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The Ammonite War

First Samuel 11: 1-15

The Ammonite war DIG: Why did Nahash make such harsh terms of surrender? Why then did Nahash give the people of Jabesh-Gilead a chance to fortify their troops? How were the Israelites rallied with united hearts? What did the victory mean for the citizens of Jabesh-Gilead? For the Israelites? Even for the worthless rebels?

REFLECT: In what situation have you felt ADONAI truly empowering you? What did you do that, without the Lord, you could not have done? When was YHVH vindicated in the eyes of worthless rebels or skeptics? What challenges are you facing now in which you need God to embolden and empower you? In victory are you magnanimous or not?

**The people of Isra'el were happy to have such a king,
and Sha'ul was happy to be such a king.**

At this point in our Bible, at the break between First Samuel 10 and 11, there is a sudden transition from Sha'ul to a new character, Nahash the Ammonite, and to a new location, Jabesh-Gilead, to the east of Jordan. In the Qumran manuscript 4QSam^a, however, the extra paragraph does provide a helpful introduction to the Ammonite war, and Josephus reveals that it was part of text he used (Josephus, Antiquates 6.5.1). It appears to have been omitted from the LXX and MT. It explains that Nahash had been oppressing the tribes of Reuben and Gad, putting out the right eyes of all the men they captured, but that seven thousand had taken refuge in the city of Jabesh-Gilead. The last words of First Samuel 10:27 are transformed by a slight change in the Hebrew to the meaning "About a month later," as in the LXX and Josephus, thus giving the indication of the passing of time between the two incidents. However, the text does not add anything substantial to the meaning of the bible. The manuscript reads:

Now Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been severely oppressing the tribes of Reuben and Gad by gouging out the right eye of each of them, and allowing no deliverer. No Israelites were across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash,

king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But seven thousand men had escaped from the Ammonites and entered into Jabesh-Gilead.²⁴⁷

After **his public coronation**, **Sha'ul** returned home to **Gibeah** and resumed **his** normal life. Perhaps **he** was keeping a low profile while waiting for an opportunity to prove **himself**, in keeping with the judges before **him**. Unwittingly, **the Ammonites** provided just the opportunity that **Sha'ul** needed to take the initiative, and answer the question: **How can this man save us from our enemies (10:26-27)?**

The Ammonites were related to **Isra'el** (see the commentary on **Genesis**, **to see link click Fb - Let's Get Our Father to Drink Wine and then Lie with Him**), but were typically aggressive, harassing the tribes east of the Jordan River from **their** territory further to the east (**Judges 3:13**). **They** claimed that the east bank of the Jordan belonged to **them** (**Judges 11:12-13**). It is clear from **Jephthah's** battle with **the Ammonites** (see **Judges Bp - The Defeat of the Amorites**), that in the initial battle **Jephthah** led troops from the Transjordan tribes only. The rallying-point was at **Mitzpah** in **Gilead** (**Judges 11:29**), the place from which **Jephthah** came from, and no help was expected from any of the tribes west of the Jordan (**Judges 12:2**). For **their** part, **the people of Jabesh-Gilead** had refused to participate in the war against **Benjamin**. As a result, there was little hope that in the looming conflict with **the Ammonites**, there would be any help from the western tribes.

The challenge (11:1-4): Then **Nahash** (Hebrew: *snake*), **the king of the Ammonites** (**12:12**), **came up and set up camp to fight Jabesh-Gilead**. Intermarriage between **the Benjamites** and the people of **Jabesh-Gilead** would have established a bond between **them**, which forms part of the background to **Sha'ul's** reaction as we will soon see. **All the men of Jabesh-Gilead said to Nahash, "If you will make a treaty with us, we will be subject to you."** But rather than engage in a long and costly siege, **Nahash** replied: **I'll make a treaty with you only on this condition: that all your right eyes be gouged out (11:1-2a).**²⁴⁸ **According to Josephus, warriors of that day fought in formation with interlocking shields, so that the left eye was covered by the shield. By gouging out the right eye, Nahash rendered them unfit for battle, though still eligible for slave labor (Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, 6.5).** If **Nahash** had succeeded, **Isra'el** could have lost **her** territory east of the Jordan River permanently.

But **Nahash** also held a serious grudge against **the Israelites**, wanting to **bring disgrace on all of Isra'el (11:2b)**. **The Ammonites** were **Isra'el's** cousins via incest, having descended from the forbidden union between drunken **Lot** and one of **his daughters** after

their flight from the destruction of **Sodom (Genesis 19:38)**. **The Israelites** didn't hold **the Ammonites** in high regard, to say the least, and the feeling was mutual. During **Isra'el's** wilderness wanderings, **the Ammonites** had refused to offer **their cousins** needed provisions (**Deut 23:4**), and **they** are listed among the traditional enemies of **Isra'el (Isaiah 11:14; Jeremiah 9:25-26)**. Finally, during the judgeship of **Jephthah the Gileadite**, **the Ammonites** made war in these same regions. **Jephthah** defeated **the Ammonites** and captured **twenty of their cities (Judges 11:33)**. Needless to say, the hatred between **Isra'el** and **Ammon** was long-standing. So desperate was the situation of **Jabesh-Gilead** that **they** could only surrender and accept the terms. **They** were at the mercy of **the Ammonites**.²⁴⁹

