

I Samuel – Part 4

To Obey is Better than Sacrifice – I Samuel 11-14

“And Samuel said to all the people, ‘See ye him whom the LORD hath chosen, that there is none like him among all the people?’ And all the people shouted, and said, ‘God save the king.’” (I Sam. 10:24). A band of men called by God became King Saul’s bodyguards...but not everyone was in favor of the new king.

Before long, Saul had an opportunity to prove that he was God’s man for the job, a job he initially knew nothing about, nor even wanted. God had shown him signs that He had called Saul to this position and would be with him if he obeyed Him. Soon, Saul would have an opportunity to prove to Israel that he was God’s man for the job. Trouble was brewing; the Ammonites were gathering for war outside Jabesh-Gilead...

I. Dealing With Trouble

You might remember that the tribes of Israel had killed all the inhabitants of this city, except for the virgins, as they looked for a “quick fix” to provide wives for the almost extinct tribe of Benjamin. The Benjamites had chosen to defend their tribe instead of obeying God’s Law for the rape of a Levite’s concubine. (Judg. 20-21). In executing judgment, the other tribes had almost annihilated the Benjamites.

Later, they regretted such a harsh judgment when they realized the extent of the damage they had caused. They had already sworn that their daughters would not be allowed to marry the remaining 600 Benjamite men. A meeting of all the tribes of Israel was called to go to God collectively for an answer to the problem. The people of Jabesh seemed to ignore the need for unity in the nation when they didn’t attend, so Israel “bent” God’s rules, killing all of them, except the virgins who could be used for wives for the Benjamites. This became a “quick fix” for the Benjamites, but Israel gave up what was right and replaced it with something that was “iffy,” but quick.

Now that we are reminded of what has previously transpired in the city of Jabesh, let’s consider a parenthetical phrase that is found in some versions of Scripture that provides context to what is happening in I Samuel 11. Although not in the Masoretic text, it is based on the Dead Sea Scroll 4Qsam^a, which dates at least 50 years before the text is translated into most Scriptures, and is confirmed by other ancient sources, such as the historian Josephus. It doesn’t change the meaning of what is happening, but gives some context and clarity about King Nahash and why he was so feared:

“Meanwhile, Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been severely oppressing the descendants of Gad and descendants of Reuben, gouging out their right eyes and not allowing Israel to have a deliverer. No one was left among the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. However, 7,000 men had escaped from the Ammonites and entered Jabesh-Gilead.” (ISV)

Now, Nahash has surrounded the city of Jabesh. When the town’s inhabitants saw the troops, they were immediately ready to submit as servants to the fierce Ammonites, rather than fighting. Nahash agreed to the offer on one condition: Every man in the city must have his right eye removed. This act was not just a physical threat but also a psychological one, intended to produce disgrace, fear, and submission to all Israel. The

right eye is essential for depth perception in shield-and-spear warfare. These men would become militarily useless. Nahash held Israel in such contempt that he had agreed to allow them seven days to think this over.

“And *behold*, Saul came after the herd out of the field...” The word “behold” pops up frequently in Scripture, but what does it really mean? It’s a term that urges us to pay attention to something significant, like a truth or message in Scripture, yet its full impact can sometimes get lost in translation. When we see this word, it should prompt us to reflect and contemplate the purpose of its use in the context. What is God saying? It’s like a stop sign that prompts us to put on the brakes and look both ways before moving forward. Taking a moment to stop in our reading will help us be more actively engaged in what Scripture says rather than just “reading words.”

So, what are we to “behold” in this passage? Saul had apparently been plowing and hadn’t heard the news of Jabesh. Let’s combine the thoughts of “behold” and the polysyndeton, “and” to see what God is showing to us. (I Sam. 11:5-9). First, Saul, the KING, is plowing. Apparently, he hasn’t yet been accepted as king, nor has he himself done anything to act as a king—he’s still plowing in the field. But...now is his time to take control. As we stop to contemplate this, we should ask ourselves, “Is there something God has called me to do that I’m not acting on?”

The polysyndeton demonstrates Saul’s urgency and determination in his response to the messengers of Jabesh. “The Spirit of God came upon Saul... *and* his anger was kindled greatly.” He took the yoke of oxen he had been using, cut them into pieces, and sent them throughout all the regions of Israel, saying, “Whosoever cometh not forth after Saul and after Samuel [acknowledged as the spokesperson of God], so shall it be done unto his oxen.” Remember, the Levite priest had sent pieces of his dead concubine throughout Israel to call the people together to fight against a common enemy. (Judg. 20). In this case, Saul is calling the men to fight Nahash, the enemy.

