

“The Serpent, the Spirit, and the Second-Rate Servants”

1 Samuel 11

March 24, 2019

Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service

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We return to First Samuel again this evening, chapter eleven. To refresh your memory, in the previous chapters we have covered, the Lord, through Samuel, secretly anointed Saul as the prince of Israel in chapters nine and ten, and then in the second half of chapter ten Saul was formally selected to be king in Israel. And now we pick up with the first major event after Saul’s appointment as king.

We should note, before we get to our text, that the last chapter ended with some questioning Saul’s kingship. Chapter ten, verse twenty-seven said “But some worthless fellows said, ‘How can this man save us?’”

With that question still hanging in the air, we come to chapter eleven.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

^{11:1}Then Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-gilead, and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, “Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you.” ²But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, “On this condition I will make a treaty with you, that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel.” ³The elders of Jabesh said to him, “Give us seven days’ respite that we may send messengers through all the territory of Israel. Then, if there is no one to save us, we will give ourselves up to you.” ⁴When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul, they reported the matter in the ears of the people, and all the people wept aloud.

⁵Now, behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen. And Saul said, “What is wrong with the people, that they are weeping?” So they told him the news of the men of Jabesh. ⁶And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. ⁷He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hand of the messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!” Then the dread of Yahweh fell upon the people, and they came out as one man. ⁸When he mustered them at Bezek, the people of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand. ⁹And they said to the messengers who had come, “Thus shall you say to the men of Jabesh-gilead: ‘Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have salvation.’” When the messengers came and told the men of Jabesh, they were glad. ¹⁰Therefore the men of Jabesh said, “Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you.” ¹¹And the next day Saul put the people in three companies. And they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. And those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

¹²Then the people said to Samuel, “Who is it that said, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Bring the men, that we may put them to death.” ¹³But Saul said, “Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today Yahweh has worked salvation in Israel.” ¹⁴Then Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom.” ¹⁵So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they

made Saul king before Yahweh in Gilgal. There they sacrificed peace offerings before Yahweh, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let's pray ...

Lord, as the psalmist says, we know that those who walk in the ways of your word are blessed – those who keep your testimonies and seek you with their whole heart.

Lord, make our ways steadfast in keeping your statutes.

Keep us from dishonoring your name, by fixing our eyes now on your word.

Teach us the way of righteousness, so that we might praise you with upright hearts,

Grant this for Jesus's sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:1-2, 5-7]

Our text this evening is an important part in the story of the establishment of Saul as Israel's king.

Saul was privately anointed, he was publicly selected by Yahweh, and then after he leads Israel in battle in this chapter he is fully accepted by the people and truly installed as the king.

But this story is not just an account of how Saul gained the people's acceptance as king. There are some important things going on here that were reminders of spiritual truths then and that are reminders of spiritual truths for us now as well.

So, we'll see three things again as we look at tonight's text.

We're going to see:

- I. What the enemies of God's people expect,
- II. Who will deliver God's people, and
- III. What the deliverer will use.

What the enemies of God's people expect,
who will deliver God's people,
and what the deliverer will use.

So first, what do the enemies of God's people expect?

The first paragraph of our text shows us that the enemies of God's people expect total and perpetual surrender.

Where am I getting that?

Well, Nahash the Ammonite shows up and besieges Jabesh-gilead. And the people of Jabesh-gilead want to come to some sort of arrangement. And the arrangement Nahash offers is that he gouges out all of their right eyes. Now ... what's going on with that?

Well, Josephus tells us that the shield used in the ancient world obscured the left eye – so the right eye was crucial for fighting. [Firth, 138] In other words, Nahash will only offer them a treaty that includes their “never-ending subservience” to him. [Davis, 116] With their right eyes gouged out, all the men will be unable to fight in battle, and so Jabesh-gilead will never be able to try to assert its freedom from Nahash in the future.

For Nahash this is a practical matter of course, but as he himself admits, it also grows out of his desire to humiliate the people of God. He wants their never-ending subservience to be humiliating.

