

The Deliverer *1 Samuel 11:1-13*

Lot hurried toward the barren hills of the desert wilderness without looking back. Behind him, great column of black smoke boiled up from the charred embers and scorched stones of what was once Sodom and Gomorrah.

Centuries later, Lot's descendants had grown to a nation of nomads. Called the Ammonites, they pitched their tents on the parched plains that stretched out beyond the barren hills of Moab east of the Jordan.

They were a fierce people. And they nursed an abiding hatred for the people of Israel. A generation earlier, Israel's judge, Jephthah, had soundly defeated Ammon's camel cavalries.

That made the Ammonites hate God's people all the more. And the farmers and shopkeepers of Israel knew it. Their enemies to the east thirsted for their blood.

So the Israelites were deathly afraid of Ammon's armies. In fact, that was why they wanted a warrior king to rule over them.

When you saw that Nahash the king of the sons of Ammon came against you, you said to me, "No, but a king shall reign over us," 1 Samuel 12:12

Israel got the king they wanted. Saul was anointed by Samuel and introduced as king to all Israel at Mizpah. And just weeks later, the Ammonites struck their first blow against God's people.

Now Nahash the Ammonite came up and besieged Jabesh-gilead; Verse 1

The account of Ammon's attack and the battle that followed a week later is more than dust dry history. It is packed with spiritual lessons.

That is much more than mere supposition. Two broad hints, tucked away in the scriptural account, confirm it.

First, the cruel king who ruled over Ammon was Nahash. And that name means serpent: a biblical name for Satan.

...the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; Revelation 12:9

Secondly, Saul's summary of the Israel's victorious battle over Ammon also urges us to dig spiritual lessons out of this account.

...today the Lord has worked salvation in Israel. (ESV)

Yes, there are lessons in the ancient account of a battle between Israel and Ammon. And those lessons go beyond life and death. They extend all the way to eternity.

Lessons about Sin

There was a reason why Nahash chose Jabesh-gilead as the first target in his campaign against Israel. Most of the twelve tribes lived between the Jordan River and the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

But not Jabesh. That city rose up on the plains east of the Jordan. Indeed, it was on the very edge of the vast, desert territory where the bedouin tribes of Ammon lived.

That made Jabesh-gilead an attractive target. The people of Jabesh were a lot like some saints. They did not live in the enemy's territory, but they were always very close to it.

In like manner, many Christians do not drink alcohol. But they do spend their time in taverns with people who do. Other believers might not be lovers of possessions or pleasure. But they do indulge and even enjoy powerful temptations to compromise their commitment to Christ.

That makes such saints attractive, irresistible targets for Satan's attacks. After all, the safest place is always in the very center of God's will. Walking the edges of enticement is an open invitation to the devil.

The Ammonites did not attempt to scale Jabesh-gilead's defensive wall right away. Instead, they pitched their tent city around it, surrounding and besieging Jabesh.

When the people inside the city peeked over the wall, they saw the swords and spears of Ammon. And they were stricken with terror.

They knew they were the black sheep of Israel. Years earlier when Israel went to war to against heinous sinners among the Benjamites, the men of Jabesh stayed home. So after Israel brought Benjamin to heel, they splashed across the Jordan to punish Jabesh.

The people of that eastern city knew they should have responded to the call for arms that rang throughout Israel. But they ignored both it and the nagging needles of their own consciences.

And that too invites Satan's attacks. Whenever we act against the inner urges of our conscience, we open a door to the devil.

That is what Paul taught Christians at Corinth concerning meat sacrificed to idols in pagan temples. No, there was nothing really wrong with eating such meat, the apostle said. But some saints had to stifle the inner urges of their conscience to eat it. And that was not wise.

...some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 1 Corinthians 8:7 (ESV)

Paul knew it is always dangerous to do anything that violates our conscience. It makes us vulnerable to Satan's attacks.

The people of Jabesh did not think they had any other choice. So they offered to surrender both their city and themselves to Nahash.

...all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, "Make a covenant with us and we will serve you." But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, "I will make it with you on this condition, that I will gouge out the right eye of every one of you, thus I will make it a reproach on all Israel." Verses 1-2

Nahash, the serpent, is a sign and symbol for Satan. Just as Nahash hated Israel, so the devil is filled with and fueled by a burning hatred for God. That is why the lords of Ammon were not satisfied merely to enslave the people of Jabesh-gilead.

