

Lesson 6
A Crown and a Warning
1 Samuel 11:1 – 12:25

Let's begin with a brief review of what occurred in the latter part of Chapter 10. The people wanted a human king to rule their nation, rejecting God as their leader. After Saul was privately anointed and publicly chosen as king, he returned to his hometown, Gibeah. Some of the people weren't too enthused with him though and asked, "How can this man save us?" Well, that will soon change, as Saul is about to have a defining moment.

Before we continue, let's pray.

Through the years of teaching Bible stories to 3 year olds about King Saul, they often focus on his relationship with David – not a good one. However, in this lesson, I learned about Saul's *initial* qualities and actions I had overlooked. He wasn't just a donkey wrangler who became king. Saul exhibited characteristics of a *great* king. He was humble, not revengeful, courageous, confident. But more importantly, he gave God glory for his success. Unfortunately, in future lessons, that would change all too quickly.

Chapter 11 takes us to the Israelite town of Jabesh-Gilead, which I'll refer to as Jabesh. It was located about 20 miles south of the Sea of Galilee, just east of the Jordan River. In rejecting God for a human king, the Jabeshites had set themselves up for disaster.

The enemy was Nahash, King of the Ammonites. He was proud, boastful and cruel. He had surrounded Jabesh, not allowing anyone to enter or leave; just waiting for the people to run out of food and starve to death. Jabesh would be the first of many conquests in Nahash's goal to rule all of Israel.

The Ammonites descended from Abraham's nephew, Lot, and although they were related to the Jewish people, they were longstanding enemies. The Ammonites were a warlike people with a well-organized army and superior weapons. They were fierce, cruel and predatory.

In Jabesh, the city elders were depending upon themselves instead of God to handle Nahash and the Ammonites. They knew they could not hold out long, so they proposed a treaty - a covenant - with Nahash. They thought that would simply mean they would hand over their town, pay whatever taxes he would demand of them and accept his rule. Unfortunately, this treaty with Nahash would break a *Divine Law*. In Deuteronomy, God had strictly forbidden His people to make a covenant with Ammonites.

I can imagine how Nahash reacted when the elders asked for a treaty. Pagan nations didn't make treaties; they annihilated and took what they wanted. However, in keeping with his sadistic nature, Nahash counters with *his* proposition – a painful and humiliating one. Basically he said, "Sure, I'll grant you a treaty, *only* if I gouge out the right eye of every male in the city."

Of all the things Nahash could have demanded, why gouge out their right eye? There are three possible reasons:

It was a military strategy for Nahash. He knew one-eyed archers didn't make the best soldiers. They needed *both* eyes to accurately aim their arrows. Also, half-blinded soldiers would be ineffective to fight him in the future.

Israel would be humiliated because they were too weak to prevent such an atrocity.

Lastly, Ammonites were just plain cruel. This barbarous mutilation was the usual punishment of pagan conquerors on the male population of a town.

Ammonites weren't content to have city inhabitants just be their servants. They tormented them and put them in intense pain.

After Nahash made *his* demand known, the city leaders did something *astounding* – they asked for a seven-day reprieve! They tell brutal Nahash – my paraphrase, “We would like you *not* to attack us, not scare us anymore and let us have a week to contact *everyone* in Israel to come save us by attacking and killing *you*. If no one comes to save us, we'll let you gouge out our right eyes.” Seven days to find someone – did you notice the language – “someone” to save us? Had they not heard about King Saul? Perhaps they *had* and were among those in Chapter 10 who questioned, “How can *he* save us?” More seriously, they did *not* call upon the Lord to save them.

Nahash likely mocked their request, but incredibly, and arrogantly for sure, he granted it, primarily because of his confidence in his military superiority. If Israel *could* mobilize an army in just 7 days, he was confident he could defeat it. Most Israelite tribes were farmers with crude weapons, if any at all. Their new king was also a farmer and inexperienced in warfare. Nahash could let his soldiers rest for a week and *still* have the victory he wanted without the expense of a long and costly siege. Every reason for allowing the messengers to leave was on his side.

HOWEVER! Don't you *love* “however” in stories of good vs. evil, where the underdog looks like he's a gonner? The “however” here was: *God* was in control and *Israel* was His chosen people.

Although help from other Israelite tribes seemed unlikely, the Jabesh messengers eventually reached Gibeah. Let's picture the scene. It was probably mid-afternoon when the messengers arrived. They are tired, soaked with sweat, and covered with dust. They entered Gibeah and related the impending horror in Jabesh.

As the news spread, people gathered around and the shocking situation sinks in. The people begin to weep loudly and sorrowfully. They may have wept because many living in Gibeah were related to inhabitants in Jabesh *or* perhaps they knew they would be *next* in Nahash's reign of terror.