And so Nahash, the enemy of God's people, demands their total and perpetual surrender.

But it's not just that. Nahash not only demands it – he expects it. He is confident that he will receive it.

The elders of Jabesh-gilead request seven days to see if there is anyone in Israel who will help them. We might find Nahash's agreement with this plan odd, but it makes sense in several ways.

First, it reflects the fact that Nahash is extremely confident that no one will come to help Jabesh-Gilead. Nahash is convinced that no one can or will save the people of Jabesh-Gilead from him, even if they go around asking.

Second, it makes sense practically. If he is right, that no real help will come, then Nahash gets to avoid both the cost in lives of a battle, and the cost in time and resources of a siege. So, agreeing to this plan makes practical sense to him. [Firth, 138]

But third, if Nahash wanted to humiliate the people, this would add to it even more to that. It would be humiliating enough for them to have to surrender to such terms. But if they sent messengers throughout all Israel and still received no help and had to surrender, that would make their humiliation and disgrace that much greater and that much more demoralizing. [Davis, 116; Alter, 61]

In Nahash we see that the enemies of God's people demand (and expect to receive) surrender from God's people that is total, perpetual, and humiliating.

And we might hear that, and we might question really whether that is a generalized principal or just the way Nahash did things ... but whether it was providential or whether the author chose the name he used for this leader to emphasize this, I think the text indicates to us that what we see here should be considered in generalized terms.

Because the name “Nahash” is also the Hebrew word for serpent. [Leithart, 81]

It is a real name ... but it is also a connection that would seem to be obvious to the Hebrew readers. A man named Serpent shows up and besieges a city of God's people and demands their total, perpetual, and humiliating surrender.

It seems that the author is indicating that as Satan sought to capture Adam and Eve through the serpent, now through another serpent he is demanding complete surrender from a city of God's people.

Jabesh-gilead did not face unique demands from the serpent that faced them. They are the same terms the serpent has been demanding for the entire history of God's people.

The spiritual enemies of God's people demand (and expect to receive) total, perpetual, and humiliating surrender from the people of God.

For some reason though ... like the elders of Jabesh-gilead ... we always seem to think they'll settle for something more moderate and middle-of-the-road.

We each have that one area of sin where we kind of figure that if we let it have a marked off space, if we don't challenge it or try to uproot it there ... then maybe it'll stay within those boundaries and we can reach a sort of arrangement with it. But it never stays in the territory we cede to it. Sin always wants more. It always demands more. The lie it tells us, and which we so often fall for, is that if we just give it a bit more, then it will be satisfied. But it never is. Because sin will not stop its demands until it has your total, perpetual, and humiliating surrender.

The same is true of our idols – those allegiances in our hearts that we have not put in their proper place as something that is a good thing, but not our greatest good. Those things we are tempted to value more than we should. Those things that aren't necessarily bad, unless in our hearts they begin to rival God. Those things that rather than staying where they belong ... they are always demanding more. Whether it is your work or your wealth, your achievement or your image ... when we let something we love to become an idol, it will accept no moderate treaty with anything else. It demands our total, perpetual, and often humiliating, surrender.

And the same is often true of our relationship to the world. This one is tricky, because there are many in the church in our culture who want to label any nuance in thought as surrender to the culture – any engagement with secular thought or causes as conforming to the world – and ministry to controversial groups in our culture as compromise of the gospel. Sometimes groups do compromise with the culture. But other times Christians labeled in these ways are doing good and faithful work that honors Christ. We're not always as good as we think we are at telling the difference from a distance.

So, we need to be much more careful about declaring publicly or gossiping privately that this or that group has surrendered to the culture, and that we know it because someone said so on the internet, so it must be true ...

Rather than using the internet to identify those who one theological micro-tribe have been described by another theological micro-tribe as surrendering to the culture, we would probably do better by being more aware of the ways that *we* are surrendering to the world around us.

