December 12/13, 2015

Saul's Finest Hour

Courage to Lead Series

1 Samuel 11:1-15

Pastor Bryan Clark

In the year 1873, there was a revivalist preacher by the name of Henry Varley who said to a young shoe salesman, "The world has yet to see what God could do through a man fully consecrated to Him." That young man, that young shoe salesman was D.L. Moody. D.L. Moody had the courage and faith to believe that statement was true, and for a generation D.L. Moody would be a world-renowned evangelist that changed the world.

When you go back through the Scriptures, when you go back through the history of the church, there is a clear and established pattern by God that God uses the most ordinary people to do the most extraordinary things for Him. It's not an anomaly; it's not occasionally. It is the clear and established pattern of God. If you sit here this morning and still struggle, struggle to believe that God could use you such as you are, such as your story is, to be a world changer; if you still struggle with your own inadequacies, with your past, with your struggles and failures and mistakes to believe that God could somehow use you to make a significant difference in the world, our story this morning is for you.

If you have your Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 11. Continuing in our study of 1 Samuel, Saul has been privately anointed as the first human king of Israel. He has been publically presented to the people as God's choice for the first human king of Israel, and at the end of chapter 10 he simply goes back home, and that's where we left the story. We pick it up then in chapter 11, verse 1.

> **Now Nahash the Ammonite came up and besieged Jabesh-gilead; and 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." 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." 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.** (*NASB, 1 Samuel 11:1-4)

It's helpful to get a little background on what exactly is going on here, so first of all, who were the Ammonites? If you go back to Genesis chapter 19, it's a familiar story with the destruction of the city of Sodom. Lot is living there with his wife and two daughters. The angels come. They warn Lot of the destruction. Lot, his wife and two daughters escape. His wife looks back. She's turned into a pillar of salt and so Lot and his two daughters escape. They end up hiding in a cave, and in the cave Lot's two daughters get their father intoxicated. Both have relations with their father; both become pregnant with sons. One of those sons becomes the father of the Ammonite people. The other becomes the father of the Moabite people. Just east of the Jordan River was home base for the Ammonites to the north and right below them, the Moabites to the south and then to the west basically from the foothills all the way to the Mediterranean Sea were the Philistines. Those are the three big enemies of Israel in the Samuel story.

We don't have recorded in the text the background to what led up to this, but in the mid part of the twentieth century, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. The Dead Sea Scrolls were copies of almost all of the Old Testament in some portion or fragment thereof. There is a paragraph that is called 4QSam for

Samuel that basically is a paragraph that precedes chapter 11. Now scholars debate as to whether or not that paragraph was meant to be part of the inspired text. They go back and forth. I think most scholars think probably not, but all of the scholars believe that the paragraph represents accurate historical detail.

What that paragraph explains is that on the east side of the Jordan River there were two of the twelve tribes, the tribe of Gad to the north and the tribe of Reuben to the south. Now the Jordan River makes a natural boundary, so then going east of that boundary, the land was a little bit more difficult to establish and so there was this conflict with the Ammonites and the Moabites. We are told in that paragraph that Nahash, king of the Ammonites, went to war with the tribe of Gad and the tribe of Reuben, pretty much wiped them out and gouged the right eye out of all of the men of fighting age.

Now that seems like a rather barbaric practice to us, and actually it is rather barbaric, but again you're left with the question in the ancient world, when you defeated an enemy, what did you do with them? We often equate biblical slavery with slavery here in the United States or slavery in Europe, but they're not really comparable at all. In an ancient world, they didn't have prisons. They didn't have a lot of options. Once you conquer a nation, what do you do? If you just turn them loose, they re-gather and attack again, so one option was you just slaughtered men, women and children, and eliminate them.

A more compassionate option was to bring them home, turn them into slaves, but sometimes what was done is the right eye would be gouged out in order to render them ineffective as soldiers. The shield was held in the left arm and the sword in the right arm, so basically the right eye looked around the shield to fight. Once that eye is gone, it would have been very difficult to fight as a soldier and also very difficult to aim a bow and arrow, so that was the idea. So they gouge out the right eye of the men of fighting age, but seven hundred fighting-age men escape, and they escape and go to the city of Jabesh-gilead.

