

### I Samuel

#### Lesson 18 - Chapter 11 and 12

Let's pick up today with the story of the beginning of King Saul's reign as the first king of Israel as it is told in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel chapter 11. And before we re-read this short chapter and then summarize what we've learned about Samuel and Saul and the current condition of the tribes of Israel, let me reiterate that at least one aspect of the underlying theme that I have been emphasizing is that despite the divine providence and unseen holy guidance that shapes history and pushes forward God's redemptive agenda, it is all miraculously carried out within the free will of humans (both evil and righteous humans). And because this is the case it necessarily happens that human beings make decisions and choices in the context of our own lives and daily circumstances. It was no different for the Bible heroes and villains that we encounter in God's Word.

Thus even though the Bible's divinely inspired authors give us accurate and meaningful (yet exceedingly shortened) versions of cosmically important events whereby we can (in hindsight) see God's hand at work, in fact behind these events are the stories of real people living in real communities making decisions based on a multitude of factors such as the current political realities, their personal and family traditions, relationships and cultural entanglements, their age and health, hopes and aspirations, temperaments and personalities, personal preferences, societal trends, and more (just like mankind always has and always will).

It's when we lose track of this fundamental fact that the Bible becomes such an ethereal and lofty document that it is nearly unintelligible and hard for us to identify with; and thus more tricky than necessary to apply to our own lives and situations. It's when we lose sight that God's Word is as full of humanity as it is of divinity that we create the strangest doctrines and spend our precious time dwelling on trivia while overlooking the substance. So especially as we study the books of Samuel and Kings we will flesh-out these characters and the cultural and political and familial situations inside of which all that we read is occurring. Not only will the words on the pages of our Bibles suddenly make more sense to our minds, but it will show us more fully that the Lord still acts upon us and within us just as He acted within these beloved (and at times maligned) Bible characters that we are reading about. And in the vast majority of the time Yehoveh acts in ways hidden to us; and only with the passage of time when we stop to glance into the rearview mirrors of our lives do we occasionally detect His handiwork and recognize His purposes.

Let's re-read 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel chapter 11.

#### **RE-READ 1<sup>ST</sup> SAMUEL CHAPTER 11 all**

The leadership of Israel has acknowledged that the Lord has dealt with their demand for a

“king like their neighbors” in the person of Sha’ul of Gibeah. After Samuel summoned Israel’s elders and tribal leaders to Mizpah and presented them with their first king, he warned them that what they have chosen is evil in God’s eyes and unintended consequences awaited them.

Saul was not unanimously hailed by the 12 tribes as Israel’s new supreme leader. There were many who hated the idea of having a king; some because it was obvious that this angered God. Others were upset because it was so humiliating and hurtful to Samuel who had been leading them with selfless dedication for so many years. But several of the clan and tribal chiefs were incensed because a king would automatically impinge on their personal authority and sovereignty; the greatest portion of citizens with this particular mindset was those tribes who occupied the southern region of Canaan: Judah and Simeon.

Israel was (as of this time) divided into 3 identifiable political factions and alliances: the 8 tribes who occupied the north of Canaan, the 2 tribes who occupied the south of Canaan, and the 3 tribes who occupied the Trans-Jordan (land east of the Jordan River). I realize that  $8 + 2 + 3$  adds up to 13 and not 12 tribes, but this is because the tribe of Manassah split along clan lines with some clans electing to live in the Trans-Jordan and the remainder occupying the north of the Holy Land. King Saul’s tribe, Benjamin, lay at the center of Canaan and bordered all 3 political coalitions. This made Benjamin strategically important but also put them in a dicey situation because on the one hand they could pick and choose which alliance to affiliate with and thus give them the greatest advantage; but on the other hand they were vulnerable on 3 fronts. At this time Benjamin was generally aligned with the northern coalition with one notable exception: the city of Yavesh-Gilead that was in the Trans-Jordan (and this fact plays a pivotal role in the story we just read).

It was due to this unfavorable political situation that Saul was not immediately able to assume the throne and begin to rule like a real king; the opposition was just too great. So he went home to Gibeah and resumed normal everyday life as a farmer and herder and waited for his opportunity to prove his merit (especially to the dissenters) and hopefully gain the needed support. He didn’t have to wait long.