They also wanted to shame God's people. And their purpose was the same as Satan's is when he tempts Christians. Nahash wanted to bring reproach upon all of Israel by turning the Lord's chosen people into maimed, one-eyed slaves.

In the same way, the devil hungers to bring disgrace and dishonor to Christ by defiling His people. When saints submit to Satan, they become his helpless slaves. Then our eternal enemy smiles and shouts to the world that the Savior's own people are depraved and despicable.

Temptations can often smell sweet and savory. But we must never forget that Satan himself is behind every urge to disobey God. And over the centuries, his motive has not changed.

He wants to drag the blessed name of Jesus through the mud.

Lessons for Saints

The delegation from Jabesh-gilead was stunned by Nahash's terms of surrender. So they stalled for time.

The elders of Jabesh said to him, "Let us alone for seven days, that we may send messengers throughout the territory of Israel. Then, if there is no one to deliver us, we will come out to you." Verse 3

For the people of Jabesh, it was a desperate, last ditch effort. They sent messengers to their countrymen on the other side of the Jordan, begging for help.

But they were not at all optimistic about their chances of being rescued. They knew the rest of Israel looked down upon them. Still, they knew they had no other option.

Maybe that is why it is so terribly wrong to look down upon anyone whose life is swamped and soaked with sin. It whispers a lie in the ear of those who are slaves to the darkness, death and defeat of sin. It makes them believe they are doomed to live and die in darkness.

The people of Jabesh had no one to rescue them from the Ammonites but God's people. And people today who are addicted to and enslaved by sin have no one to rescue them but those of us who love and live for Jesus Christ.

If the people of Israel turned a deaf ear to the desperate pleas the messengers from Jabesh delivered, the people in that city were without hope. And if we who trust Jesus look down upon sinners, they are in an even more hopeless condition than that besieged city.

Some of the messengers panted into Gilead. In the market, people gathered around them. Then the men described the horror that faced their city and poured out the desperate appeals they had been sent to deliver.

Then the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and spoke these words in the hearing of the people, and all the people lifted up their voices and wept. Verse 4

The people of Jabesh were wrong. Their countrymen did care that they were under attack and faced with being blinded and enslaved.

The people wept openly at the news. And that is commendable. But it was not enough then. And it is not enough now.

It is never enough for Christians to feel sorry or even weep for people whose marriages, children and lives are being destroyed by sin. When Saul heard the news, he felt sorry too. But that was not all he felt.

...the Spirit of God came upon Saul mightily when he heard these words, and he became very angry. Verse 6

It is of much more than passing interest that Saul became angry only after a tidal wave of God's Holy Spirit swept over him. It reminds us that Christ, would have us react the same way when we see Satan destroying lives around us. In fact, God would fill us with such righteous rage.

He would not have us become angry with those whose lives are so filled with sin. But He would have us be enraged at Satan.

Our Lord is a God of love. But He is also a God of wrath. And nothing quite so incites His anger as does the merciless mayhem the devil inflicts upon human beings.

However, in the end even anger is not enough. Saul knew that. And He was not satisfied simply to rage away at the Ammonites. He determined to do something about it. So the newly crowned king of Israel sent out some messengers of his own.

He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout the territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, "Whoever does not come out after Saul and after Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen." Verse 7

Soon, soldiers and swordsmen from all over Israel gathered at Bezek. And Saul sent Jabesh-gilead's messengers back to the besieged city with good news.

“Thus you shall say to the men of Jabesh-gilead, ‘Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you will have deliverance.’” So the messengers went and told the men of Jabesh; and they were glad. Verse 9

Then Saul led the armies of God down the mountain trail to the Jordan to deliver Jabesh from their bitter enemies. The soldiers marched all night and surprised the Ammonites in the pre-dawn darkness.

The next morning Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the camp at the morning watch and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together. Verse 11

In the end, God gave Israel complete victory over the Ammonites. And He will just as surely give us victory over our dark enemy.

