for a prince to prove his worth to be king.

This would be a good time to point out another interesting (but sometimes not so obvious) dynamic that is going on here: monarchies and tribalism don't mix very well. In other words, whereas the sovereignty of the tribal leader over his tribe and his duty to do everything possible to elevate his tribe's status and dominance above the others is at the heart of the tribal system, it is a king's goal to have the unwavering allegiance of all of his subject to him and him alone, and to destroy all those who might have ambitions to usurp his throne. Further it was necessary that a king set-up a common justice system that all the kingdom obeyed, and was administered by the king's men, regardless of family ties and other loyalties. Well Israel consisted of 12 tribes, each with its own tribal prince who had no interest in giving up any of his sovereignty to a king. Among the tribes, it was the tribe leader who administered justice. So we have two different governing systems, philosophies and leadership agendas about to butt heads. If Israel was going to have a true and functional monarchy, tribalism would have to diminish. Fat chance.

Let me give you a modern day parallel so that you can get a good mental picture of why King Sha'ul was doomed to never having peace and to ultimate failure. Early in the 18th century a similar transition from pure tribalism to a monarchy was attempted in the Arabian Peninsula, but a kingship didn't become reality there until the turn of the 19th to the 20 century. The Saud family in the mid-1700's became the head of a powerful tribe and dominated the other tribes of central Arabia with the rather typical goal of becoming the preeminent Arab tribe in all of Arabia and eventually the entire Middle East.

As happens in tribalism, the other tribes fought against them and so the Saud family's power diminished and then arose again, only to diminish and again rise multiple times in wave-like fashion. Eventually just after 1900, a new generation of the Saud family openly sought to create a monarchy and for the first time their efforts generally succeeded. They used brutal means to put down the constant rebellions of the various tribal leaders who had no interest in having a king over them.

Today the Saud ruling family of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues in that battle. Since the religion of Islam is a tribal and warfare-based religion, the various tribes of Saudi Arabia who hate the decadent Saud monarchy (who live like rich playboys) are constantly trying to overthrow the government of Saudi Arabia. It is this situation that brought about the likes of Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi rebel. In fact the rulers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are generally hated by the tribal Muslims throughout the Middle East because the idea of royalty goes against both their tribal traditions and Muslim religion. Thus when oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in the 1930's (that would bring in vast riches to the coffers of the royal family), the tribal leaders became all the more angry and jealous and this drove the Saudi monarchy to make alliances with the West. The West wanted and needed the oil, had powerful militaries, and the king and thousands of his royal Saud family wanted to stay in power; it was a natural alliance. Thus we see this uneasy but necessary relationship between the West and the king of Saudi Arabia, but also the never-ending battles and violence and repression in Saudi Arabia all wrapped around the traditional Muslim-Arab tribal system vying against the hated Saudi monarchy who takes away the tribal leaders' sovereignty.

This is what King Saul was about to face and he full well knew it (as did God). Of course the tribal leaders of Israel who demanded a king and applauded the choice of Saul of Benjamin saw only the benefits for themselves. But in the end things never did work out very well for anybody except Israel's enemies in this arrangement.

In chapter 11 verse 1 we are introduced to a fellow named Nachash, a king from the territory of Ammon. It's always interesting in the Bible when we leap so suddenly and without warning from one scenario to the next, as here where we go directly from Saul's coronation to a war with King Nachash. Well, the Dead Sea Scrolls have shed a little bit of additional light on this passage.

In the Dead Sea Scroll of Samuel was found a verse to begin this chapter that was heretofore unknown; it was either added by the Essenes or was dropped by later Bible translators (there's much speculation as to which it was so we'll not debate that today). Here is that verse:

4QSam: "Now Nachash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nachash, King of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and had entered Jabesh-Gilead".

Then the words, “about 1 month later” appear before the start of the text that we all have in our modern Bibles.

I’m not sure that this extra verse adds much, except that it tells us that it was only about 1 month from the time of Saul’s inauguration at Mitzpah until his opportunity to prove himself and establish his merit to be Israel’s king by rescuing Jabesh-Gilead. We also see that Jabesh-Gilead had become something like a fortress of last resort for what remained of the tribe of Gad’s and Reuben’s warriors, since they had been chased there by Nachash and his troops.

The Ammonites were descendants of Lot, nephew to Abraham. Thus they were Semites (descendants of Shem) and distant cousins of the Israelites. They lived to the east of the territory of Gad and Reuben and their capital city was Rabbath-Amman, which interestingly is today known as the modern city of Amman, capital of the Kingdom of Jordan (I don’t think that connection is any coincidence).