That fragment in the Dead Sea Scrolls tells us that thirty days elapsed between those seven hundred men going to Jabesh-gilead and the beginning of chapter 11. So Nahash and the Ammonite army have followed them to Jabesh-gilead to besiege them. The elders realize that they don't stand a chance, so they come out to Nahash and they ask about a covenant. Literally the language is "to cut a covenant with you." It probably would have been very similar to what was done in Genesis 15 with the animals when God cut a covenant with Abraham.

Nahash responds, says he's willing to do that, but here's the condition. He will gouge out the right eye of every male of fighting age, and he's very clear. This is not just done for protection. This is done as a reproach to Israel. The surrounding nations in the ancient world just hated Israel. Much like today, they hated this claim that there is one true God, and He was the God of Israel, so they hated Israel and they hated Israel's God. So Nahash has a chance to make both Israel and Israel's God a reproach, a laughingstock; so that is part of the deal.

So the elders say to Nahash, "I'll tell you what. Give us seven days. We'll send messengers around the territory. If we can't find an army to fight, we'll give up, and you can do what you want with us." Now a logical question would be, "Why would Nahash even allow that?" Well, there are probably several reasons. One is: in his mind the chance of Israel coming up with an army was zero to none. Israel has no functioning king; they had no army. They really had no way of mustering troops in order to fight in seven days, so the risk was little to none. Nahash also would have understood that if he could have Jabesh-gilead without any more blood loss to his own soldiers, no more consumption of his own resources, it's just a freebie. It's a gimme, and so he had a lot to gain—very little to lose—so he agrees.

So the messengers go out to all of Israel. The only messengers the text tracks are the ones that go to Gibeah of Saul. The reason it's called Gibeah of Saul is because there were several Gibeahs, and this one always is identified as Gibeah of Saul. So the word comes; this is the problem, and the people cry out.

So having said all that, we're going to throw a map up on the screen and give you a little sense of where all this happens. So right there is the Sea of Galilee. Down here is the Mediterranean Sea, and it's connected by the Jordan River. Up here would have been the Ammonites, down here the Moabites, over here the Philistines. You can't see it on the map, but to get your perspective, Jerusalem would be right here. This is the Jordan River. The Dead Sea is here. The Sea of Galilee is here. Jabesh-gilead is about twenty-five miles south of the Sea of Galilee and then from Jabesh-gilead down here to Gibeah of Saul would have been about fifty miles. So the messengers have come down that far and deliver the message. Verse 5:

> **Now behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen, and he said, "What is *the matter* with the people that they weep?" So they related to him the words of the men of Jabesh. Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul mightily when he heard these words, and he became very angry. 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." Then the dread of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out as one man.** (Vs. 5-7)

Now there are a lot of things to notice in that paragraph. First of all we're told that **...behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen.** Just like last week when Saul was hiding in the luggage, the word **behold** is to make sure you don't just read through this, but it's like, "Stop. Shine a spotlight on it. **Behold**, Saul's in the baggage." Well this is similar. **"Behold, Saul is coming in from the field behind the oxen."** In other words Saul had not assumed his role as king. Saul went home and went back to farming. He's coming in from the field as a farmer, and he hears the people weeping, and he asks why they're weeping.

They relay the message of what was happening, and the text says **...the Spirit of God came upon him mightily.** It doesn't say that Saul prayed. It doesn't say that Saul sought Samuel. It doesn't say that Saul did anything, but God, true to His promise, came upon Saul to equip him for his first big test. He responds with what I would consider a righteous anger. The Ammonites intend to make a reproach, a laughingstock, out of both Israel and Israel's God, and God responds with a holy anger through Saul. "We're not going to take that."

