

CHAPTER 11

In this chapter we have the first-fruits of Saul's government, in the glorious rescue of Jabesh-Gilead out of the hands of the Ammonites. Let not Israel thence infer that therefore they did well to ask a king (God could and would have saved them without one); but let them admire God's goodness, that he did not reject them when they rejected him, and acknowledge his wisdom in the choice of the person whom, if he did not find fit, yet he made fit, for the great trust he called him to, and enabled, in some measure, to merit the crown by his public services, before it was fixed on his head by the public approbation. Here is,

- I.** The great extremity to which the city of Jabesh-Gilead, on the other side of Jordan, was reduced by the Ammonites (v. 1-3).
- II.** Saul's great readiness to come to their relief, whereby he signalized himself (v. 4-10).
- III.** The good success of his attempt, by which God signalized him (v. 11).
- IV.** Saul's tenderness, notwithstanding this, towards those that had opposed him (v. 12, 13).
- V.** The public confirmation and recognition of his election to the government (v. 14, 15).

~~<0110>~~ 1 SAMUEL 11:1-4

EXTREMITY OF JABESH-GILEAD

The Ammonites were bad neighbours to those tribes of Israel that lay next them, though descendants from just Lot, and, for that reason, dealt civilly with by Israel. See ~~<0219>~~Deuteronomy 2:19. Jephthah, in his time, had humbled them, but now the sin of Israel had put them into a capacity to make head again, and avenge that quarrel. The city of Jabesh-Gilead had been, some ages ago, destroyed by Israel's sword of justice, for not appearing against the wickedness of Gibeah (~~<0210>~~Judges 21:10); and now being replenished again, probably by the posterity of those that then

escaped the sword, it is in danger of being destroyed by the Ammonites, as if some bad fate attended the place. Nahash, king of Ammon (^{<390>}1 Chronicles 19:1) laid siege to it. Now here,

I. The besieged beat a parley (v. 1): “*Make a covenant with us, and we will surrender upon terms, and serve thee.*” They had lost the virtue of Israelites, else they would not have thus lost the valour of Israelites, nor tamely yielded to serve an Ammonite, without one bold struggle for themselves. Had they not broken their covenant with God, and forsaken his service, they needed not thus to have courted a covenant with a Gentile nation, and offered themselves to serve them.

II. The besiegers offer them base and barbarous conditions; they will spare their lives, and take them to be their servants, upon condition that they shall *put out their right eyes*, v. 2. The Gileadites were content to part with their liberty and estates for the ransom of their blood; and, had the Ammonites taken them at their word, the matter would have been so settled immediately, and the Gileadites would not have sent out for relief. But their abject concessions make the Ammonites more insolent in their demands, and they cannot be content to have them for their servants, but, 1. They must torment them, and put them to pain, exquisite pain, for so the thrusting out of an eye would do.

2. They must disable them for war, and render them incapable, though not of labour (that would have been a loss to their lords), yet of bearing arms; for in those times they fought with shields in their left hands, which covered their left eye, so that a soldier without his right eye was in effect blind.

3. They must put a *reproach upon all Israel*, as weak and cowardly, that would suffer the inhabitants of one of their chief cities to be thus miserably used, and not offer to rescue them.

III. The besieged desire, and obtain, seven days' time to consider of this proposal, v. 3. If Nahash had not granted them this respite, we may suppose the horror of the proposal would have made them desperate, and they would rather have died with their swords in their hands than have surrendered to such merciless enemies: therefore Nahash, not imagining it possible that, in so short a time, they should have relief, and being very secure of the advantages he thought he had against them, in a bravado gave them seven days, that the reproach upon Israel, for not rescuing them,

might be the greater, and his triumphs the more illustrious. But there was a providence in it, that his security might be his infatuation and ruin.

IV. Notice is sent of this to Gibeah. They said they would send messengers *to all the coasts of Israel* (v. 3), which made Nahash the more secure, for that, he thought, would be a work of time, and none would be forward to appear if they had not one common head; and perhaps Nahash had not yet heard of the new-elected king. But the messengers, either of their own accord or by order from their masters, went straight to Gibeah, and, not finding Saul within, told their news to the people, who fell a weeping upon hearing it, v. 4. They would sooner lament their brethren's misery and danger than think of helping them, shed their tears for them than shed their blood. They wept, as despairing to help the men of Jabesh-Gilead, and fearing lest, if that frontier-city should be lost, the enemy would penetrate into the very bowels of their country, which now appeared in great hazard.