Yavesh-Gilead (also called Jabesh-Gilead) was a fortified city located east of the Jordan River in the territory of Gad. Apparently after the remnant of the combined forces of Gad and Reuben fled to **Yavesh-Gilead** for safety, Nachash brought his Ammonite troops there and set up a siege. It was obvious to Gilead’s leadership that they had no hope of winning this battle at their current troop strength and so chose the standard option for that era (when faced with such an unwinnable situation): they would surrender with terms. Such surrender usually had benefits for both sides. The attacking force didn’t waste time or resources in battle nor did they heavily damage property that they wished to acquire; and the besieged didn’t die or lose their homes and livelihoods. But Nachash was not a particularly agreeable fellow; his terms were that in return for not annihilating every last resident of Jabesh-Gilead he would blind the right eye of every Israelite male. His stated reason for doing this: “to bring disgrace upon all Israel” (or in most bibles, to bring “reproach” upon all Israel).

You have to understand ancient Middle Eastern terms and culture to appreciate the savage irony that Nachash is insisting upon. Although in many translations we’ll see the word “treaty” used (if you will make a treaty with us), in fact the Hebrew word is **b’rit**, which is more usually translated as “covenant”. A treaty is a covenant, and a covenant is a treaty; they were interchangeable terms in that era. As I’m sure you’ll recall a covenant was sealed in blood; an animal was sacrificed and cut-up and the local god’s name invoked as an oath. Thus the standard Biblical terminology was to “cut” a covenant (cut was not a synonym for “make”; it simply incorporated the idea of cutting up an animal). If an animal was not ritually cut-up, there was no valid covenant.

So Nachash is saying sarcastically that he’ll cut a covenant with them, all right: but what will be cut up to seal the treaty is not an animal but instead each and every Israelites’ right eye. To have an eye gouged out is one thing; to have your RIGHT eye gouged out is another. The right side of anything was regarded as the best side, the most powerful side. So to have one’s right eye removed brought on great shame.

Why was Nachash so intent in inflicting such harm on Israel? He hated them. In fact no specific reason is given for such hatred, but undoubtedly it was born centuries earlier when his

Ammonite ancestors were ejected from their land by Moses and Joshua. All over our planet we'll find wars over land that changed hands scores if not hundreds of years earlier. We have a similar case going on in Israel today. But what we need to notice is this almost irrational hatred of Israel harbored by Nachash. Other than the typical tribal skirmishes that occurred on a regular basis, there is nothing to suggest that Gad or Reuben had been unusually hard on their neighbors to the east, Ammon. So why was Nachash intent on doling out such severe retribution against the men of Gilead that he saw as a means of symbolically humiliating all Israel? Rather this hatred is the almost inexplicable kind that we have seen for centuries against the Jewish people, and now the State of Israel.

By cutting a covenant (a treaty) with the leaders of **Yavesh-Gilead**, essentially a vassal agreement was being created whereby the city of Jabesh-Gilead would owe tribute to Nachash. It was usual that foreign kings of that era were mainly seeking tribute (another source of income) when they marched against other cities. Most of the time they were only too happy to allow the current king of that city to stay in his position as long as he bowed down to the conqueror, kept the peace, and paid the required taxes and tribute because keeping the current king in place and city intact kept the economy running. To gouge out the right eye of every male of Gilead would do nothing but greatly reduce the amount of tribute possible.

But it is the nature of hatred to be destructively irrational, is it not? We saw it with Pharaoh. We saw it with Hitler. And we see it today with Hezbollah, Hamas, Fatah, and the bulk of Islam that is willing to give up anything to destroy Israel. Everything SHORT of turning over Israel lock, stock and barrel to her enemies has been offered in hopes of achieving peace and each time it is turned down. When, about 4 years ago, Israel gave up the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians, the first thing the Palestinians did was to rampage and destroy the fabulous greenhouses Israel had built and grew so much food in, and then they started destroying public buildings, schools, and infrastructure that as of then belonged to them! Then, when they had destroyed almost all their food growing capacity they sat in the remains and complained that they were starving and had no jobs and Israel (and the world) needed to give them food and money. Now THAT is irrational hatred.

Although I'm not a fan of his, I remember seeing a short news clip a few years ago of Phil Donohue (a TV talk show host), where he was holding a kind of forum on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. And after about an hour of discussion, when it was becoming apparent that utterly no solution was possible that could even reasonably satisfy both sides, he just exploded and said that in all of his life he had never seen such an insane situation where the only thing that seemed to guide decisions was hatred; hatred that was so intractable that one side was literally willingly to destroy itself if it meant that they could also destroy the other side. That's the underlying reason here in 1st Samuel 11 for Nachash's attack on Jabesh-Gilead: hatred of the Hebrew people.

In verse 3 the leaders of Jabesh-Gilead ask Nachash if he will allow them to send to Israel for help and if in 7 days none is forthcoming they will accept Nachash's horrible terms. Now while such an odd request (and an agreement from Nachash to allow) is difficult for us to fathom, we must understand that Nachash's purpose was to humiliate so he was more than happy to get the news out. Further I think he suspected that **Yavesh-Gilead** would get no help from Israel

and for very good reason: more than a century earlier they refused to answer the call to arms to punish to the tribe of Benjamin for the sexual attack upon a Levite's concubine in the city of Gibeah (a major city in the territory of Benjamin) that resulted in her death. Besides, a siege is a long lasting event (it can be months), so a week is a rather short period of time.