Then Saul does a rather strange thing, at least in our opinion. He takes the oxen, cuts them up into bloody pieces, and sends them with messengers all over the territory, and the message is, "If you don't come out and join forces with Samuel and me, this is what we're going to do to your oxen." It's interesting that Saul brings Samuel into the discussion. I think this is in all of the best sense. Saul, at this point under the Spirit of God, understands that God is King, that Samuel is God's prophet. He's the sub-king. He was referred to as a prince earlier in the text, so now as the sub-king, together under Saul's prophet Samuel, he is calling the people out to fight. I think all of that is good and appropriate.

The text tells us that the people got the message. **The dread of the LORD came upon them.** It's worth noting this is the first time in Scripture that **the dread of the LORD** has ever come on the Hebrew people. This phrase has been used before, but it's always used in reference to the enemies of God. This is the first time it was ever used of the people of Israel themselves. They clearly got the message, and came out as one.

Now there's a lot going on in this story, but there's actually a lot more going on in this story. Helpful background to what is behind all this would be found in the book of Judges, chapters 19, 20, and 21. I'm going to give you a quick summary. You can read it for yourself at your leisure, but I have to warn you, it's very much PG-13.

The story recorded in the book of Judges is that a Levite came to Gibeah of Saul which was the town within the tribe of Benjamin. He has with him a concubine, which was kind of like a secondary wife. As soon as the host takes him in and evening comes, the town gathers and the men want the Levite turned over to them in order that they may have relations with him. The scene looks almost identical to what happened to Lot in the city of Sodom. The host begs the people to leave his guest alone. Finally, the Levite throws his concubine to the crowd. The crowd has their way with the concubine, using and abusing her all night long. In the morning the Levite gets up. It's time to go, and there is his concubine lying on the threshold of the door. She is dead. He is now very angry. He dismembers her into twelve pieces and sends those twelve pieces with messengers out to the twelve tribes. The people are horrified by this. The tribes send representatives to gather, to have a discussion of what is the reason for this horrific act? The Levite explains what happened in Benjamin in the city of Gibeah among their own people, and so the nation decides to punish, to judge Benjamin and Gibeah. So they rally together and they attack Benjamin, and they all but wipe out this entire tribe.

Once that is finished and they kind of cool off a little bit, they have regrets that they all but wiped out one of the twelve tribes of Israel. So they seek to re-grow and re-establish that tribe, but in order to do that, they will need women to have children to repopulate that tribe. So they look through their records and they find that there was one city that did not send a single soldier to fight in the civil war, and that was the city of Jabesh-gilead. So the army goes to Jabesh-gilead; they all but wipe them out, but they rescue four hundred virgins. They take these four hundred virgins; they bring them to the tribe of Benjamin to the city of Gibeah, and there they give them to the tribe to have babies—to repopulate the tribe of Benjamin. This of course would have been many generations before Saul was even born, but this is why there is such a strong tie between Jabesh-gilead and Gibeah of Saul. This is why they were weeping and carrying on with such emotion. This is why Saul reacts with such anger, because these would have been blood relatives. The likelihood that Saul's own blood relatives were those under stress in Jabesh-gilead would have been extremely high.

So there is this family connection that is driving a lot of this story, but there's more than that. The people would have been very familiar with the story I just described, so they know that there was a time when this was done, and the body parts were sent out, and all of Israel gathered in order to judge one of their own tribes of Benjamin. So Saul is tapping into that, doing something similar with oxen, but the message is, "You did this before in order to wipe out one of our own, so now we're calling you out to come together in the same way to fight against an enemy that wants to make a reproach of Israel." So that's a lot of the background regarding why Saul did what he did. Highly effective—the people come out as one!

> **He numbered them in Bezek; and the sons of Israel were 300,000, and the men of Judah 30,000.** (Vs. 8)

Now one quick note: I mentioned this several weeks ago. From time to time the writer puts things in the text that would make sense to him at the time of his writing and would have made sense to the first readers but would not necessarily have been understood at the time of the event. At the time of the event, Israel was not divided between Israel and Judah, north and south. That doesn't come until after Solomon. But at the time of the writing, and at the time of the first readers, they would have understood this detail and so he gives the detail regarding Israel in the north, Judah in the south.