Let's talk about Saul. Gibeah is where he was born, raised and lived. He knew no other lifestyle except that of a farmer. The outdoors, nature, domestic animals and tilling the ground behind oxen were his world. He probably hadn't been much further than where those donkeys had wandered to in Chapter 10! When he initially was made king, he hid in the supply area. And here, he emerges from behind oxen he'd been herding. Up to this point, Saul seemed a most unlikely choice to be Israel's king. He led cattle, not men. A tall, handsome, pretty boy, yes! But a *king*? Then, something supernatural happened.....

The Holy Spirit of God came powerfully upon Saul and he "burned with anger." The Holy Spirit just doesn't arrive *without* power, does He? The Hebrew text says Saul was *intensely* angry. It welled up inside him. Saul was gripped with *righteous* anger aroused by the Spirit of God Himself and it burned against the cruel and savage threat against the Lord's people, his fellow countrymen, his relatives; and they were pleading for help. *Man's* anger didn't overcome Saul. *God's Spirit* did.

Have you ever "burned with anger?" Anger is a powerful emotion – it can be productive – it can be destructive. In *this* passage, Saul's anger was a *righteous anger*.

Righteous anger is honorable. It's unleashed to obtain justice.

Righteous anger is calm. It is not chaotic.

Righteous anger is holy. Saul was not *consumed* by anger, but *compelled* by it.

Righteous anger is healthy. Saul's anger convicted others to act. His anger resulted in planned action; not blind rage.

Acting on strength and confidence from the Lord, Saul gave an *order* for the nation's men to gather for battle and he used an *unusual* way to get their attention. By taking the oxen he'd been plowing with, cutting them into pieces and sending those pieces throughout Israel, it became a graphic and dramatic visual aid for any Israelite considering *not* obeying Saul's call to fight. There would be a price to pay if they refused to respond.

Saul wasn't saying the same would happen to the *men* who didn't respond, but it would happen to the *oxen* of the men who didn't respond. If anyone had the excuse that they, "*just couldn't get away from the farm at the moment,*" Saul's actions made it clear that they would have nothing to farm *with* if they refused to help their brethren. Oxen were these pastoral people's livelihood. Saul basically threatened to take away their "tractors." When those hunks of ox-flesh came special delivery, all Israel knew there was a leader in the nation who was serious.

Even so, the fear of the LORD, *not* the fear of Saul, united the people, resulting in a vast army gathering to rescue Jabesh.

I imagined what it was like as a woman in Jabesh, whose husband, son, father, grandson – all my male family members, within a few days, would be tortuously disfigured. So, I just loved the simple, yet powerful message sent by Saul back to Jabesh. It's short and sweet. In so many words he said, "Tomorrow. Noon. Rescue." Basically, help is on the way.

Can you reflect on a time when you have faced distressing situations? Perhaps even right now you're experiencing a challenge that seems like an uphill climb dragging two dead elephants. Whether events slap us in the face

or slowly creep into our lives, God wants us to know that His help is on the way. When we cry out to the Lord like David did:

“I am weak. I am sick at heart. I am worn out from sobbing,” (Psalm 6) The Lord hears our cries. And David said about God,
“He is my shield, the power that saves me. He heard me from His sanctuary; my cry to Him reached His ears. He reached down from heaven and rescued me. The LORD, my God, lights up my darkness.”

What a privilege to commit our troubles to the Mighty Warrior!

In Jabesh, the people trusted the messenger’s news and their despair turned to joy. So confident of success, they told Nahash that the *next day* they would surrender and he could do whatever he wanted to them. Did they want to give Nahash a false sense of victory so his army wouldn’t be prepared for battle? Was Nahash such an egotist he thought these weak people failed to be rescued and he would soon inflict a cruel act of torture on them? Yes... And, yes!

But Saul didn’t wait for the next day. He had *already* marshaled an army at Bezek.

Not waiting for the light of day, Saul organized his army into three groups and they marched to Jabesh sometime between 3 and 6 am. The Ammonites were likely sleeping when Saul’s army entered their camp, surrounded them, catching them by surprise. By noon the Ammonites were utterly defeated. Of the Ammonite survivors, there weren’t even two of them *together* standing, walking or running away!

Saul wasn’t a soldier prior to this, let alone a military leader. Where did the wisdom and skill to plan a military operation and then pull it off so perfectly come from? How did this ex-herdsman demonstrate such *courage* to gather an entire nation to fight a cruel and savage enemy? Saul’s leadership came from the direct

empowerment of God's Holy Spirit, Who is the source of *all* leadership among God's people. When the Spirit of the God comes upon men and women, it will make them expert even without experience.

