

Reassessing Saul

I'm going to do things a little differently this morning. Before I read the Scripture for the morning, it's time for a Bible pop quiz and, as usual, Pam and Charlie are disqualified, because I know they know. And Connie's disqualified because she reads my sermons in advance to make sure I don't say anything too remarkably stupid. Who can tell me the name of the first king of Israel? Great, and what do you remember about Saul? Anybody else?

Usually, when we talk about Saul, we talk about him in relation to his rival and successor, David. We remember that David surprised Saul and everybody else by killing the Philistine giant, Goliath. We remember that David played music for Saul to calm him down when he was beset by "evil spirits," and more on that later. We remember that Saul threw a spear at David and plotted to kill him. We may remember that Saul reneged on his promise to marry his eldest daughter to David and gave him a younger daughter, Michal, instead and later, when David was on the run, gave Michal to another man. We remember that he had a son named Jonathan who was David's best friend. And we may remember that, in a scene reminiscent to Americans of Custer's last stand, Saul fell on his sword rather than be captured by the Philistines. What we most remember about Saul are things that leave us with a fairly negative impression of the man.

Now, here's our Scripture for the morning, I Samuel 11:1-15...

This is a rather different picture of Saul. He's young, he's fierce, he's a master strategist, and he's compassionate. This is a man that sounds like a legitimate king for Israel. And that's what I want us to think about this morning. Saul, like any of us, was a complex human being. His story didn't end well but it began brightly. I want to look carefully at the early Saul so that we can remember that people's lives, ours included, do not always go in a straight line.

Saul's story actually begins in I Samuel chapter 9. The people of Israel have come to the prophet and judge, Samuel, and asked him to appoint a king for them. Samuel has guided them well but now he is old and his sons, Joel and Abijah, are crooks, taking bribes when they serve as judges in the old man's place. Samuel is dubious. He believes that God is the real king of Israel and that the judges only serve as stewards of God. But when he prays about it, God tells him to go ahead but to warn the people what they are in for. Samuel gathers the people and tells them that a king will draft their sons for his army and take their daughters as his household servants and tax their produce. "He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you will be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves: but the LORD will not answer you in that day." The people, however, are not dissuaded.

Shortly thereafter, a young man of the tribe of Benjamin shows up to ask Samuel about three donkeys who have gone astray. This is Saul, and I Samuel 9:2 notes: "a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." Samuel invites him to dinner and to spend the night and the next day escorts him out of town, then anoints him and tells him he will be Israel's king. Saul experiences a spirit of prophecy and had an experience among a band of traveling prophets that those who've experienced Pentecostal worship might call "falling out," or "being slain in the Spirit." It is the first time that we read that Saul has been touched by a spirit.

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In I Samuel 10 is the story of Saul's first coronation, from which he tries to hide. Samuel has gathered the people at Mizpah to conduct a ceremony. He tells them that they will draw lots by tribes, then by families, then by individuals, until the king is identified. Sure enough, the lot falls to Saul. But he is reluctant and has hidden in the baggage train. When he is found, the people are all impressed with his good looks and stature. "Long live the king," they shout. But a few are not sure. Listen to I Samuel 10:27: "But some worthless fellows said, 'How can this man save us?' They despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace."

Now, I don't usually talk about textual issues when I preach because I confess I find such matters dry as dust usually. Here's one, though, that's kind of interesting. For centuries, I Samuel 10 stopped where I just read. But I Samuel 11, which I read earlier, seemed to be missing something. Why did the men of Jabesh-gilead submit so readily to Nahash the Ammonite? It wasn't until what we call the "Dead Sea Scrolls" were discovered in the late 1940s and early 1950s and subsequently deciphered that the missing piece came to light. The NRSV that we use as pew Bibles puts the missing paragraph in at the end of I Samuel 10:27, which is why it is such a long verse. "Now Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and had entered Jabesh-gilead."

Perhaps a little more background would be helpful. The Ammonites were a kindred people to Israel. The Bible tells us that they were descended from Abraham's nephew, Lot. They spoke a language very similar to Hebrew. Prior to the return of the Children of Israel from Egypt, the land claimed by the tribes of Gad and Reuben, east of the Jordan River in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan, was Ammonite territory. Their capital city, Rabbath-ammon, is now known as Amman, still the capital of Jordan. As we all know, and especially from the Bible, there's no feud like a family feud and at the time of Saul, the Ammonite king, Nahash, has taken it to a ghastly level. He has soundly defeated the majority of the Gadites and Reubenites and punished their warriors by gouging out their right eyes. As Tony Cartledge notes in his commentary on I & II Samuel for the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, "This cruelty left the men not only disfigured, but seriously handicapped in the event of war. Most men, being right-handed, could not aim a bow or a spear effectively without benefit of their right eye." Incidentally, my dad won a sharpshooter medal during his days with the Missouri National Guard despite his poor vision and, in our college days when I would go shooting with my pal John McConnell, I always astonished him because I was a pretty good shot despite shooting right-handed but sighting from my left eye, which is dominant. But I digress...