“And the fear of the Lord fell on the people...” 300,000 chief men from each district came from Israel and 30,000 from Judah to assemble at Bezek. Bezek lay within Issachar’s tribe, within a day’s journey from Jabesh. It was in the open plain of Jezreel, perfect for assembling so many people. Judah is typically listed separately from Israel until David becomes its king and was busy fighting its own battles against the Philistines, so its numbers aren’t huge. *Behold*, the Spirit gave Saul the ability to command, organize the disorderly group into three fighting companies, and give compassion to the people of Jabesh. God gives us direction in the things He calls us to do as well.

After a resounding victory over Nahash that sent them scattering, Saul’s supporters were ready to put the wicked men who had despised him to death. (I Sam. 10:27). Saul would not allow it “for today the Lord had wrought salvation in Israel.” Saul gave God, not himself, the glory for the victory. All the people now seemed ready to acknowledge Saul as their king. They gathered at Gilgal, offered peace offerings, and renewed their loyalty to Saul. Samuel gave his last great speech at this event. (I Sam. 12).

Samuel told all Israel, “*Behold*, I have listened to you in all that you said to me and have made a king over you...” Notice all the “ye” and “you” words used in these first two verses. Samuel’s reminder to them to *behold* this king who began in their hearts was not in the heart and mind of God. God allowed it and directed its execution, but it

was the people's voice that prompted it. Now, the king is over them, "and now, *behold*, the king walks before you...and *behold*, my sons are with you..."

Samuel extols his integrity, but says it is time for him to slow down from his responsibilities; he is getting old, and they have a king to lead them now. He is helping Israel make the transition from his leadership as a prophet and judge to Saul's leadership as king. Although he would never completely step down, he didn't want his role to eclipse that of Saul. Samuel included Saul, his anointed, throughout his speech to show their roles clearly.

Since Samuel's sons had so blatantly taken bribes from the people, distorting justice for money, Samuel has finally removed them from their offices. "*Behold*, my sons are with you," not on the podium with Samuel to welcome the new king, but simply a part of the assembly, common people, not judges. Samuel, though, has walked in integrity, without cheating or turning a blind eye to justice, but... if they saw something different, he would restore it. They assured him that his life was without reproach.

Now Samuel gives them a brief history lesson. It wasn't a history lesson of Israel, though, but the history of God's righteous acts, both blessings and punishments. Samuel uses this history to link God's deliverance from Exodus to their turning away from God through the judges and even to their present. Through God's righteous acts, they were dominated and controlled by the enemy to bring them to repentance. He warns both Saul and the people to fear God and serve Him wholeheartedly, so they don't face these consequences again. As they transition into a monarchy, Samuel highlights the importance of leadership and the consequences of disobedience. *Everything the Lord will do is in the setting of what He has already done.*

Israel was disobedient in wanting a king, yet God gave them one. But God also gave them an important choice: If they would obey God and serve Him, He would bless them. One wrong choice would not cast out forever. If they chose to disobey Him, then God would be against them, as He had at other times when they had been delivered into the hands of their enemies. So, would they obey and be submissive, or would they rebel and disobey? Then Samuel calls on God to give them a sign to confirm what he has told the people; he knew that only a sign from God would impress them.

II. *The Sign*

The time was right for a sign from God. Without one, they would have cast Saul off in a manner just as quick and just as wrong as they had asked for a king. Saul had proven himself, and while the people were excited about their king, they were also repentant about their sin. So, Samuel asked God to send thunder and rain as a sign. Doesn't sound like any great thing for God to do, does it? But...it was the time of wheat harvest. This occurs between the middle of May and the middle of June when rain seldom or never falls, but if it does, it is usually severe. Heavy rain during the harvest could destroy all their crops. The sign was a warning because rain in harvest was not fitting (Prov. 26:1). It is so totally unexpected that it could be seen as a sign of God's displeasure.

And the terrible rainstorm came, accompanied by thunder, in response to Samuel's prayer. It struck the people with extreme fear, and for the moment, they thoroughly repented of the past. They understood God's displeasure; they had acted foolishly and wickedly, rejecting the government of God, the One who commanded all things in both

heaven and earth, with a sign that displayed not only God's power, but also His judgment. The people begged Samuel to entreat God for them, to intercede for them.

So, Samuel prayed and then told the people, Fear not...but begin now to serve the Lord with all your heart and turn not aside to go after vain things. "For the Lord will not forsake His people for His great name's sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you His people...Only fear the Lord and serve Him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things He hath done for you. BUT if you shall still do wickedly, you shall be consumed, both you and your king" (I Sam. 12:20-25).