We each have our area where we are tempted to begin compromising our faith to appease the world. Maybe it's some of those more embarrassing theological views that you're willing to cover up or tweak to avoid the world's mockery and grasp at a bit more intellectual respectability. Maybe it's a specific ethical area you'd like to change just a bit to not be too far out of step with the world around you. Maybe it's more subtle than all that, changing your approach to life as you see how enjoyable it can be to live according to the patterns of the world – spending a bit more money on yourself instead of others, enjoying a bit more of the culture's sexual freedom, or just delighting in our society's consumeristic self-centered approach to life.

What are the compromises with the world that you are tempted with? And are you at least aware where each of those paths lead? That the patterns of the world, just like sin and idols in our hearts, will in the end be satisfied with nothing less than our total and perpetual surrender?

Whether our sinful desires, the idols of our hearts, or the demands of the world, the enemies of God's people will never offer a mutually beneficial treaty. They demand to pluck our right eye out – they demand that we give them our total, perpetual, and humiliating surrender. And they will not settle for less than that.

Do you appreciate that when you are in the midst of temptation? Do you remind yourself that giving in to your desire or idol or some cultural demand one more time will never actually satisfy them? That they will always want more until they have everything? Or do you buy the lie that just a bit more will satisfy them this time?

Nahash the Ammonite ... Nahash the serpent ... reminds us of what our spiritual enemies demand. And he also reminds us of their confidence. They expect to receive what they demand. They too believe that no one will save us from them.

So: What do the enemies of God's people demand?

They demand our total and perpetual surrender.

That's the first thing.

Second: Who will deliver God's people from their enemies?

That's the question that introduced this passage – right? Back in chapter ten the question left hanging in the air was: Who will deliver God's people from their enemies?

On a surface-level reading we might be tempted to say that Saul, their king, will.

But a closer look reveals that Saul is not the main character in this passage. He is not the main actor. The Spirit of God is.

The turning point of this whole passage is verse six. Up until verse six everything looks bad. Jabesh-gilead is unable to defend itself. Nahash is confident that no one will come to their rescue. The people of Gibeah, when they hear about what's happened in verse four, they don't begin gathering an army – they just weep. Then we find Saul and we see that he doesn't have an

army ready for something like this, but has returned to his farm work, and through verse five there is little hope.

And then in verse six we read “And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words.” And from that phrase on, everything changes. From there Saul suddenly acts with confidence. He gathers an army, which boldly routes the Ammonites and delivers the people of Jabesh-gilead.

It was the rushing of the Spirit upon Saul that “made all the difference in the world” in this situation. [Davis, 115-116] That is where everything changes in terms of the flow of the narrative.

That moment is also the central piece in the structure of the story.

A common way to organize a story or passage in the ancient world was in a chiasmic structure – this is a structure where there is a sort of mirror symmetry in the passage from the beginning to the end, and where the most important part of the story is placed at the center. One commentator makes the case that 1 Samuel 11:1-13 is told in such a chiasmic structure, with the rushing of the Spirit in verse six at the very center. In other words, the center piece of the passage, the most important part according to the author, is the working of the Spirit. [Davis, 116]

And the work of the Spirit is not only revealed in verse six.

Saul, having had the Spirit of God rush upon him acts at the Spirit’s direction. And then in verse seven we read that “the dread of Yahweh” came on the people as a result. And we should see that this response from the people is also a result of the Spirit at work. [Firth, 139]

Saul leads the people, because of the empowering Spirit of God, the people respond rightly to Saul, because of the fear of God through the same Spirit, and as a result, God’s people are delivered.

And in case we miss the fact that it is the Spirit of God who is the true deliverer here, Saul himself states it clearly. In verse thirteen Saul declares that it is Yahweh who has delivered Israel. [Firth, 141]

Having considered these details, we can zoom out again and look at the text as a whole. At the end of chapter ten, the specific question asked was: “How will this fellow save us?” and the answer that chapter eleven seems to give is “By the power of God’s Spirit.” [Davis, 115]

Chapter eleven is a salvation narrative, and its central point seems to be that even now, even after Israel has been given a human king, it is still Yahweh who is Israel’s savior, as he works by his Spirit. [Firth, 136-137]

Who will deliver God’s people from their enemies?
The Spirit of God will.