So, when Nahash and the Ammonite army catch up with the survivors of the Reubenite and Gadite army at Jabesh-gilead, the refugees try to cut a deal. But the terms Nahash offers them are the same as if he'd defeated them in battle – he proposes to gouge out their right eyes, too. In despair, they ask for a seven day stay, which Nahash grants. He doesn't think there is anyone in Israel who can stand up to him and his troops. He allows the men of Jabesh to send out messengers throughout Israel, begging for help. Clearly, they were unaware of our 21st century saying: "Better Call Saul." Because it is the young king who rallies Israel to their cause. Incidentally, did you notice that, despite being proclaimed king, Saul is hard at work back on the

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family farm when the news from Jabesh-gilead reaches him? He's been out plowing the fields with a yoke of oxen. When he hears the news, "the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, "Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!" Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one." Unlike the evil anger which comes upon him years later, with David, Saul's anger in this story is righteous and effective.

The young Saul appears here as an inspired (literally) and inspirational leader. What happens next shows him as a shrewd warrior. After gathering his troops, he sends word to Jabesh-gilead that he will relieve them by noon the next day, "tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot." But the men of Jabesh-gilead tell Nahash that they'll be ready to surrender by noon. Meanwhile, Saul prepares his men to attack at dawn. "At the morning watch they came into the camp and cut down the Ammonites until the heat of the day; and those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together." Nahash has been both overconfident and unprepared and Saul has won the day.

Inspirational leader, wise tactician, Saul also shows himself in this story to be a peacemaker. "The people said to Samuel, 'Who is it that said, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Give them to us so that we may put them to death.' But Saul said, 'No one shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has brought deliverance to Israel.'" Given Saul's ferocity in demanding that Israel rally to the cause of Jabesh-gilead, we might not have been surprised had he caused his internal enemies to be punished, even with death. But the young Saul is clearly still led by God, whom, as the prophet Hosea will put it some centuries later, desires mercy and not sacrifice. The people of Israel and Judah unite around the young king, this time in Gilgal, the site of the people's crossing of the Jordan under Joshua, "and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly."

So, what are we to make of this little story of young Saul, newly made king, still humble farmer? First, I think it's a good reminder to us that God can take any situation, no matter how dire it seems and bring good from it. What Nahash has done to the men of the tribes of Gad and Reuben is an atrocity, viewed from the perspective of the 21st century. But out of their defeat and torture comes a nation of Israel truly united for the first time since Joshua. They would not stay that way for long, of course, dividing again briefly after Saul's death over whether or not David should rule, then splitting up again in protest of the harsh rule of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. But Israel really did need to be united at this time. Not only were the Ammonites trying to force them out of Gilead, their possessions east of the Jordan, but the Philistines continued to try to push their way into the central plains from the coast of the Mediterranean. The Children of Israel were caught in a pincer between two powerful enemies as they tried to make a life in the Promised Land. But at the end of this story, they are victorious and grateful to God.

Not only can God make good in any situation, God can make good of anyone. Saul may have been a good-looking young man, tall and strong, but he was at first a reluctant king. Seen first out searching for his father's stray donkeys, then later out plowing the fields, he seems a bit of a

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hayseed – hardly the inspiring, crafty warrior he turns out to be. Remember the men at Mizpah who asked, “How can this man save us?” And Nahash of Ammon certainly didn’t take him seriously as a threat. There are other possibly troubling signs about Saul, too. He’s very susceptible to the influence of spiritual powers. In this story and the previous one, it is the Spirit of God which influences him. In the stories we remember about him with David, it is an evil spirit which seizes Saul. Today, we’d wonder about his mental health. And the frenzy he is said to have experienced with the band of prophets makes modern readers ask if he had epilepsy. But when he listened for the voice of God, this later-troubled man was successful.

When I officiated my dad’s interment two weeks ago in Missouri, I mentioned one of the most famous funerals in literature, William Shakespeare’s treatment of the funeral of Julius Caesar. Perhaps you remember part of Mark Antony’s funeral oration: “The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones.” As we showed earlier, with what we remember about Saul, that is certainly true for the first king of Israel. But there’s another, more modern saying, that I think applies here. Civil rights lawyer and death row advocate Bryan Stevenson often says, “We’re all more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” And though our overriding memories of Saul may be the evil things he did to David, we should also remember that he, too, was a deliverer of Israel. And, perhaps, in having mercy on the memory of Saul, we can find it in ourselves to have mercy on others, as well. Or even on ourselves.

Tony Cartledge ends his commentary on this passage with the following: “Thus, a story that began with cruel suffering and impassioned anger concluded with joy, celebration, and peace. Such a story offers hope that we, too, may find deliverance from our own distress and experience a renewal of joy.” In a moment, we will turn to another story that began with cruel suffering and concludes with joy, celebration, and peace. It is the story of the final Passover celebrated by Jesus with his disciples. After their dinner together, he was seized by the religious and imperial forces, subjected to an improper trial on trumped up charges, tortured and executed. He died and was buried but on the third day, he rose! And in his rising, he showed God’s power over evil and death that is now extended to us. Truly, ours are stories that will end in joy, celebration, and peace. Thanks be to God! Amen.