Saul also demonstrated his authority to *spare* lives. He said "no" to killing those who scoffed at him, humbly acknowledging the *Lord* had given them the victory. There would be no vengeful killing or retribution on that day. *That* day would be remembered as the day God delivered Israel from the oppressor; a day of salvation, not punishment.

By God's providence, the victory provided an opportunity for Saul to prove himself a king and be accepted by the people, and Samuel gathered them at Gilgal to officially install Saul as king.

The jubilant celebration that followed was something like . . . the victory party of the winning team after the Super Bowl, or, like the Angels winning the World Series – not that *that* will happen any time soon! If the Israelites had a band, it would have played, "Happy Days Are Here Again."

Samuel also wanted to give the people a *spiritual* perspective to remind them the living God will *always* be their King – with a capital K. No earthly king will *ever* replace God. So Samuel cut the festivities short and delivered a farewell speech – the last one he would make before the nation that he led most of his life. The transition from a theocracy to a monarchy was a *significant* change in Israel's history. This marked the end of the rule of Judges and Samuel became Israel's first kingmaker.

Before the people, Samuel reviewed his life, starting by saying that he's old and gray, which may have meant, "*At my age, I won't live long, so listen to what I have to say.*"

Gray hair: for those of us who *have* it and for those of you who *will* have it, I found these Scriptures about gray hair particularly inspiring!

“Now that I am old and gray, do not abandon me, O God. Let me proclaim Your power to this new generation, Your mighty miracles to all who come after me.”

Psalm 71:19

And God said, *“Even when you’re old, I’ll take care of you. Even when your hair turns gray, I’ll support you. I made you and will continue to care for you.”*

Isaiah 46:4.

Although gray hair shows wisdom in age and experience in life, I’m still going to hide mine!

In his speech, Samuel received confirmation from the people that they had not found injustice in his leadership or spiritual flaws as their Judge. His life was a life of integrity. Even in the matter of his sons, who were unlike him due to their greed and corruption, Samuel had shown *integrity* not partiality towards them. His actions matched the words he taught. He “walked the talk.”

Samuel continued with an “Israelite history lesson” to prove to the people their demand for a king was another rebellion against God. Samuel left no doubt that from the very beginning of when they began as a nation, it had *never* been men – not even great men like Moses –who delivered Israel. It had always been God.

Focusing on two facts, Samuel told them that when they forgot the Lord and worshipped idols, they were brought into trouble; and when they repented and cried out to God, He delivered them. In demanding a human king because they feared Nahash, had they not learned or they had forgotten how God protected them throughout their history?

Samuel then commanded the assembly of people to stand still. The Hebrew text says, “station yourselves.” In other words, get ready for this! This assembly was held during a season in Israel called the *wheat harvest* – the dry season; sometime in May to mid-June. When wheat crops were harvested, it seldom or never rained. Samuel knew only a sign from God would impress the people and he asked God to do something that did not normally happen that time of year. He called upon the Lord to provide a thunderstorm.

Let’s talk about storms for a moment. Having been born and raised in Southern California, I think storms here are often, “wimpy.” Let me explain why. While visiting family in Kentucky one year, I experienced a summer thunderstorm, replete with lightning and torrential rain. It terrified me. We were living in a house well over 100 years old and when the thunder rolled and the lightning cracked and it rained like I’d never seen before, I just knew the winds would lift the house up in the air like Dorothy’s house in the Wizard of Oz. *That* storm was not “wimpy.”

The Bible says thunder represents the loud and powerful voice of God. Remember how we read in 1 Samuel 7 that the Lord sent thunder so loud it threw the Philistines into a panic? Think about how loud that must have been! I’m sure the thunderstorm Samuel prayed for was definitely not “wimpy.” This miraculous display of divine intervention in the sky showed not only what mighty influence God has on earth but also what a powerful relationship Samuel had with God in his *prayer* life.

I read a humorous story about someone *else* with a healthy prayer life. A cranky woman was miffed because her neighbors had not invited her to a picnic. On the morning of the picnic, one of the neighbors finally called and invited her to

go along. "It's too late," snapped the woman at the caller, "I've already prayed for rain."

Can you envision the stubborn Israelites, standing in the midst of a storm that only the omnipotent God could create? I envision them screaming, falling to the ground, trying to cover themselves, running in terror. I'd say it made quite an impression on them, wouldn't you?

The storm displayed not only God's power, but also His judgment. Heavy rain during the wheat harvest could destroy their crops leaving them destitute. This storm was prayed for by Samuel to emphasize the gravity of Israel's sin in asking for a king. This king-business was serious business to God, and now it becomes serious to His people.

They have been drenched and their crops threatened. They stood in awe of the Lord and of Samuel, finally acknowledging the greatness of their sin in general, and specifically their sin in demanding a king. Terrified, they begged Samuel to pray for them so that God wouldn't completely destroy them.