Which, when we think of the sins, and idols, and worldly challenges that we face, should give us tremendous hope.

It is not *you* who must have the power to defeat the sin you are battling with in your heart – the sin that always wants more. It is not *you* who must have the power to defeat the idols in your life. It is not *you* who must be strong enough to fend off the power of the world. It is the Spirit of God who delivers God's people.

Now, that does not mean we are passive – we'll say more on that in a minute. But it does mean that the power and the deliverance is from God's Spirit and not from us.

We too are called to wage war against Nahash, against the serpent – against our spiritual enemies – just Israel was. But victory does not come from our own strength. The one who will deliver us is the Spirit of God.

There is much work to be done in the spiritual battles we face. But even as you prepare for them, even as you engage in them, can you find rest in this reality that the victory is not up to your strength, but to the strength of the Spirit of God?

So, first:

What do the enemies of God's people demand?

They demand our total and perpetual surrender.

Second:

Who will deliver God's people from their enemies?

The Spirit of God will.

And now, third: What will this deliverer, the Spirit of God, use?

Our text reminds us that he uses imperfect people.

The Spirit of God uses imperfect people to bring his deliverance.

We certainly see that in our text.

We see it first in Saul.

Saul has been full of ambiguities again and again, and the first part of chapter eleven is no different. When we come to Saul, the new king of Israel, we find him back home working on his farm. And again, it's unclear what to make of this.

On the one hand, it's a relief that Saul has not begun to follow the corrupt path of amassing power and wealth for himself, as Samuel had warned about in chapter eight. [Firth, 138] On the other hand, it's hard not to wonder if this might signal that Saul has failed so far to take on his assigned roll as king. [Firth, 137]

With all the ambiguity so far, with the lack of clear negative signs, but also the lack of clear positive signs, it is safe to say, I think, that so far Saul appears at least imperfect as a military leader for Israel. There is some understandable cause to question his courage and willingness to step into a challenging roll.

And yet ... it is this very imperfect leader that the Spirit uses to deliver God's people. As one commentator puts it, the author of First Samuel is telling us that "This [...] is what God's Spirit does. He takes this shy, hesitant farmer and makes him function as a super-judge. That is the difference the Spirit makes." [Davis, 119]

In Saul, we see that the Spirit of God uses imperfect people to bring his deliverance.

But that's not the only place we see it.

The two cities mentioned in our text tonight, the two cities especially involved in the action, had a reputation from the earlier history of Israel.

The book of Judges records, among other things, the religious and moral decline of God's people. Chapters one through eighteen give a fairly chronological account of that decline. But then, at the end, the author puts two stories that are exemplary accounts of the depths of Israel's corruption in this period as a whole.

In Judges 17 and 18 we get a story exemplifying the depths of Israel's religious corruption. And in chapters 19 through 21 we get a story exemplifying the depths of Israel's moral and social corruption. [Howard, *ESV Study Bible*, 467, 469; Howard, *Historical Books*, 141]

As one writer puts it, in Judges 19-21 "One horror seems to lead inexorably to another [...], as the people's unfaithfulness takes its devastating toll." [Howard, *ESV Study Bible*, 469]

Without going into all the details, the story of chapters 19 through 21 is a disturbing account of the moral corruption of Israel. The act that sets everything off is the brutal group sexual assault of a woman to death in one city. And one act leads to another from there. Outraged by this deed, the other tribes of Israel demand that the perpetrators be brought to justice. The tribe which the perpetrators were from refuses to turn them over, and instead gather for battle to defend them. Civil war ensues. The city of perpetrators is defeated and destroyed. Then, when the dust settles, it is brought up that another town in Israel did not come out against the offending city – seeming to approve of them by their inaction, and that city is then destroyed by Israel as well. It should be noted that none of this solves the problems, which continue to spiral from there into additional layers of corruption.

