

## **The Real King**

### **1 Samuel 11:1-15**

We Christians can be a funny bunch. From time to time we can get a bit insecure about our Christianity. We get doubts as to whether God really is on our side. We look at our Christian lives in the context of our Western world and what our Western world values and we feel something's missing.

- Maybe we're lacking a few material things.
- Maybe our health's not as good as we'd like.
- Maybe others seem to be having more fun.

We compare ourselves with those around us and we seem to come out second best. They're more prosperous, more with it, more recognised, more honoured.

And so we feel insecure. We go searching for the self-help books or gurus to fix things up. We look to the wisdom they've followed to get their success. We assume if we follow it too, we'll get similar success. Our lives will begin to look more like their lives. We'll get the things we envy in their lifestyle.

As we've gone through these chapters of 1 Samuel, we've seen Israel had a similar insecurity on a national level. They looked at the nations round them. They used modern technology. They had kings to lead them. Their economies were progressive. They looked strong. And they looked at themselves and felt they just didn't measure up. They struggled. They didn't seem very united. They had trouble asserting their rights over their own land. They needed help.

And so they went to the ancient equivalent of the self-

help books – to the wisdom of their age. Kings are the answer. The other nations all have kings. We don't. We need to change our political system. That'll solve our problems. Getting a king will bring salvation.

And so they demanded a king of God's prophet. God granted their request – but, at the same time, rebuked them for their rebelliousness. He told them real wisdom wasn't to go for the self-help books – real wisdom was to submit to God as King.

In 1 Samuel 10, God gives them a king – a guy from the tribe of Benjamin by the name of Saul. Yet, the chapter finishes with a question ringing in our ears. Verse 26:

*Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched. But some troublemakers said, "How can this fellow save us?" They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent.*

Can this fellow Saul save us?

## **The New Threat**

Chapter 11 begins with a threat to Israel.

*Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, "Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you."*

*But Nahash the Ammonite replied, "I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel."*

*The elders of Jabesh said to him, "Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you."*

This comes as a bit of a surprise. From the question at the end of chapter 10, we're expecting a story that'll tell us whether or not this fellow Saul can save them. Yet, their problem's been with the Philistines – that's the enemy that's sprinkled throughout the earlier chapters. They're the ones that gave rise to the demand for a king. Israel wants political salvation from their oppression.

But the threat comes from the other side of the country. The Philistines were to the west of Israel. They dominated the coastal plain. Ammon and Jabesh Gilead are on the east side of the Jordan River. It's not what we're expecting.

The mention of Jabesh Gilead also takes us back to the last story in the book of Judges. It's a story that comes from a time when it's emphasised there's no king in the land – everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It's also a story of moral corruption and civil war. The tribe of Benjamin – the tribe from which King Saul comes – was nearly wiped out because they refused to take action against their tribal members who committed great evil.

- At that time, the people from Jabesh Gilead had not answered the summons to come and deal with Benjamin's wickedness. Thus, Israel took punitive action against them.
- One of the results of that punitive action was that 400 virgins were taken from Jabesh Gilead and given to the remaining men of Benjamin so the tribe would not be wiped out of Israel.

That's the city that's now threatened. They may very well have wondered whether their fellow Israelites would bother saving them. Nevertheless, they're given opport-

unity to find out. They make a deal with Nahash. They're allowed to search for a saviour – for someone to rescue them. It's another echo of the book of Judges – for the essential nature of the judges is not what we think when we hear the word. Their primary task wasn't judicial; rather, they were saviours – people God used to rescue His people from their enemies.

Their deal's ambiguous – despite the way the NIV translates it. They say they'll *come out* – rather than *surrender* – if no help arrives.

- Nahash interprets that in terms of coming out to surrender.
- But it could equally be coming out to give battle.

Anyway, Nahash allows them to send messengers to see if any help will come.

- He may have been confident no help would come.
- He may have felt confident he could deal with any help that did come – and thus achieve an even greater victory.
- He may just have seen this as an opportunity not to have to go through the long and difficult process of a siege.

So the town of Jabesh Gilead sends out messengers to Israel seeking a saviour.

## **Saul's Position**

The story continues in verse 4:

*When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and reported these terms to the people, they all wept aloud. Just then Saul was returning from the fields, behind his oxen, and he asked, "What is wrong with the people? Why are they weeping?" Then they repeated to him what the men of Jabesh had said.*

*When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, "This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel." Then the terror of the Lord fell on the people, and they turned out as one man.*

We're only told of the messengers that go to Gibeah.

- Maybe this was simply their first port of call.
- Maybe they went here first because of the family connection.
- Maybe it's because that's where the king is.

We're not told. Gibeah, however, was the town that did the great evil at the end of the book of Judges. It was their actions – and the refusal of their fellow-Benjamites to bring them to account – that led to the civil war. In Gibeah, the messengers get a sympathetic hearing – and they get a favourable response from Saul.