Wisely, **the leaders of Jabesh** answered him, saying: **Give us seven days' grace to send messengers throughout Isra'el's territory; then, if no one will rescue us, we will surrender to you.** For the reasons above, **Nahash** delighted in causing **the Israelites** of **Jabesh-Gilead** to writhe in fear before **him**. Not only that, it was better to wait seven days than to engage in a lengthy and costly siege. In **his** estimation, help was unlikely because **seven days** was barely enough time for **messengers** to reach the whole land, and return. When **the messengers came to Gibeah, where Sha'ul lived, and said these words in the hearing of the people, they all wept aloud** because **the people** of **Benjamin** had a blood connection with **the people of Jabesh-Gilead** as seen below (**11:3-4**). Nevertheless, **the people of Jabesh-Gilead** had no plan of action.²⁵⁰

The conquest (11:5-11): It appears that **the messengers** were unaware of **Sha'ul's** new kingship, since they went to **the people** in general, rather than approaching **the king** directly. The fact that **they all wept aloud** hints that behind **their** grief was an especially strong bond between **Gibeah** and **Jabesh-Gilead**. In the war against **Benjamin** (see [Judges Cd - War Against the Tribe of Benjamin](#)), **Jabesh-Gilead** had refused to participate. As a result, all **the unmarried maidens of Jabesh-Gilead** had been given to provide **wives** for **the men of Gibeah** (see [Judges Ce - The Preservation of the Tribe of Benjamin](#)). The result was that many of **the people** in **Sha'ul's** home town were the sons and daughters of women from **Jabesh-Gilead**. So there was a blood relationship between the tribe of **Benjamin** and the people of **Jabesh-Gilead**. **As this was going on, Sha'ul was returning from the fields, behind his oxen.** At that time the office of a **king** was not yet a royal status; however, **the Ammonite** war was about to change all that for good. **Sha'ul** asked, **"What's wrong with the people to make them cry like that?"** They told him what the men of **Jabesh-Gilead** had said (**11:5**).

With this news, a decisive moment had come to the newly enthroned **Sha'ul**. It was the

threat of invasion that had largely motivated **the elders'** demand for a **king (8:20)**. Now that such an invasion had occurred, it was **the king's** duty to save **Isra'el**. This had been the very concern raised by **Sha'ul's** opponents: **How can this man save us (10:27)?** Therefore, **his** actions at that moment would be a critical turning point for **the king** and **his** new regime.

Fortunately for **Sha'ul**, **his** greatest need was met at that very moment. **When Sha'ul heard their words, the Spirit of God fell on him in power (11:6a)**. The coming of the Spirit made a remarkable point, because it showed **the LORD's** favor toward that **king** who had been installed as a result of **the people's** rebellion (see [Bq - Give us a King!](#)).

ADONAI would give **Sha'ul** every opportunity to serve in **God's** own strength; **He** was graciously willing to remain **Isra'el's Savior** throughout **the kingship** of **Sha'ul**. Just as **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** had rushed into **Samson**, giving **him** the supernatural strength to strike a **young lion** with **his hands** or **the Philistines** with **the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 14:6 and 19, 15:14)**, and just as **the Spirit** had empowered **Othniel**, **Gideon**, and **Jephthah** in **their** victories, now **the Ruach** came to empower **Sha'ul** with courage and vigor to lead **Isra'el** in that time of crisis.²⁵¹



The coming of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** caused **Sha'ul** to **burn with** righteous **anger** for **Nahash's** evil and with a violent resolve to strike out in defense of **God's people (11:6b)**. This righteous **anger** reflects **Ha'Shem's** own wrath against evil. Consequently, **Sha'ul's** situation called for bold and decisive action. **Sha'ul** acted accordingly: **He seized a pair of oxen and cut them into pieces; then he sent them throughout Isra'el with the same messengers** that had come from **Jabesh-Gilead**, saying, **"Anyone who doesn't come and follow Sha'ul and Samuel, this is what will be done to his oxen!"** **Sha'ul** was not harsh, threatening death to those who opposed **him**, but only imposing the civil punishment

of death on **their oxen (11:7a)**. Sha'ul began acting like **the king** he was chosen to be.