One day while he’s out plowing his family’s fields with a team of oxen he hears a loud ruckus coming from the city and finds out that some runners from the Trans-Jordanian city of Jabesh-Gilead have arrived with devastating news: Nachash, King of Ammon, had placed an ultimatum upon the city of Jabesh-Gilead: surrender and all the residents will live but have their right eyes gouged out, or fight and all will be slaughtered by Nachash’s overwhelming armed forces.

The people of Gibeah in Benjamin were wailing and crying upon hearing this and when Saul found out what was happening he reacted not by falling to pieces but by becoming full of anger and determining to rescue the citizens of Yavesh-Gilead from their fate. Naturally he full well knew that if he could persuade the tribes of Israel to muster its militia and follow him to battle Nachash, and that if God would grant him victory, chances were good that he could afterward assume the kingship of Israel with only minor opposition.

We spent quite a while in our last lesson discussing why it was that the people of Gibeah were

so upset over the happenings at Jabesh-Gilead, a city some 40 miles away, in a different tribal territory, located across the Jordan: it turns out that they were closely inter-related by blood. We looked back to about a century before the time of Saul when (as recorded in the book of Judges) 11 tribes of Israel ganged up on Benjamin to punish them, but the Gadite city of Yavesh-Gilead refused to join in. The result was that after the 11 tribes decimated Benjamin, they turned their fury upon Yavesh-Gilead and decimated them, too, in retaliation for their non-participation. Later, upon reflection of what had transpired, the tribal elders of the Israelites became concerned that the tribe of Benjamin would literally go extinct (so few were the survivors). So in a rather primitive (but expedient) solution, 400 virgins were captured from the city of Yavesh-Gilead and given to the few remaining Benjamite men as wives. The purpose of course was to repopulate the tribe of Benjamin; but the result was that the generation that came of it had mothers from the tribe of Gad and fathers from the tribe of Benjamin. While custom (and God's Law) technically made the offspring that came from the mixed tribal marriages Benjamites, still the cities of Gibeah (Benjamin) and Yavesh-Gilead (Gad) were now closely tied together by historical circumstance and by family.

King Saul (as did most of the other residents of Gibeah) had relatives and close friends living in Yavesh-Gilead and so it was logical that he would be angered and want to save them from Nachash. He sends out a message (and a not-so-veiled threat) to the tribes of Israel to muster for battle to rescue Jabesh-Gilead; the message was a directive to gather at Bezek and it was accompanied with a chunk of ox meat. Saul (obviously remembering the Levite who cut up his dead concubine into 12 sections and sent the hideous pieces to all the tribes insisting that they punish Benjamin for killing her) slaughters and cuts up his own team of oxen into pieces.

During this story we read that the Spirit of God descended upon Saul. This event is usually tied together with Saul's anger making it a righteous, God-inspired anger but I think that is a mistake. Rather we should tie Saul's not-so-righteous outrage to the equally not-so-righteous act of slaughtering and dismembering his oxen. The goal of this cruel and gross act was to intimidate the tribes into compliance but also to make them remember their guilt in their rash act (100 years earlier) of nearly eliminating Benjamin from the face of the earth. In the case of the Levite's concubine it was a gathering designed to come and punish Benjamin. Here in the case of Saul's oxen it was a gathering ordered by a Benjamite (Saul) to come and rescue other Benjamites (residents of Yavesh-Gilead). How could any Israelite refuse? Here was an opportunity to at least in some way atone for a century-old wrong that nearly wiped out the tribe of Benjamin. Saul proved immediately that he could be both clever and ruthless.

Now look at verse 8; there it says that 300,000 men from Israel AND 30,000 men from Judah came together to rescue Jabesh-Gilead. By the way: we'll get different numbers from different bible versions, some as high as 700,000 Israelites and 70,000 Judahites. This is mostly due to copyist errors and in some cases translators not believing the large numbers. But in each case the ratio is 10 Israelites for every Judahite. Notice how this rather innocuous statement slips in the important piece of information that at this point in history (or soon thereafter when this event was actually written down) the 3 main political factions of Israel became all the more solidified to the point that the Hebrews were identifying primarily with their political alliances rather than as a unified national entity of 12 tribes, even though they now had a king. This is so critical to understanding the words of the Bible from here forward (and especially as it concerns

prophecy). Judah saw themselves as apart from the other tribes, and the northern tribes acknowledge this. Judah tended to see them as a sovereign entity. Here we see the story's narrator deal with this by naming the northern alliance "Israel" while the southern alliance was called "Judah". Again: Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin, at this time part of the northern alliance, here called Israel.