What's Saul been up to? We leave him at the end of chapter 10 as the new leader of Israel – the one who's given to them in response to their demand for a king. Yet he doesn't seem to have done much in the way of being a king in the meantime. As we saw last week, he didn't deal with the Philistine outpost at Gibeah. Since, then:

- He hasn't built himself a palace.
- He hasn't found himself a royal crown.
- He hasn't established a standing army.
- He hasn't brought in a new political system.

Instead, he seems to have gone back to farming. When these messengers arrive, Saul's out ploughing the family fields with the family oxen. He hasn't taken any initiative

to deal with the problem of the Philistines. Maybe the troublemakers are right – maybe this guy can't save Israel.

Yet, Saul does act now – when he hears this news of a threat to Jabesh Gilead. He kills the oxen, cuts them into pieces and sends them throughout Israel. Once again, it reminds us of the story at the end of judges. It was the Levite's action in cutting his dead concubine into pieces and sending them throughout Israel that started the civil war with Benjamin. A very big difference here is that we're told Saul does this after God's Spirit rushes on him. Here we have God's chosen king empowered by God for action against these enemies.

### Saul the Judge

And he does take action. Verse 8:

*When Saul mustered them at Bezek, the men of Israel numbered three hundred thousand and the men of Judah thirty thousand.*

*They told the messengers who had come, "Say to the men of Jabesh Gilead, 'By the time the sun is hot tomorrow, you will be delivered.'" When the messengers went and reported this to the men of Jabesh, they were elated. They said to the Ammonites, "Tomorrow we will surrender to you, and you can do to us whatever seems good to you."*

*The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.*

At this point, we're left wondering whether the political

situation in Israel has changed. The people demanded a king. God gave them a king. In other words, on the surface there's been this change in leadership pattern. But the story itself reads like a story from the book of Judges. Sure, Saul takes action – but, just like the judges, he takes action because he's chosen and empowered by God to do so.

- It's God's Spirit who comes on Saul in power and stirs him up to action.
- It's the terror of Yahweh that falls on the people and unites them for action against the enemy.

Yes, Saul provides leadership – but the victory is God's doing. The people of Jabesh Gilead aren't delivered because Israel now have a king like the nations. They're delivered because God continues to act for His people. God remains their true King. God delivers them from their enemies. God alone is the One who offers them salvation. At that level, nothing's changed.

### Saul the King

The narrative moves back to the troublemakers' question from chapter 10 – the question that's been hanging in the air throughout this story – the question that's now had a fairly significant answer in terms of what's happened at Jabesh-Gilead. 11:12:

*The people then said to Samuel, "Who was it that asked, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Bring these men to us and we will put them to death."*

Why do they want these men put to death?

- Is there some motive of vengeance here – something petty and wrong?
- Or is it a motive that stems from concern for God and God's reputation? God made His will clear in

choosing Saul as king. The validity of that choice is now confirmed by this victory. In voicing their objections to Saul earlier, these troublemakers have opposed God's revealed will. They demonstrated a rebellious attitude towards God. Death is the deserved punishment for such rebellion.

Now, I suspect that for most of us, if we asked the question – and I'm not suggesting it's a question we're likely to ask – but if we did ask it, it would probably be in line with seeking vengeance. These troublemakers have caused us trouble – it's right we cause them some trouble in return. And so we think: it's not a very noble question – Saul was right to reject it.

But we need to think of the question from the other perspective – because I suspect we don't think from this perspective often enough. These guys opposed God. God made His choice known. God announced His choice clearly through His established prophet. These troublemakers questioned that – even despised it.

- It's not that they were saying this whole king business is a rejection of God's rule over us – that they were taking God's side rather than Israel's side.
- It's not that they were saying it's only God who can save us – not a mere man.

They rejected God's revealed will. The question is: What should God do about those who oppose Him? And what should God's people do about those who oppose God?

These days, there are people who reject the apostle Paul. Now the New Testament makes quite plain that God chose Paul as His apostle – His special messenger. God gave Paul authority as an apostle. God gave him the task

of taking the gospel especially to the Gentiles. Yet, there are those today who reject Paul's authority. They don't like some of the things Paul wrote in the New Testament and they think that, if they can reject Paul, then they can reject the things he wrote. What should God do about such people who want to reject part of His word? What should we Christians do with such people?

These days, there are people who reject God's appointed King still – not Saul, but Jesus.

- Some treat Him simply as another man – a clever teacher, an upright person, a good example – but not someone who has any claim on their life today.
- Some reject His death for them – preferring to present God with a list of their own qualifications.
- Some reject His rule over them – preferring to continue their own rule over their own lives.

What should God do about such people who want to reject His King? What should we Christians do with such people?

How's Saul respond to this request to have the trouble-makers put to death. Verse 13:

*But Saul said, "No one shall be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel."*

It's interesting to note that the question's put to Samuel – but it's Saul who responds.

Saul's response is good in that he affirms it's God who rescued Israel. That's what the story's about. But is his response good in not having the troublemakers killed? We're not told.

- If the issue's one of personal vengeance – these guys spoke badly about me and now I have the

power and authority to do something about it – then it's a good thing he doesn't follow that course. That would be a wrong thing to do.