After all, while Satan does hold men and women in desperate slavery, he cannot hang onto his prisoners. Our loving Lord shed His blood and gave His life to break the bonds of sin and death.

But we must do more than merely weep over the pain and problems people face. If we love Jesus and are living close to His heart, we will know emotion is enough. We will be compelled to deliver those who in slavery to sin.

Saul had to fight a battle. But we do not. Christ has already won the war. All we have to do is tell people who suffer in sin that, through Christ’s cross, they can be forever free. It makes no difference if they refuse to believe the message, either. They still deserve to be told.

And no one will tell them but us.

Lessons about the Savior

Weeks earlier at Mizpah, Samuel had introduced Saul as Israel’s king. But when messengers arrived at Gilead, the new king was not in a palace or on a throne. He was working in his father’s field.

Now behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen, Verse 5

Samuel was specific at Mizpah. Israel’s elders had demanded a king. So the old prophet stood Saul before them.

Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see him whom the Lord has chosen?” 1 Samuel 10:24

The big farm boy had been anointed king by God. That was definite and undeniable. And Jesus is the Christ: the Anointed One. He has been proclaimed by the Father Himself as King of kings and Lord of lords.

God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified. Acts 2:36

He...is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 1 Timothy 6:15

There is a marvelous meekness in Saul. At Gilead, the king of Israel plowed his father’s fields behind a yoke of oxen.

He is a picture of our blessed Savior. When He urged us to willingly submit ourselves to His holy hand, Jesus said He is filled with the same spirit of humility. *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28-29 (NKJV)*

Saul was indeed the king God appointed to rule over His people. But he did not sit on a throne. And just as Saul had every right to rule over Israel, God’s Son has every right to rule over the hearts and lives of human beings.

It sounds like a fine line. But it really is not. Saul did not rule as king for one simple reason. He had been anointed and introduced as king. But the people were yet to submit themselves to him.

It is the same with our Savior. By right of birth, He is Lord of all. And by His shed blood, He is the rightful ruler of every man's heart.

But God's Son stands in the shadows of our lives. He has the power and authority to demand our submission. But He does not. He refuses to rule over anyone who does not earnestly desire that He do so.

Instead, His Spirit pleads with us to come to Christ and be forgiven. He urges us to kneel before Jesus as our own personal Commander and King: to willingly give ourselves to Him.

When Samuel introduced Saul as the new king. Most of the people agreed. But there were a few who did not. They looked upon the big farm boy with contempt.

But certain worthless men said, "How can this one deliver us?" And they despised him... 1 Samuel 10:27

Before Saul delivered Jabesh by defeating the Ammorites, some people were open and unashamed in their disapproval of the big man. They did not believe Saul could deliver them.

But they were wrong. The decisive battle at Jabesh left no doubt that Saul could deliver Israel from every enemy.

The people realized that now. And when they met Samuel on their way back from Jabesh, they demanded that those who had not wanted the big farm boy to rule over them be put to death.

Then the people said to Samuel, "Who is he that said, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Bring the men, that we may put them to death." Verse 12

Many Christians are every bit as rash as those Israelites were. They want those who oppose Christ as Savior and King to be punished.

But like Saul, God does not want His enemies to be destroyed. He wants them to be saved. So when Saul overheard his army's angry demand, he did not wait for Samuel to answer.

But Saul said, "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has accomplished deliverance in Israel." Verse 13

Perhaps those who disagreed merely needed proof that Saul really could bring deliverance to Israel. And many people today who oppose our Savior need the same thing.

They need positive proof that Jesus can deliver their conscience from grinding guilt. They need some sort of evidence that Christ really can turn tension into peace, sorrow into joy, and bondage into freedom.

The deliverance of Jabesh was all the proof Saul's doubters needed.

If anyone still needed positive proof, all they needed to do was ask the people of Jabesh-gilead. They knew first hand.

Over the past two millennia, our Master has delivered uncounted millions of lives. Each of those lives is yet another proof our Savior can and does bring salvation to those who trust in Him.

Now, those of us who have experienced His grace and goodness are to be His witnesses. We are to tell those who still doubt Christ's power to change lives that they are wrong.

We know Jesus can deliver men from pain and problems, from sin and shame, and from defeat and despair.

He freed us.