Messengers are sent from **Yavesh-Gilead** to Gibeah pleading for help. Gibeah (the same Gibeah where that terrible concubine incident had occurred so long ago) was where Saul lived. And we're told in verse 4 that the people of Gibeah wailed and cried when they heard the news. Now this certainly was not a happy day but why such a strong reaction from the people of Gibeah? They were a long way from Jabesh-Gilead (over 40 miles), and so were in no immediate danger; and there is no indication that Nachash had an intention or made any threat of crossing the Jordan River to attack any of the tribes on the west side. And since Gibeah was of the tribe of Benjamin and **Yavesh-Gilead** consisted of Gadites and Reubenites, on the surface it's hard to understand the depth of the anguish of the Benjamite residents of Gibeah. Concern yes, but despair no. Here's where some history explains yet another Bible story.

Turn your Bibles to Judges Chapter 20.

READ JUDGES 20:1- 11, 43- 46 AND JUDGES 21:1- 3, 8- 14

So there you have it. When (many years earlier) all of Israel had gathered in one accord to destroy Benjamin for their Sodom-like behavior at Gibeah when they ravaged to death the Levite's concubine, the city of **Yavesh-Gilead** refused to join the fight. Thus after the tribe of Benjamin was decimated by the huge combined tribal armies of Israel, the Israelite warriors launched a reprisal against **Yavesh-Gilead** for what they considered to be treasonous behavior and killed most of the inhabitants. During the process Israel captured 400 young unmarried girls from Jabesh-Gilead and later gave them as wives to the few remaining male inhabitants of Gibeah of Benjamin so that the tribe wouldn't entirely die out.

The result was that **Yavesh-Gilead** and Gibeah had close family ties. Lots of intermarriage had taken place and most of the inhabitants of the two cities were now closely related by blood. The majority of children born to the tribe of Benjamin after the Judges incident had mothers from the tribe of Gad and fathers from the tribe of Benjamin. Further since **Yavesh-Gilead** had essentially sided with Benjamin when no one else would, there was now a close bond between these folks (as one can easily imagine). But there was also a less than cordial relationship between **Yavesh-Gilead** and the rest of Israel who had mercilessly attacked them for merely refusing to participate in the war. So the completely logical place that the messengers would be sent to rescue Jabesh-Gilead was Gibeah of Benjamin, who were actually family. And in many ways the residents of Gibeah owed a century-old debt of gratitude to the residents of Jabesh-Gilead. This obviously also explains the high level of shock and anguish of the residents of Gibeah when they heard the news from the messengers coming from **Yavesh-Gilead**. This story begins to take on different and deeper dimensions when we understand this, doesn't it? There will be many more fascinating ties like this that I'll point out as we proceed.

Verse 5 explains that Sha'ul was out plowing fields with oxen when the messengers arrived at Gibeah, and the wailing was so loud that he heard it as he approached the city. We're told that

upon hearing the nature of the trouble that he became highly agitated and angry.

Now the usual explanation for this anger is that it was a righteous anger that resulted from the Spirit of God coming upon him. But when we understand the simple fact that the community that he was part of (Gibeah), and therefore much of his own family had aunts, uncles, cousins, children, in-laws and close friends who were under attack and in grave danger at Jabesh-Gilead we have to question whether it was a righteous anger that was the result of the Spirit of God coming upon him, or something else. I think it was not the anger but the **resolve** to do something about this pending catastrophe, along with a new and divine **capability** to lead men into battle (when there is no evidence that Saul had any leadership let alone military experience); *that* is what the Holy Spirit gave to him.

Saul's response is a strange one: he cut's up his oxen and sends the pieces off to the other tribes along with a message that they are to muster for battle against Nachash and anyone who refuses will have this happen to their oxen (along with the not so subtle hint that they personally may suffer the same fate as their oxen). Now where might Saul have thought of the idea to do such a thing?

Let's go back to the book of Judges.

READ JUDGES 19: 25 – end

As we conclude today let me point out again that these Bible stories didn't happen in isolation. There were reasons these people did what they did. But this decision to cut up the oxen also doesn't bode well for Saul. What that Levite did in dismembering his concubine's body and sending it all over Israel is so disgusting that it's hard to quantify. That Saul would use the same message only with oxen is certainly not as blood curdling or full of sin, but it isn't edifying either. Don't think that the people of Israel didn't perfectly understand the implication and parallel; that was for sure Saul's intention. We have this occurring even from the same city as where the concubine incident happened and we have Benjamin and Jabesh-Gilead AGAIN in the middle of this thing. Always watch for the patterns. They'll lead us to the truth.