III. Testing for Good

God tests men to bring out the good in them, but Satan tempts men to bring out their evil. Sometimes when God tests a man, the man responds in the wrong way. Instead of triumphing over the test, he gives in to it and falls into sin. This is what Saul did. I Samuel 13 begins sometime after he has become king. His popularity has risen to great heights. Other nations feared a contest with Israel. Only two, the Philistines in the west and the Amalekites in the south, were brave enough to oppose them. Saul may have begun to think that his success was through his own ability rather than because of God's intervention, so God put him to the test.

Saul's first test would determine if he was willing to wait patiently on God's timing. Saul had gathered an army of 3,000, leading 2,000 of them himself in Michmash and Mount Bethel, and giving his son Jonathan the remaining 1,000 to command in Gibeah of Benjamin. He allowed everyone else who had volunteered to return home.

Jonathan came out strong, actively pursuing the enemy, and smote the Philistines in Geba. The Philistines regarded Israel now as repulsive, a stench. News spread quickly throughout all Israel and the Philistines. The Philistines weren't a group of people the size of a typical tribe; they were the ancient equivalent of a superpower. They were a heavily armed, fierce group of warriors. They gathered their forces, 30,000 iron chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and an army too large to count, to attack Saul at Michmash.

Saul must have gulped at his small numbers and sent for reinforcements to supply men equivalent to those he had had against the Ammonites. Instead of adding to his numbers, the men began deserting him, hiding in caves, thickets, behind rocks, wherever it looked safe. Some even crossed over the Jordan, until only 600 men remained. Saul was beginning to panic. Where were the eager men who were supposed to fight? And where was Samuel? He was supposed to come to Gilgal within seven days to offer sacrifices on their behalf. He was late, and Saul was getting desperate!

In his impatience and concern, Saul called for a burnt offering and peace offerings. Since Samuel hadn't shown up, he'd offer the offerings himself. Surely, God would understand! But God was ahead of Saul as usual and had delayed Samuel's coming so He could test him.

Just as Saul completed the burnt offering, Samuel came walking up. Saul went out to greet him, but Samuel said, "What have you done?" Saul had his excuses ready: "1) Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and 2) that thou camest not within the days appointed, and 3) that the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash, therefore said I, 4) 'The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal,

and I have not made supplication unto the Lord: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering.” But Samuel said, “Thou hast done foolishly...”

These were only excuses, not legitimate reasons. Saul knew better but felt that “the end justified the means.” But Saul was to conduct all his actions in deference to God and His spokesman, Samuel, and Saul had been told to wait for Samuel. Saul failed to consider God’s will. He didn’t allow God to show His power to deliver His people. As a result, Samuel told him that his kingdom would be taken from him.

In the meantime, the Philistines felt there was no threat to them from Israel, so they sent companies in three different directions to harass and ravage Israel. They went north to Ophrah in the land of Shual, west to Beth-horon, and east to the valley of Zeboim. When the Bible includes geographical references, they appear as more than throwaway statements. Often, they play an important role in our understanding and application of the Bible. It adds an additional viewpoint to our other five senses to help us understand what is going on. This departure of the three companies will give Jonathan an advantage for his part in the war. (I Sam. 14).

God shows us that Israel also had another obstacle to overcome in their battle. They had no iron weapons, no metal craftsmen to sharpen them or forge them! Even when their farm tools needed sharpening, they had to go to Philistia...and that came with a high price! Israel’s weapons were made of bronze, and iron weapons could pierce bronze helmets easily. Only God would be able to give a victory over this army!

Saul had failed his first test, but God gave him a second one to test his pride. (I Sam. 14). God would use Saul’s son, Jonathan. There is a huge contrast between father and son: Jonathan actively pursued victory while Saul sat under a pomegranate tree. Jonathan and his armor bearer secretly decide to cross over to check out the Philistines, because “It may be that the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few.” Jonathan put his trust in God’s hands. (Rom. 8:31).

Jonathan proposed a test to see whether God wanted them to attack the Philistines. They popped their heads up out of a narrow crevice, and if the Philistines told them to “come up,” they would go. This would be God’s sign that He was with them. Jonathan did not use this sign because of doubt, but out of faith. He didn’t demand to know the whole battle plan. He let God know his plan, but then let God show him what He wanted, one step at a time.

The Philistines must have thought that Jonathan and his armor bearer had been hiding in the hole after deserting Saul and were giving themselves up. Or maybe the Philistines thought a great number of soldiers would soon come out of their hiding places and attack. Instead, the two of them had taken God to the enemy with them and slaughtered twenty men. God created additional havoc by sending an earthquake! The Philistines panicked and began rushing around, killing each other!