> **They said to the messengers who had come, "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. Then the men of Jabesh said, "Tomorrow we will come out to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you." 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.** (Vs. 9-11)

So Saul sends word through a messenger back to Jabesh-gilead and says, "Tomorrow at high noon, you will be delivered." It's like the Gary Cooper movie: "Tomorrow—*High Noon*—we win." So the people of Jabesh-gilead are quite excited about this. They send a messenger out to Nahash. "By the way, we'll come out tomorrow, and then you can do what you want with us." I'm sure the thought was that they were surrendering, but that isn't the way the story goes. At the morning light—basically the morning watch is from two a.m. to sunup—so somewhere in that timeframe Saul shows up, has divided the army into three companies, and they completely wipe out and destroy the Ammonite army. There aren't any left together. There's just the singles that flee into the hills, and it's a tremendous victory. Verse 12:

> **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." But Saul said, "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has accomplished deliverance in Israel."** (Vs. 12-13)

So after this great victory that finally establishes Saul as the first human king, some people rally to the defense of Saul and say, "Who were the worthless men who said that they wouldn't submit to Saul because Saul could never be their deliverer?" And, "Let's kill them all!" Now at this moment, kind of knowing the insecure Saul from the previous chapters, we might think that Saul would go for that, but Saul responds beautifully. He doesn't want anyone put to death. As a matter of fact, his statement kind of reflects that he agreed with his critics. How is it possible that he Saul could possibly become their deliverer? He knows what happened, and he states it at the end of that paragraph. **The LORD has accomplished deliverance in Israel.** He's very clear. God kept His promise; God did this through Saul.

Using that word **deliverance** is worth noting. It could be translated *saved*. You go back to the last verse of chapter 10. That's what the worthless men said. How is it possible that Saul could be the one to *save* them? When the messengers speak to Nahash, they're looking for someone who will *save* them—same Hebrew word. The message that goes back to the elders at Jabesh from Saul is, "At high noon tomorrow, you will get your *deliverance*," and then Saul's statement here that, "It is the LORD who has *saved* you."

This is one of those passages that gives just a shadow, just a hint that there is a promise of a king who would be the Savior, who would be their deliverer. Is it Saul? Saul is like a shadow. Saul is like a prototype, and then it would be David, and ultimately the Christmas story! The angels would say, "For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior—a deliverer, the long-promised Messiah." So this is one of those texts where you get just a little glimpse at the possibility of a deliverer or a Savior.

> **Then Samuel said to the people, "Come and let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there." So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they also offered sacrifices of peace offerings before the LORD; and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.** (Vs. 14-15)

That is a wonderful paragraph! Samuel says, "Let's gather at Gilgal, and let's have the coronation of our king." Saul has been privately anointed. He's been publically announced but this is really the moment where he is coronated, and the people and Saul together acknowledge that God is our King, that Samuel is His prophet, that Saul will now function as the sub-king under God, and they gather to offer sacrifice and praise and to worship God, and Saul and the people rejoice.

I would suggest to you that without question this is Saul's finest hour. Everything about Saul in this story is good and right. The Spirit of God comes upon him. He is decisive; he takes action. He is responsive to Samuel. He is faithful; he is courageous. He gives glory to God. He brings the nation together. Together they worship and praise God for this great deliverance. This is but a glimpse of what was possible—that God could use a very ordinary man like Saul to do something extraordinary in the nation. Without question, this was Saul's finest hour! Will Saul continue to trust God and experience more victories for God's glory? We won't know that until we pick up the story in mid January and continue on in our story of Saul, David, and the nation of Israel.

If you go back through the Bible, the history of God through the two thousand years of the existence of His church, there is a very clear, established pattern of God using the most unlikely, ordinary people to do extraordinary things. It isn't occasionally. It isn't now and then. It is His clear and established pattern: right into the Christmas story when the God of the universe was born as a baby in a manger...that the message was announced to poor shepherds on a hillside...that Jesus would choose a gathering of sinners, misfits, and losers to be His disciples...who would become world changers. That's always been God's pattern.