Here's what this means for every Bible student: when the term Israel is used it MUST be used in the context of time. Israel began as merely one man's name (Jacob's new name), then it became a clan, after centuries in Egypt the clan grew large enough to be seen as a separate people (meaning an separate ethnic group), then as each of Jacob's sons' families grew large they were each given tribal status, then at Sinai God pronounced the tribes (when taken together) to be a **nation** set apart for Him. However from a human government standpoint, as of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel chapter 11, the 12 tribe conglomerate did not hold a "nation" status. Nation status was probably the primary goal of the northern alliance of Israelite tribes in they're demand for a king; they greatly desired for their gentile neighbors to regard them as a nation. As far as anyone knew in that era, in order to be considered a legitimate nation one had to have a king. Otherwise you were just a tribe or an ad hoc alliance of tribes and clans and families; without an identifiable and accepted central government there was no nation.

Thus one can't just lump together a variety of verses from Exodus, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Ezekiel and the New Testament where the word "Israel" appears and take them all to indicate the same thing. Here in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 11 verse 8 we see the use of the term Israel as generally meaning, "all the tribes **except** the southern tribes". And the southern tribes consisted of Judah and Simeon with Judah being dominant and Simeon quickly being assimilated by Judah. This mix would change a bit in but a handful of years upon Saul's death.

After gathering at a place called Bezek (while it's not certain, the belief is that Bezek was located about 12 miles northeast of Shechem), the runners from Yavesh-Gilead are sent home with the joyous news that help was on the way. The leaders of the city decide to play it coy and so they send an intentionally ambiguous message to Nachash: "Tomorrow we will come out to you...." Our CJB says, "we will surrender" but that misses the point. "Coming out" can mean surrender but it can also mean "give ourselves over to you", or it can mean "march out to battle against you". So they didn't lie to Nachash, they just gave him a report that allowed him to think whatever he wanted to think. And Nachash took it to mean surrender.

Using a rather standard Israeli military strategy that we've see a number of times thus far, Sha'ul divides his forces into 3 groups and attacks at morning watch, which means a little before dawn. Because the Ammonite troops were expecting to simply wake up and accept Yavesh-Gilead's meek surrender they were caught off guard with the furious attack of Saul's enormous militia. Those who survived ran in all directions and Nachash's army was effectively dissolved.

The battle achieved not only the deliverance of the residents of Jabesh-Gilead from the hand of a foreign enemy but it also gave Saul the victory and notoriety he needed to begin his reign. The people of Israel (in verses 12 and 13 meaning Israel in a general way as in the 12 tribes), were so elated in their victory that they now wanted to put to death all those among them who

had weeks earlier refused to accept Saul as their king. No doubt that would have meant most of Judah, but because Judah sent a sizeable contingent of troops to fight alongside the northern tribes obviously it demonstrated that Judah was not so bent on its own separateness and sovereignty that it would ignore their place as one of the 12 families of Jacob, or that they would openly defy the general political will of all the other tribes in accepting Saul as their king.

It was Samuel who was asked if they shouldn't execute all those who had dissented, but it was King Sha'ul who answered with the magnanimous and unifying edict that "no one will be put to death today because today YHWH has rescued Israel" (here Israel is meaning ALL Israel, all 12 tribes plus Levi). By this format of the people directing their request to Samuel but Saul making the decision and publically answering, the torch is passed. Samuel will now diminish as leader and Saul will increase. Samuel's role as Judge has ended, and now he is God's prophet who intercedes between God and His people but also brings God's oracle to the King. Here, at this moment in history, is the end of the era of the Judges and the beginning of the era of the Kings.

Now that the leadership and people of all Israel (in general) were on board, and in the joy and exuberance caused by their great victory, it was time for a national celebration and reaffirmation of Saul's coronation. The place selected was Gilgal, perhaps the holiest religious site (among the several in use) for the Hebrews at this time. This was the same place where Samuel had earlier commanded Sha'ul to go down and wait for him for 7 days. No doubt there was some kind of sanctuary there, and priests present, and certainly the Ark of the Covenant was there because we're told that "before Yehoveh they made Saul king". "Before Yehoveh" is an idiom or saying that effectively means "in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant."

