

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel

Lesson 6: Saul's First Victory and Samuel's Charge -- 1 Samuel 11:1–12:25

A cruel ultimatum opens this lesson. Nahash the Ammonite besieges the town of Jabesh-gilead, and when the desperate townsfolk beg for terms, he offers them a deal soaked in contempt: he will spare them only if he may thrust out every right eye, to bring shame upon all Israel. Picture the terror in that little town, messengers fanning out across the country weeping, looking for anyone, anyone, who will help. It is the kind of darkness into which God loves to send a deliverer.

And the deliverer turns out to be the new king, freshly chosen but as yet unproven. When Saul hears the news, the Spirit of God comes upon him, and his anger is kindled, the righteous kind of anger that moves a man to act for the helpless. He rallies the nation, marches through the night, and shatters the Ammonites by morning. It is a genuine, God-empowered victory, and for one shining moment Saul is everything a king should be: courageous, decisive, and used by God to save his people.

Then something even more attractive appears: grace. The crowd, flushed with triumph, wants to execute the men who had earlier despised Saul. But Saul refuses. Not a man shall be put to death this day, he says, for today the Lord hath wrought salvation in Israel. He gives God the glory and gives his critics mercy. It is a beautiful beginning, and it makes what comes later in his story all the more sorrowful. Here, at the start, Saul shows us the man he could have been.

The lesson closes with the aged Samuel stepping forward to give his farewell charge. He clears his name, rehearses God's faithfulness across Israel's history, and then lays before the people the choice that defines every generation: only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart. But he does not soften the stakes. If ye shall still do wickedly, he warns, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king. Obedience matters. Those who start well can still be swept away. That solemn truth is the ground on which the rest of this study will be built.

Group Discussion: Samuel charged Israel, “only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart,” yet warned that both king and people would be swept away if they did wickedly (12:25). How do we keep the fear of the Lord alive in a culture, and a church, that can grow casual about obedience?

Personal Reflection: After the victory Saul refused to take revenge on those who had despised him, giving God the glory instead. Who in your life have you been tempted to repay, and what would it look like to extend mercy and let God receive the credit?

Read 1 Samuel 11:1–12:25

Study Questions

1. Nahash the Ammonite demanded the right to thrust out every right eye of Jabesh-gilead (11:1-3). What does this opening crisis reveal about the cruelty of the enemies of God's people and the kind of darkness into which God sends deliverance?
2. When Saul heard of Jabesh-gilead's plight, his anger was kindled to act (11:6). When have you felt rightly stirred to act on behalf of the helpless, and where might God be calling you to that now?
3. The Spirit of God came upon Saul and he won a great victory (11:6-11). What does this teach about the source of true strength for the work God gives, and how is that different from relying on ourselves?
4. After the victory, Saul refused to let his earlier critics be killed (11:12-13). What in your own heart needs to grow toward this kind of restraint and mercy toward those who have wronged you?
5. Saul declared, "to day the Lord hath wrought salvation in Israel" (11:13), giving God the credit. Why is giving God the glory the mark of a healthy leader, and how do we guard against quietly taking credit ourselves?
6. Samuel called the people to renew the kingdom at Gilgal with sacrifice and rejoicing (11:14-15). What place should remembering and celebrating God's deliverances have in your own walk and in the church's life?

7. In his farewell, Samuel cleared his name and rehearsed God's faithful dealings with Israel (12:1–13). What does his review of history teach us about remembering God's past faithfulness when facing present uncertainty?
8. Samuel sent thunder and rain in harvest as a sign, and the people feared greatly and confessed their sin (12:16–19). When has God used something to awaken in you a fresh, holy fear of Him, and why do we need it?
9. Samuel charged, “only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart,” yet warned, “if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king” (12:24–25). What does this teach about how much obedience matters, and that even those who begin well can fall away?
10. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this lesson, whether toward courage for the helpless, mercy toward critics, or a renewed resolve to fear and serve the Lord in truth all your days.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Romans 12:19–21, leaving vengeance to God and overcoming evil with good as Saul did with his critics; Joshua 24:14–15, the earlier charge to fear the Lord and choose whom you will serve; Deuteronomy 8:11–18, the warning not to forget the Lord and to credit ourselves; 1 Samuel 12:23, Samuel's refusal to sin by ceasing to pray for the people; Hebrews 3:12–14, the warning that those who begin must hold fast to the end or fall away.

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