This is the Book of Judge's story of just how awful and corrupt things had become in Israel. This particular story likely took place in an earlier part of Israel's history during the period of the Judges. [Davis, 119]

The city in which the abominable assault happened was Gibeah. The tribe that defended the perpetrators was Benjamin. And the city that refused to stand against the perpetrators was Jabesh-gilead.

Benjamin, Gibeah, and Jabesh-gilead were the main characters in the example given by the Book of Judges as the worst kinds of corruption to be found in a thoroughly corrupt Israel at the time of the judges. And Benjamin, Gibeah, and Jabesh-gilead are all at the center of this story of deliverance in 1 Samuel 11.

Now, to be clear, these were not the same men involved – the span of time between the story of Judges 19-21 and our text tonight was likely several generations. The cities destroyed had been rebuilt. The current inhabitants were several generations removed.

And yet it seems that the author means for us to remember the spiritual history of these people.

If the names of the cities were not enough to jog our memory, Saul's dismemberment of the oxen, sending a piece to each tribe, uncomfortably brings to mind the dismemberment of the woman whose body parts were also sent to each tribe in Judges 19-21. [Firth, 137]

Why is the author reminding us of the terrible history of Gibeah, Benjamin, and Jabesh-gilead?

If the example of Saul were not clear enough, we have another reminder here that the Spirit of God uses imperfect people to bring about his deliverance.

Gibeah, once the source of great evil, is now the one the Spirit of God will use to bring his deliverance. It is through a Benjaminite, the tribe who failed to stand up for what was right before, that the Spirit will now bring deliverance.

Now again, the men in these stories were not the same men. The point is less in the individuals and more in the choice of city by the Spirit. The Spirit did not draw from the most capable in the land, those with a sterling history. He drew his leader from a place that people would look at with some questions. It was a place with a *very* imperfect history.

In the choice of Saul ... in beginning the work of deliverance in Benjamin, and in Gibeah, our text reminds us that the Spirit who delivers God's people from their enemies, uses imperfect people.

And that is a very important thing for us to appreciate.

Let me just mention three implications of this truth.

It means that:

- The Spirit of God can work through you,
- The Spirit of God can work through the people around you, and
- The Spirit of God can work through your church.

Let's take just a few minutes on each of those.

First, the Spirit of God can work through you.

We talked last week about our tendency to shrink back from God's calling, so I won't dwell on this long.

But if the Spirit of God brings deliverance through imperfect people, then that means he can work even through you.

He can work, for example, through your efforts in your own life.

Spiritual growth is possible. Repentance is possible. Spiritual maturity is possible. You can pursue spiritual growth and you can grow as you do that, *because the Spirit of God works through imperfect people.*

Pursuing repentance and growth is never hopeless, because it is broken and imperfect people like you that God's Spirit so often works through.

And just as the Spirit of God can work through your efforts in your own life, so he can also work through your imperfect efforts in the lives of others.

If you saw some ways last week, when we talked about calling, where you have failed to answer the call to serve others, where you have avoided reaching out to others because you don't think you have anything to offer, our text reminds us that your confidence in reaching out to those in need should not ultimately rest in your abilities, but in this fact that the Spirit of God works through imperfect people.

If the Spirit of God can bring deliverance through Saul and Gibeah, then surely, he can work in the lives of others through *you*.

So, the fact that the Spirit of God works through imperfect people means that the Spirit of God can work through your efforts.

Second, it means that the Spirit of God can work through the people around you.

We far too quickly limit who God can use to help us. As a matter of pride, we assume that only someone with expertise and intelligence far beyond ours can be a real instrument of God in our lives. So, we don't listen to our friends, or our spouse, or our kids, or our parents, when they have something insightful to say to us – something that might help us grow spiritually. We assume that the Spirit of God cannot work through them in our lives.