The sacrifices offered really were part of a kind of a makeshift ceremony connected with the coronation event. There was no celebration or ritual specified within the Law to inaugurate a king because no king was contemplated at that time. In fact it was a very specific (and appropriate) kind of sacrifice that was employed here, the **Zevah Shelamim**; a voluntary kind that was permitted for generally any kind of celebration that was also giving God the glory and thanks for something good that is anticipated or has already happened. Further, the **Zevah Shelamim** can be eaten by the worshippers so in addition to the religious aspect of the coronation celebration this sacrifice also provided the main course for the accompanying feast.

Let's move on now to chapter 12.

### READ 1<sup>ST</sup> SAMUEL CHAPTER 12 all

Theologians usually call this story Samuel's farewell address but that is a bit off the mark. Samuel is not dying, or disappearing from the scene, or retiring; rather his role is changing. Since Israel now has a new political leader in King Saul, Samuel must settle his account with those he's led and served for the past several decades so that he can be at peace in his new role and the people will have a logical shift to Saul's authority.. Samuel has run his course as Israel's political leader and has obeyed the Lord by giving Israel the king they demanded. But in the story that begins in chapter 12 Israel starts to understand that they have given up more than they ever imagined by rejecting God's kingship and preferring a human to be their king.

In their headstrong and wrong minded enthusiasm to be “like all the other nations”, they have forgotten a national uniqueness that was embodied in their special relationship with God. The depth of their foolishness is starting to emerge and they know it, but it’s too late; they have their king and there is no returning to the old way. However there is a bit of good news in that Samuel will remain to actively intercede for them, pray for them and instruct them in the ways of the Lord.

That we have changed chapters does not mean we have changed location; we’re still at Gilgal immediately following King Saul’s reaffirmation ceremony. And as we look closely at this chapter in many senses Samuel’s address to the people is also a covenant renewal ceremony of sorts. Why renew the covenant? Because this is not only a change in leadership but a change in the form of government and therefore a change in how Yehoveh will administer His covenant justice upon His people. Whereas for the past 3 centuries or so the Lord’s justice has been administered by means of Judges, now it will be by means of a monarch. Back in chapter 8 we witnessed Samuel explain to the folks that having a king meant that the king had the authority to make all kinds of rulings over them. But despite those rulings (that would in many instances make following God’s laws more difficult for them) that is exactly what they were obligated to do under the Covenant of Moses; nothing has changed in that regard. God’s Torah remained intact.

So in verse 1 Samuel formally hands the scepter of political authority of Israel over to Sha’ul by saying, “there is the king walking ahead of you.....I have walked at your head from when I was a boy UNTIL TODAY”. Starting in verse 3 Samuel is clearing his account with the people and at the same time declaring his innocence. It was the people (not Samuel) that insisted upon an earthly king and now that they have one it’s time for the people to admit that Samuel never did them any wrong. Samuel was not at fault, nor was he inadequate in his leadership. The main thing he did NOT do was to take anything from the people. The Hebrew word translated as “take” is *laqah* and it is repeated in this story to draw the contrast between God’s Judge Samuel who served but did not take, and Israel’s new monarchy which will take but not serve. Though the people were naïve and blind to have demanded a new form of government now they are forced to publically admit before God that Samuel was just and honest and in no way deserved the unceremonious heave-ho that he received from them.

So Samuel tells that people to publically pronounce anything they have against him and they acknowledge that he has served them faithfully and not done them any wrong. And to cement the people’s statement for the record, Samuel invokes Yehoveh as the spiritual witness and King Saul as the earthly witness to the people’s legal declaration of Samuel’s innocence. Case closed.