Then the fear of ADONAI fell on the people, and they came out with united hearts. Inspired by **the Ruach**, Sha'ul spoke with authority. Again, aided by **God's Spirit**, Sha'ul quickly **mustered the army at Bezek**, about twenty miles from **Jabesh-Gilead**; **there were 300,000 from the people of Isra'el, and the men of Judah numbered 30,000.** Sha'ul sent a message to **Jabesh-Gilead** that help was coming the next day before noon. **"Tomorrow, by midday, you will have been rescued."** When the messengers returned and told the men of **Jabesh-Gilead**, they were overjoyed. Shrewdly, the citizens of **Jabesh** were confident in **their king** and said [to Nahash], **"Tomorrow we will surrender to you, and you can do with us whatever you like."** Sha'ul may have known the story of **Gideon** and his defeat of the Midianites because **the next day**, like **Gideon (Judges 7:16)**, he divided his men into three companies. Then they entered the camp of the **Ammonites** and surprised them before dawn (from 3am to 6am). The Israelites slaughtered them until midday. Those who survived were so scattered that no two of them were left together (11:7b-11).²⁵²

The conformation (11:12-15): Sha'ul's victory at **Jabesh-Gilead** established his kingdom among **the tribes of Isra'el**. But **the people** demanded the death of those who opposed the king at his public coronation. The people said to Samuel, **"Who are the men who said, 'Is Sha'ul to rule over us' (10:27)? Hand them over to us, so we can put them to death."** However, the answer didn't come from Samuel, but from Sha'ul. The king declared: **No one will be put to death today, because today ADONAI has rescued Isra'el.** The events seem to have brought satisfaction to Samuel. Isra'el had rejected him as well as **the LORD** in demanding a king. But now **God's Spirit** had come to Sha'ul, so that Samuel might hope for godliness and faith in **the new ruler**. Sha'ul had done the **kingly** thing and led his people to a great victory. So, the prophet quickly took advantage of the situation.²⁵³ Then Samuel said to the people, **"Come, let's go to Gilgal and confirm the kingship there.** Gilgal was also the place where the Israelites under Joshua first set foot on the soil of **Canaan**, and acknowledged ADONAI's great power on their behalf, as well as the fact that they belonged to Him (Joshua 4:23-24 and 5:2-7). So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Sha'ul as their king in the presence of ADONAI. There they presented sacrifices as peace offerings before ADONAI (see the commentary on [Leviticus Ak](#) - The Peace Offerings: At Peace with God), and Sha'ul and all the people of Isra'el celebrated with great joy. The people of Isra'el were happy to have such a king, and Sha'ul was happy to be such a king.²⁵⁴ His reign had started out well.

As Richard Phillips relates in his commentary in **1 Samuel**, **Sha'ul's** victory over **the Ammonite Nahash** presents a challenge to all believers and the congregations of **God** today. It's a challenge for us to realize that no matter how friendly our circumstances may seem, on a spiritual plane, **ADONAI's** people are always at war. Paul warns us that **we are not struggling against human beings, but against the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers governing this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm** (see the commentary on [Ephesians Cb - The Armor of God](#)). These spiritual foes are just as eager to destroy **God's people** today as **Nahash** and **the Ammonites** were in the day of **King Sha'ul**.

Yet despite the warning of this text, the reality is that the Church today rarely sees itself engaged in deadly spiritual warfare. This can be seen in the fact that most of the congregations of **God** see themselves according to business plans, rather than battle plans. "Going to battle" is not how we like to think of our evangelistic efforts. In many ways the business world has replaced the battlefield. Gospel work is then not war but business: we go to sell a product, not to fight a battle. We become marketers, not soldiers. We have a product, not to fight a battle. We face potential customers, not an enemy. We are out to expand our market share and increase our customer base, not to capture, defeat, and destroy an enemy. The language of war, weapons, and battle is too extreme for the way we think about evangelism. We are more like advertisers than fighters.

As a result, we need to rethink our approach. Our challenge in evangelism is not to present an appealing product to a consumer culture. Rather, Paul says that **the god of this world has blinded their minds, in order to prevent them from seeing the light shining from the Good News about the glory of the Messiah, who is the image of God (Second Corinthians 4:4)**. Since Paul is correct and the combination of spiritual domination and depravity is the problem with unbelievers, then evangelism will have to rely on something different from worldly appeals of persuasion. After all, the Gospel cannot be sold to those who are blind and even hostile to it. We must understand ourselves as being engaged in spiritual warfare, taking up the spiritual weapons of **prayer** and **God's Word (Hebrews 4:12-13; First Peter 1:23)**. As **Paul** writes: **For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have God's power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Messiah** (see the commentary on [Second Corinthians Bt - Winning the Spiritual War](#)).²⁵⁵

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being **the Almighty Invincible Warrior** who wins battles and who has given into the hands of **His** children a very powerful weapon. Yes, we have **the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17)** which is also very powerful; but there is another extremely powerful weapon you so graciously place into your children's hands. That weapon is not made of metal or of steel. It is prayer (**Ephesians 6:18**)! It is a weapon that places the situation into your hands and asks you to guide and to move in mighty ways to bring glory to **Your Name**. **You** have never lost any battle that **You** desired to win. Though you did sometimes allow **Isra'el** to be defeated, that was only because you were disciplining **them** and seeking to bring them back to loving and following **You** whole heartedly. Dear **Lord**, when I am in the midst of the spiritual battle, please help me to remember to pray to **You**. For **You** are so gracious and merciful to listen to me. To **the One who sits at Your right hand**. Amen*