When Saul saw what was happening on the mountain, he became confused, too; he had no idea who was leading the battle. Instead of joining in at this opportune time, he was too busy trying to find out who was going to get the credit for it. The Philistines had a few Israelites with them, probably slaves, who had been there to help fight, but these men turned against them and helped Israel win the battle.

Unknowingly for Jonathan, though, earlier Saul had forbidden the people to eat until the battle was won. Out of fear, no one had eaten. But Jonathan hadn't heard the order, so on his way back to camp, he saw honey, dipped the tip of his sword into a honeycomb, and ate to renew his energy from the battle. The soldiers had fought valiantly, but Saul's rule, given in a lack of wisdom, could have cost them the battle. His focus on the battle and his sense of authority was also wrong. Saul's pride got in the way: "**I** may be avenged on **mine** enemies." Even the punishment he demanded was wrong. He had acted foolishly again.

The Philistines had left behind their animals when they fled. The Israelites were hungry and rushed to the spoil. They were in such a hurry eat that they forgot that God said they weren't to eat the blood. Saul built an altar to the Lord and told the people to bring their animals for sacrifice. They were to prepare them properly. But the people were so hungry, they ate the animals, blood and all.

Again, Saul's foolish command caused him to fail God's test; his pride caused the people to sin. Saul blamed the people, but it was really his fault they sinned. And when he found out that Jonathan had eaten when it was forbidden, he was willing to kill his own son instead of admitting he was wrong. If not for the people's demand that he be spared, Jonathan would have died to satisfy Saul's pride. They knew that Jonathan had worked with God that day, not against Him. To kill Jonathan because of ignorance of a foolish law would have been even more wrong, especially when God's approval was so evident.

Time and again, Saul acted unwisely. But God wasn't done testing him yet.

Conclusion:

Saul's strength was broad but shallow. He was not a man after God's own heart, and because his own relationship with God was more about image than substance, his kingdom could not last. Where is your focus? Is it on how good you can make yourself look to others? Is it on bowing under pressure when things get tight instead of relying on God? Do you make rash decisions and then blame the resulting problems on everybody else? It is very easy to fall into the trap of hurrying up and bypassing God.

We sometimes hear the statement when we jump ahead to finish something without going through the proper channels, "I'd rather ask forgiveness than ask permission." But Samuel told Saul, "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? BEHOLD, to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Sam. 15:22). Slow down, consult God, and be obedient to Him.

Time for a Change (I Samuel Part 5)

- 1)** Read I Samuel 15-19. Why was God going to transition to a different king?

- 2)** Would you consider Saul's words of repentance in I Samuel 15:24 to be true repentance? Why or why not? What makes the difference between true and not true?

- 3)** What/Who was Samuel mourning over in I Samuel 16? Was it something he should have been doing or was it sinful? Explain.

- 4)** In I Samuel 16:7, how are you influenced by a person's outward appearance? What should you be doing about it? Why did God give this command to Samuel before choosing the next king?

- 5)** Highlight the word "Behold" as you read. What truth is found in each of them?

- 6)** What was Saul's initial reaction to David's wanting to go against Goliath? How was he trying to prepare him?

- 7)** What was David's brothers' reaction to him going against Goliath? How would you have reacted to undertaking something this large when everyone seems against you? How did David overcome that?

8) What does the “evil spirit from God” mean? (I Sam. 18:10)

Conclusion:

Although Saul doesn't know it, God is going to prepare a new king right under his very nose. He will work in the palace right alongside Saul. But first, we see the attitude of David, the king-in-training. David has already been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel. God is giving us a glimpse of this young man's integrity and obedience. (I Sam. 16).

Sometimes, we might think that it takes some grand action of obedience or some great service to show we are important or worthy enough for the job that God has called us to do, but that's not what God shows us through David's life. When Saul is “having a moment” of trouble, his servants recommend someone to play for him and soothe him. They say, “Behold, I have seen a son cunning in playing, a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and *the Lord is with him.*”

He isn't noticed just for what he can do, but because God is with him. People notice these things whether we think they do or not. As a shepherd boy, he wasn't out there preaching to them, telling them things that they could do better, gossiping about the other shepherds, doing noticeable acts. He was quietly living in obedience to God. Maybe they heard him singing some of the psalms he composed. Maybe he was helping some of the others when they couldn't find a lost sheep or needed someone to listen to or share a lunch with. Maybe they noticed he wasn't like the other young men who were always pushing the limits because “the Lord was with him.”

How do people view you? Is your walk with God noticeable in that quiet, steady, sort of way? We don't have to be a showoff or preachy, but we do have to be obedient and faithful, living what we say. Do you?

“As ye have, therefore, received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him: Rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6-7).