~~CHAP~~ I SAMUEL 11:5-11

THE DISTRESS OF JABESH-GILEAD

What is here related turns very much to the honour of Saul, and shows the happy fruits of that other spirit with which he was endued. Observe here,

I. His humility. Though he was anointed king, and accepted by his people, yet he did not think it below him to know the state of his own flocks, but went himself to see them, and came in the evening, with his servants, *after the herd out of the field*, v. 5. This was an evidence that he was not puffed up with his advancement, as those are most apt to be that are raised from a mean estate. Providence had not yet found him business as a king; he left all to Samuel; and therefore, rather than be idle, he would, for the present, apply himself to his country business again. Though the sons of Belial would, perhaps, despise him the more for it, such as were virtuous and wise, and loved business themselves, would think never the worse of him. He had no revenues settled upon him for the support of his dignity, and he was desirous not to be burdensome to the people, for which reason, like Paul, he worked with his hands; for, if he neglect his domestic affairs, how must he maintain himself and his family? Solomon gives it as a reason why

men should look well to their herds because *the crown doth not endure to every generation*, ^{<1723>}Proverbs 27:23, 24. Saul's did not; he must therefore provide something surer.

II. His concern for his neighbours. When he perceived them in tears, he asked, "*What ails the people that they weep?*" Let me know, that, if it be a grievance which can be redressed, I may help them, and that, if not, I may weep with them." Good magistrates are in pain if their subjects are in tears.

III. His zeal for the safety and honour of Israel. When he heard of the insolence of the Ammonites, and the distress of a city, a mother in Israel, *the Spirit of God came upon him*, and put great thoughts into his mind, *and his anger was kindled greatly*, v. 6. He was angry at the insolence of the Ammonites, angry at the mean and sneaking spirit of the men of Jabesh-Gilead, angry that they had not sent him notice sooner of the Ammonites' descent and the extremity they were likely to be reduced to. He was angry to see his neighbours weeping, when it was fitter for them to be preparing for war. It was a brave and generous fire that was now kindled in the breast of Saul, and such as became his high station.

IV. The authority and power he exerted upon this important occasion. He soon let Israel know that, though he had retired to his privacy, he had a care for the public, and knew how to command men into the field, as well as how to drive cattle out of the field, v. 5, 7. He sent a summons to all the coasts of Israel, to show the extent of his power beyond his own tribe, even to all the tribes, and ordered all the military men forthwith to appear in arms at a general rendezvous in Bezek. Observe, 1. His modesty, in joining Samuel in commission with himself. He would not execute the office of a king without a due regard to that of a prophet.

2. His mildness in the penalty threatened against those that should disobey his orders. He hews a yoke of oxen in pieces, and sends the pieces to the several cities of Israel, threatening, with respect to him who should decline the public service, not, "Thus shall it be done to *him*," but, "Thus shall it be done to his *oxen*." God had threatened it as a great judgment (^{<1838>}Deuteronomy 28:31), *Thy ox shall be slain before thy eyes, and thou shalt not eat thereof*. It was necessary that the command should be enforced with some penalty, but this was not nearly so severe as that which was affixed to a similar order by the whole congregation, ^{<0205>}Judges 21:5. Saul wished to show that his government was more gentle than that which

they had been under. The effect of this summons was that the militia, or trained bands, of the nation, *came out as one man*, and the reason given is, because *the fear of the Lord fell upon them*. Saul did not affect to make them fear him, but they were influenced to observe his orders by the fear of God and a regard to him who had made Saul their king and them members one of another. Note, 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.

V. His prudent proceedings in this great affair, v. 8. He numbered those that came in to him, that he might know his own strength, and how to distribute his forces in the best manner their numbers would allow. It is the honour of princes to know the number of their men, but it is the honour of the King of kings that *there is not any number of his armies*, ^{<K21B>} Job 25:3. In this muster, it seems, Judah, though numbered by itself, made no great figure; for, as it was one tribe of twelve, so it was but an eleventh part of the whole number, 30,330, though the rendezvous was at Bezek, in that tribe. They wanted the numbers, or the courage, or the zeal for which that tribe used to be famous; so low was it, just before the sceptre was brought into it in David.

VI. His faith and confidence, and (grounded thereon) his courage and resolution, in this enterprise. It should seem that those very messengers who brought the tidings from Jabesh-Gilead Saul sent into the country to raise the militia, who would be sure to be faithful and careful in their own business, and them he now sends back to their distressed countrymen, with this assurance (in which, it is probable, Samuel encouraged him): “*To-morrow, by such an hour, before the enemy can pretend that the seven days have expired, you shall have deliverance*, v. 9. Be you ready to do your part, and we will not fail to do ours. Do you sally out upon the besiegers, while we surround them.” Saul knew he had a just cause, a clear call, and God on his side, and therefore doubted not of success. This was good news to the besieged Gileadites, whose right eyes had wept themselves dry for their calamities, and now began to fail with looking for relief and to ache in expectation of the doom of the ensuing day, when they must look their last; the greater the exigence the more welcome the deliverance. When they heard it they were glad, relying on the assurances that were sent to them. And they sent into the enemies' camp (v. 10) to tell them that next

day they would be ready to meet them, which the enemies understood as an intimation that they despaired of relief, and so were made the more secure by it. If they took not care, by sending out scouts, to rectify their own mistake, they must thank themselves if they were surprised: the besieged were under no obligation to give them notice of the help they were assured of.