In verse 6 the shoe is now on the other foot. Samuel essentially casts himself in the same light as Moses and Aaron, all 3 anointed by God for service to Him. And what follows amounts to a legal discourse. Samuel voluntarily stood before the people giving them an opportunity to accuse him of legal wrong doing and none having been found he now proceeds to accuse them! And like a prosecutor in a trial Samuel lays out a case against the Hebrew people and their leaders and begins with outlining the history leading up to this indictment. And this history begins with the righteous deeds that the Lord did for Israel to deliver them from Egypt and

bring them to a land of their own. The Hebrew word for righteous deeds is ***tzedekah***; it means deeds of mercy, and kindness, and grace. It involves no merit on the part of the one who receives. It is instructional for us to learn that in God's economy His DEFINITION of righteousness (in this context) is for us to do deeds of mercy and kindness and grace to others, performed within the framework of the Torah.

Righteousness (***tzedekah***) is so misunderstood especially within Christianity. Biblically speaking righteousness is on the one hand a condition or status bestowed upon us by God, and on the other hand righteousness is acts (deeds, works) that we physically and actively perform, which by definition is for the benefit of our fellow man. Judaism tends to focus almost exclusively on the latter and Christianity on the former. Such imbalance by both camps is unwarranted and misguided. One cannot hope to attain the first kind of righteousness by means of deeds; however upon being bestowed with righteousness by God we are duty bound to DO the 2<sup>nd</sup> kind of righteousness in which deeds are the point.

In verse 7 where our CJB says, "Now hold still, for I am going to enter into judgment with you" is little more cryptic than necessary. First, to "hold still" or "to stand" is meant in the same sense as "standing before the Judge". It is absolutely meant to imply a legal proceeding here in Samuel. And the people are essentially told to "Stand before the Judge (who is God)". The people are to stand as the accused, before God, so that Samuel can present his case as the prosecutor in a trial. God will judge them and pronounce His verdict through His prophet, Samuel.

Samuel reminds them that after Jacob had gone down to Egypt to live, the Israelites became slaves and they cried out to Yehoveh for deliverance, which He gave to them by bringing them to Canaan. However the ancestors of the accused responded to God's saving ***tzedekah*** on their behalf by being unfaithful to the Lord; they apostized and served other gods. In turn the Lord punished them by handing them over to the king of Hatzor, and to the Philistines, and to the king of Moab (to name just a few). What we have here is Samuel recounting an all too familiar theme found in the book of Judges: a theme I call the cycle of sin. The people apostize from God, they are oppressed by foreigners as punishment, they repent and ask for mercy, God hears and sends them a deliverer (a Judge), and they are restored. Over and over again Israel did this and they are on the verge of doing it again in their rejection of God as their sovereign, instead placing their trust in a human king.

Because the era of the Judges was what the current residents of Canaan were born into, and because it was typified by Israel's constant backsliding into apostasy, Samuel invokes the names of Israel's recent heroes: all being Judges. Yeruba'al was an alternate name for Gideon given to him by his father. Yiftach (Jephthah) was the infamous Judge who although delivered Israel from Ammon (the same enemy that King Saul had just defeated and so we see why Samuel chose Jephthah as one of only 4 Judges used as examples), but also killed his own daughter as a sacrifice to God. Bedan is a curious choice mainly because this name is unknown in either the Scriptures or Jewish Tradition. The general consensus is that this is a corruption (a copyist error) that has been handed down for more than 2000 years. The suspicion is that the real name is Barak since he was the one who fought and defeated Sisra and the King of Hatzor, something Samuel had just mentioned. The final name is Samuel.

Some say that this too is a copyist error since Samuel would have been too modest to mention himself. Therefore, they say it should be Samson, which connects well with Samuel's mention of the Philistines. That is certainly possible. However there is equally as good a reason that Samuel was indeed referring to himself because he is the last Judge; and it makes sense because Samuel was the most recent Judge to fight and defeat the Philistines.

Verse 12 adds a new piece of interesting information. It says this: "When you saw that Nachash the king of the people of Ammon was attacking you, you said to me 'no, we want a king to rule over us' ". In other words the author of this book writes that Samuel is saying that Nachash played a key role in the northern alliance of tribal leaders deciding that they needed a king to defend them from foreign threats. And these threats were quite real, and not mere contrived or exaggerated excuses to move to a monarchy form of government. Therefore the political condition at the time the leaders of Israel demanded that Samuel anoint a king was that the Philistines in the west were saber rattling, and Nachash in the east was on the move. These leaders felt that Israel was in a pincers and needed a military leader (a king) to protect them.

Let's stop here and we'll continue this story next week.