We all struggle with our insecurities, with our weaknesses, with our struggles and failures. It's easy to look at ourselves and think: there's just no way. We look at our failures; we look at our sin; we look at our story. We look at all the ways we've messed up. We look at ourselves in the mirror, and it's hard for us to believe that God could use *me* to be a world changer. We think, "Given my story...my failures...my struggles...my inadequacies, I've gotta be on the "B" Team or the "C" Team or the "D" Team. I mean, I've got to be relegated to the minor leagues because I know my own story."

And it's hard for us to realize, in God's economy there is no "B" Team. There is no "C" or "D" Team. There are no minor leagues. There is just a God who is unimaginably faithful—who calls and recalls and recalls us again and again and again, rerouting us again and again and again, inviting us to trust Him—that no matter how inadequate you may seem, no matter how ordinary you may seem, no matter what your story, no matter your struggles, no matter your failures, no matter your past, *you*—just as you are—as you sit there this morning—as ordinary as can be—could be used by God to change the world!

The issue will never be: are you adequate? The issue will never be: are you perfect? The issue won't be: did you go to seminary? It won't be any of that. The issue will simply be: do you have the faith and courage to believe God tells the truth when He says, "I have called you to be part of something that will matter forever, and I will give you what you need to fulfill your calling. Just trust Me!" The world has yet to see what God can do through any man, through any woman, through any teenager, through any child, through any ordinary person who is fully consecrated to Him. Who knows? By God's grace and mercy, you just might be that person.

Our Father, we celebrate Your patience, Your forgiveness, Your love for us. God, we make the mistake of looking in the mirror and thinking: there's just no way! God, help us to get our eyes out of the mirror and into the mirror of Your Word and to believe that Your history, Your pattern has been to use people just like us to accomplish something significant for You in the world. God, give us the courage and the faith to believe this. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Dec. 12/13, 2015

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I Samuel 11:1-15

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Opening Discussion

1. Do you genuinely believe God could use you to accomplish something significant for Him? Why or why not?

2. Have there been times when God did something through you that you never imagined possible? What were the circumstances that made that possible?

3. What are the factors in our lives that cause us to doubt that God could really use us? In what ways do you think we limit God because of our own insecurities?

Bible Study

1. Read Judges 19-21 as background to I Samuel 11:1-15. How might this background effect how the other tribes viewed the tribe of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and Gibeah specifically (Saul's home town)? How might this also affect how Saul and the people of Gibeah reacted to the news of the siege of Jabesh-gilead?

2. Read I Samuel 11:1-4. According to this text what is the intent of Nahash? He wants to do more than just defeat Jabesh-gilead, what is that? How does this help us understand why the Spirit of God came upon Saul and he became very angry?

3. Read I Samuel 11:5-15. Compare Saul as he's described in this text with what we've learned about Saul in the previous chapters. What made the difference in Saul? If Saul was back to farming do you think Saul had really bought into the idea that God would empower him as the new king? According to the text does Saul do something to deserve God's blessing or does God simply do this for Saul?

4. Compare chapter 8:20. The people had rejected God as king for a human king in order to fight their battles. Now God gives them a human king and he wins a great battle for Israel. Does this move the people toward God or away from God? How might this inform how we involve ourselves with others who make poor choices? In other words, would it not seem like a mistake to give them the king they ask for then give him a great victory? Would that not convince them they were right in asking for a human king? Yet, is that what resulted?

5. How does Saul respond to the victory and how does that affect how the people respond to God? What was Saul's role in bringing the nation together before God under Samuel?

Application

1. If God so used Saul with all his struggles, could God use you to do something significant for Him? Why or why not? What would it mean if you really believed this?

2. What seems to be Saul's role in this story? When God uses us to accomplish something for Him what must we do to make sure the celebration and focus turns to God? What's the temptation for us when God uses us to do something significant?

3. What is the most significant lesson you have learned thus far in the Samuel study? Why is this so significant for you?

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