- If the issue's to do with the celebration of God's gracious and undeserved salvation of Israel from her enemies and extending that grace to those who opposed God's choice and giving them a chance to repent of their evil, then that's a good thing to do.
- But if the issue's to do with God and God's honour, then the matter's not so clear-cut. If these guys have blasphemed God and deserve death under the law, does a king have the right to keep them alive? Is Saul ignoring – even rebelling against – God's revealed will in not putting them to death?
- And if that's the case, why doesn't he put them to death? Is it because he knows God to be gracious and forgiving? Or is it simply that he's being politically expedient – taking the popular decision rather than the right one.

We're not told. On the surface, Saul's answer looks kind and generous – but he may be motivated by personal advantage rather than doing right.

Whichever it is, the troublemakers live. Then Samuel organises a reaffirmation of Saul's reign. Verse 14:

*Then Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there reaffirm the kingship." So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.*

We'll hear more about what was involved in this next week – when we deal with chapter 12. For now, the important point is that Saul's entrenched as king.

- He's now begun to act as a king.
- He's now silenced the earlier opposition to his appointment.

Well, that's not really the right way to put it, is it? God's done these things – for God remains the true King of His people. God's shown He's willing to save His people through a king in the same way He rescued them through the judges.

### **The Ultimate King**

It's a lesson that remains the same throughout the Bible. God is sovereign. He rules. And He rules in His way and according to His will – not in the way we want to dictate to Him or according to our will. In other words, He's God, not us. In this case, God, in His grace and mercy, worked through the king they demanded – but He makes it clear that their salvation lies in Him alone. They aren't rescued because they've got a king like the other nations. They aren't rescued because they adopted the latest political fashion or modern ideologies. They're rescued because God rescues them.

God continues to rescue people today. His appointed way is through His designated King. Jesus is the One God appointed to save us. There remain worthless fellows around who still ask: Can this man save us? They think the task is too hard. They think the appointed King looks too weak. Some even think He was beaten in His death on the cross. There are three important things it's essential to grasp.

First, what we need saving from is our sins and the consequences of our sins – namely, judgment and death. That's the crucial issue. Many people have a problem

either seeing that as the crucial issue or remembering it. They think they can come up with other things they'd rather be rescued from. They think it's more important to be rescued from a difficult situation or poverty or bad health. God may or may not rescue people from those things – that's up to Him and what He's doing in each person's life. But in the long run, they're not as important as the actual rescue God promises. After all, while you're experiencing God's eternal judgment, do you think you'll be too bothered about having had a crook back here on earth for a few decades or with not having had as much money as your next-door neighbour?

Secondly, there's only one way to be rescued – that is, through the gospel – through Jesus' death for you. That's what God says. There's only one way to get right with God. There's only one Name on which you can call to be saved. Now, you can try to make up ways to save yourself.

- Be extra good for a few days.
- Perform some religious activities.
- Do something really difficult.

You can try to find someone else who'll save you – maybe talk a friend into taking your place when God hands out His judgments – or trick an enemy into doing it. God says it can't be done. He's provided the only way to be rescued. He's not going to provide any other way. And He thinks your attempts to make up your own way are grossly insulting. Indeed, they'll only add to your guilt when it comes to His judgment.

Thirdly, those God rescues are secure. God will keep them secure for all eternity. Nothing can separate them from God. We simply have to trust God.

This is the part Israel had trouble with. They didn't feel very secure. Indeed, they felt very threatened by their enemies – the Philistines on the west and now Nahash and the Ammonites on the east. Now, they had the stories of how God delivered them in the past. They knew God was able to do it. But they thought they'd be better situated with a king. Kings seemed to do the trick for the other nations. A king would provide them the security they lacked under God. Not the smartest of reasoning!

But are we any better? Where do we think we'll find security? In the same things the non-Christians around us try?

- In owning our own home? It can be destroyed by bushfires or damaged by storms.
- In our insurance policies? There are some things insurance payouts can't replace.
- In a proper diet and strenuous exercise regime? Even fit and healthy people get terminal illnesses.
- In keeping our nose clean and not getting involved in other people's business? Bad things still happen to relatively good people.

And do any of these things help us cope any better with our real enemy – namely death?

Our eternal security's in God's hands. It's to do with His appointed King and the fact that Jesus has saved us. Trust Him. And trust Him not just in terms of eternity, but in terms of this life too. We remain in His hands now. He doesn't promise us a trouble-free ride through this life. But He does say that He uses all the events of this life – even the bad ones – to achieve His good purposes in our lives. And He says there's nothing in this

life that can separate us from Him – and from the salvation He's given us. It's as secure as His word.

And so when you're tempted to feel insecure, turn to His appointed King. Go to His word.

- Remind yourself of what real life's about. It's not about the abundance of our possessions or the importance of our standing in the community. We shouldn't allow such worldly wisdom to influence our thinking. Real life's about being in right relationship with God.
- And remind yourself of the promises God's given – that in Christ He's blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms; that since He's already given you His Son, how will He not also with Him give your all things?

Since God is for you, does anything else matter?