One of my favorite lines on this comes from David Foster Wallace. In a list of things that are true, but which he says we often miss, he includes this – he says, “Other people can often see things about you that you yourself cannot see, even if those people are stupid.” [*Infinite Jest*, 204]

Wallace is right. And he's right even when you just take into account natural human perspective. So how much more must it be true when the Spirit of God is taken into account?

“Other people can often see things about you that you yourself cannot see, even if those people are stupid.”

Who around you have you assumed is too imperfect for God to use in your life? Who in your life have you failed to appreciate as a possible instrument of God's work to deliver you from your spiritual enemies?

Because the Spirit of God uses imperfect people, he can work through the people around you.

Finally, because the Spirit of God uses imperfect people, he can even work through your church.

He can even work through this body here.

There are a number of things behind the modern American tendency for people to move from church to church every few years, and for pastors to last around seven years at each congregation they serve.

But I think a failure to believe that the Spirit of God works through imperfect people is one of them.

Because it's when people begin to see the imperfections in others that they often leave churches, or that pastors often leave ministries.

A family joins a church. They are enthusiastic and excited. They get really involved. But as time goes on, they see the imperfections of the church. They see the imperfection of its leaders. And as they see more and more, they eventually reach the conclusion that God can't really work in their lives through *these* kinds of people. Through people who are so imperfect. And so, they leave, and join another church, with the same excitement and optimism ... until the imperfections there begin to show.

And so with pastors. A pastor and congregation start out together. And many people are excited and optimistic. But a few years later the congregation has a pretty good sense of their pastor's deficiencies. And the pastor has a pretty good picture of the congregation's shortcomings. And next thing you know, everyone sort of agrees that the Lord is calling the pastor elsewhere.

That's one thing, by the way, which makes a 41-year pastorate like Pastor Rayburn has had here so extraordinary.

Now, in these patterns where members and pastors leave, I'm not talking about cases where scandalous sin or a grave moral failing or theological error were at the root. That does happen, and how we evaluate that needs to be different.

But I'm talking about the far more common cases where imperfections and blemishes become apparent, and so people part ways.

Far too often, what underlies this is a lack of belief that the Spirit of God uses imperfect people.

This is a challenge to all of us. It's a challenge to congregants to ask, when you see the ordinary failings and imperfections of the leaders of this church – none of whom are perfect – will you continue to believe that the Spirit of God can work in your life through imperfect people ... or will you look elsewhere to try to find those elusive perfect leaders.

It's a challenge to those of us in leadership too – because we need to ask ourselves, when we see the ordinary failures and imperfections of a congregant will we continue to believe that the Spirit of God will contribute to our congregation through that imperfect individual ... or will we be tempted to write them off?

Really seeing each other's failures in the church is where this principal especially hits real life. It's where we move from theory to practice. When it comes to the nitty gritty of real relationships, will you believe that the Spirit of God can work through the imperfect leaders and congregants of this body?

Our text has a lot for us to consider.

What do the enemies of God's people demand?
They demand our total and perpetual surrender.

Who will deliver God's people from their enemies?
The Spirit of God will.

And what does the Spirit of God use to do this?
He uses imperfect people, like us and those around us.

These are the truths our text tonight holds out to us.

They're not the truths we often want.

We want some sort of compromise to be worked out with sin. We want a more tangible deliverer than the Spirit of God. We want a human being or institution that we can convince ourselves will be a perfect instrument for God to use.

But compromise is not an option. The Spirit of God *is* the one who delivers us. And time and time again he uses imperfect people to do it.

Our response to this should not be disappointment, but delight. What an honor that God would not leave us to make treaties with our enemies. What an honor that the Spirit of God would come to deliver even us. What an honor that God would use foolish, sinful people like you and me to accomplish his purposes in this world.

Far from grumbling, far from being discontent, let us ask our God for even more of this. Let us ask for him to pour out his Spirit upon us, so that we his people, might be equipped to be his instruments in the spiritual battles that surround us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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