VII. His industry and close application to this business. If he had been bred up to war from his youth, and had led regiments as often as he had followed doves, he could not have gone about an affair of this nature more dexterously nor more diligently. When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon men it will make them expert even without experience. A vast army (especially in comparison with the present usage) Saul had now at his foot, and a long march before him, nearly sixty miles, and over Jordan too. No cavalry in his army, but all infantry, which he divides into three battalions, v. 11. And observe, 1. With what incredible swiftness he flew to the enemy. In a day and a night he came to the place of action, where his own fate, and that of Israel, must be determined. He had passed his word, and would not break it; nay, he was better than his word, for he promised help next day, *by that time the sun was hot* (v. 9), but brought it before day, *in the morning-watch*, v. 11. Whom God helps he *helps right early*, ~~1945~~ Psalm 46:5.

2. With what incredible bravery he flew upon the enemy. Betimes in the morning, when they lay dreaming of the triumphs they expected that day over the miserable inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead, before they were aware he was in the midst of their host; and his men, being marched against them in three columns, surrounded them on every side, so that they could have neither heart nor time to make head against them.

Lastly, To complete his honour, God crowned all these virtues with success. Jabesh-Gilead was rescued, and the Ammonites were totally routed; he had now the day before him to complete his victory in, and so complete a victory it was that those who remained, after a great slaughter, were scattered so that *two of them were not left together* to encourage or help one another, v. 11. We may suppose that Saul was the more vigorous in this matter,

1. Because there was some alliance between the tribe of Benjamin and the city of Jabesh-Gilead. That city had declined joining with the rest of the

Israelites to destroy Gibeah, which was then punished as their crime, but perhaps was now remembered as their kindness, when Saul of Gibeah came with so much readiness and resolution to relieve Jabesh-Gilead. Yet that was not all; two-thirds of the Benjamites that then remained were provided with wives from that city (^{<07214>}Judges 21:14), so that most of the mothers of Benjamin were daughters of Jabesh-Gilead, for which city Saul, being a Benjamite, had therefore a particular kindness; and we find they returned his kindness, ^{<0811>}1 Samuel 31:11, 12.

2. Because it was the Ammonites' invasion that induced the people to desire a king (so Samuel says, ^{<0922>}1 Samuel 12:12), so that if he had not done his part, in this expedition, he would have disappointed their expectations, and for ever forfeited their respect.

^{<09112>}1 SAMUEL 11:12-15

SACRIFICES OFFERED TO GOD

We have here the improvement of the glorious victory which Saul had obtained, not the improvement of it abroad, though we take it for granted that the men of Jabesh-Gilead, having so narrowly saved their right eyes, would with them now discern the opportunity they had of avenging themselves upon these cruel enemies and disabling them from ever straitening them in like manner again; now shall they be avenged on the Ammonites for their right eyes condemned, as Samson on the Philistines for his two eyes put out, ^{<07638>}Judges 16:28. But the account here given is of the improvement of this victory at home.

I. The people took this occasion to show their jealousy for the honour of Saul, and their resentment of the indignities done him. Samuel, it seems, was present, if not in the action (it was too far for him to march) yet to meet them when they returned victorious; and to him, as judge, the motion was made (for they knew Saul would not be judge in his own cause) that the sons of Belial that would not have him to reign over them should be brought forth and slain, v. 12. Saul's good fortune (as foolish men commonly call it) went further with them to confirm his title than either his choice by lot or Samuel's anointing him. They had not courage thus to move for the prosecution of those that opposed him when he himself

looked mean, but, now that his victory made him look great, nothing would serve but they must be put to death.

II. Saul took this occasion to give further proofs of his clemency, for, without waiting for Samuel's answer, he himself quashed the motion (v. 13): *There shall not a man be put to death this day, no, not those men, those bad men, that had abused him, and therein reflected on God himself,*

1. Because it was a day of joy and triumph: *“To day the Lord has wrought salvation in Israel; and, since God has been so good to us all, let us not be harsh one to another. Now that God has made the heart of Israel in general so glad, let not us make sad the hearts of any particular Israelites.”*

2. Because he hoped they were by this day's work brought to a better temper, were now convinced that this man, under God, could save them, now honoured him whom before they had despised; and, if they are but reclaimed, he is secured from receiving any disturbance by them, and therefore his point is gained. If an enemy be made a friend, that will be more to our advantage than to have him slain. And all good princes consider that their power is for edification, not for destruction.

III. Samuel took this occasion to call the people together *before the Lord in Gilgal*, v. 14, 15.

1. That they might publicly give God thanks for their late victory. There they *rejoiced greatly*, and, that God might have the praise of that which they had the comfort of, they *sacrificed to him*, as the giver of all their successes, *sacrifices of peace-offerings*.

2. That they might confirm Saul in the government, more solemnly than had been yet done, that he might not retire again to his obscurity. Samuel would have the kingdom renewed; he would renew his resignation, and the people should renew their approbation, and so in concurrence with, or rather in attendance upon, the divine nomination, they made Saul king, making it their own act and deed to submit to him.