Even today, some of us won't admit we're rebellious *except* when experiencing storms. God may use storms to get our attention – to help us turn back to Him. Yes, God will always be with us in the midst of a storm, but oh that we could *avoid* storms due to our disobedience and rebellion.

Samuel so loved his people. He didn't ask God to send a huge thunderstorm just for fun. He wanted to help them obey the Lord. When he heard their confession, he comforted them; he encouraged them. This takes us to Chapter 12 verse 20 - an example of God's amazing grace! Although they had done evil, Samuel tells them not to be afraid. Shouldn't he have said, "You've been so evil you should be afraid of what's going to happen to you!"? Instead, Samuel tells them not to be afraid. Not because it's okay to be evil but because God's pure grace doesn't treat us the way we deserve!

Samuel didn't minimize the magnitude of their sin, but he didn't want them to turn *away* from God and turn *towards* idols. Idols lead to emptiness – like trying to satisfy our hunger with cotton candy, or our thirst with a coke. It may taste sweet to our senses, but in the end will only leave us hungrier and thirstier. Who will save us and give us lasting satisfaction? Jesus.... Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* John 6:35

When I read the verse about idols, initially I said to myself . . . quite confidently, "I don't think I have any idols in my life. I didn't even watch the American Idol TV show!" Then I learned more about what an idol can be in the life of a believer and I changed my tune. An idol can be *anything* a believer gives higher priority to than time with God. An idol can be a home, a job, a relationship, excessive time looking at a computer or TV screen – whatever takes up "God time." I've read that, "The primary danger of the television or computer screen lays not so much in the behavior it *produces*, as the behavior it *prevents*." Hmmm. We tend to steer, where we stare, don't we? So, I've had to ask myself, "What are the things in my life; things I do, watch or read, that replaces time I need to spend with my Heavenly Father? And am I giving God *leftover* time?" Rick Warren wrote a great devotional about how we use our time. I really liked what he said. "If Satan can't get you to be bad, he'll just get you to be busy."

In Chapter 12 verse 22, Samuel told the people: *"For the sake of His great name the Lord will not reject His people, because the Lord was pleased to make you His own."* I thought this verse was *beautiful*, but I wanted to understand it better. I learned that "His great name" not only includes names for God, like Elohim, Yahweh, Jehovah, Adoni, and *numerous* equally glorious, amazing and perfect names; but also, "His great name", refers to the countless *characteristics*

of God: infinite, merciful, forgiving, all-loving, holy, lawgiver, faithful, just, all-powerful, all knowing, all-present. . . How I wish we had time to name *every one* of His names! God's *name* represents His glory and His character.

In verse 22 where it says, "*...the Lord was pleased to make you His own.*" What does "make them His own" mean? 2 Samuel 7:23 says that *Israel* is: "*the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for Himself.*"

There is a promise – a covenant – a permanent relationship – between God and Israel. In spite of their sin He would not – could not – destroy them. The relationship is permanent because of God's character – His name.

Believers stand on this great foundation: God's commitment to us is not because of *us* - because we are *sinful*. God's commitment is in *Himself*, because He is perfect and committed to His name, to *who* He is, to His perfection, to His glorious character. We have hope in God because He is *pleased to make us His own*.

Samuel's responsibility as Judge will cease but he will continue to pray for and teach the people he has led and loved. I was convicted by what Samuel said about prayer. To him, failing to pray for God's people was a sin. We know killing and stealing are sins, but failing to *pray* for someone?

May God lead us to be mature intercessory prayer warriors!

Samuel concludes his address to the people summing it up with three instructions and one "yet".

Fear God: Be in awe of Him; respect Him.

Serve God: Serve Him faithfully and live for Him.

Remember God: Reflect on all the great things God has done.

Yet: This is the warning. Destruction will be the consequence for sin.

How is our nation different from Jabesh-Gilead? When a nation built on a moral and God-centered foundation rejects God and its commitment to God slackens, won't destruction of the moral fiber of the people be inevitable? If the history of the Jewish nation proved anything, it was that they resisted God's authority. These days, do we do any better?

The good news however, is that our gracious Lord always, *always*, reminds us He is waiting for us. The Psalmist wrote: *"For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon you."*

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."

And God says: *"Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you."*

Isn't that good news for us - for our nation?

Throughout this lesson, did you see the weaving of God's perfect plan in the events, even though the people turned away from Him? God *was* and *is* and always *will be sovereign*. People are free to make their own decisions, good or bad, but it is Jehovah who will ultimately accomplish His purposes.

This quote from J. Vernon McGee seems quite applicable:

"This is God's universe and He does things His way. We may think we have a better way... but we don't have a universe."

Let us pray.