

1 Samuel 10:17-11:15

Despondency

Some have said that one of the greatest books ever written in the English language is *Pilgrim's Progress* by Paul Bunyan.

The book is about a certain pilgrim called 'Christian' and his struggle with faith.

In his struggle he engages upon a great journey on which he meets various obstacles that test or develop his faith.

One of those obstacles is something called the Slough of Despond.

The Slough of Despond is a thick, sticky, slimy mud hole full of scum and filth that bogs Christian down and threatens to swallow him up.

The person who helps Christian escape tells Christian that the Slough of Despond is that place that a Christian enters into after their conversion.

It is that place where fears and doubts and apprehensions band together and settle in the mind and heart of the Christian.

It is that place that most Christians have felt at some time.

Despondency is a cruel experience.

It is marked by feelings of isolation.

You feel bereft and on your own.

You feel under threat.

You feel as though the world is dark.

Your shoulders hunch.

Your feelings sag.

Your faith in friends and in God dissolves.

And you feel as though there is no victory.

You long for company.

And you long for a deliverer, a friend, a hero.

Friends, despondency can cripple Christian faith.

And those of you who have found yourself despondent, know what I'm talking about.

And as I prepared to bring this passage to you today, I sense that despondency is where the nation of Israel is at this point in its history.

Let's think about where they have come from.

And let's think about where they are now.

The nation of Israel are the people of God.

They are the people whom God has chosen out of all the nations of the world.

They are the ones that God spectacularly rescued from Egypt.

The ones that he gave the promised land.

The ones amongst whom he performed many great miracles.

But things have not been going well for them recently.

In the book of Samuel alone we have seen them lose the Ark of the Covenant in battle.

And even when the Philistines returned it, God burst out in judgment upon them.

And the nation is surrounded by strong enemies and all that they have in terms of leadership is an ageing priest called Samuel.

He is not a warrior.

And he is not a king.

In my view the worries and despondency of the nation can be summed up in the middle of the passage we are going to look at tonight.

Look with me at 1 Samuel 11:1-4.

¹*Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, "Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you."*

²*But Nahash the Ammonite replied, "I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel."*

³*The elders of Jabesh said to him, "Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you."*

⁴*When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and reported these terms to the people, they all wept aloud.*

You can see the attitude of the people, can't you?

They have powerful enemies.

They feel helpless.

They call for help.

But all that they can do when faced with the call is to weep and wail.

These are people at a low ebb.

And today we are going to find out how God provides for them, how he answers their deep despondency.

But we have got a bit ahead of ourselves at this point.

We need to go back a bit in the story.

So let's do that now.

God's answer for Israel

A candidate (10:17-27)

First, let's refresh our memories.

In 1 Samuel 8, we saw the people of God ask for a king.

We heard God indicate that he would grant their request.

In 1 Samuel 9, we saw God bring his candidate Saul to Samuel.

In 1 Samuel 10:1-16 we saw Saul receive some signs of God's choice.

Now let's see how God reveals that candidate to his people.

In verse 17 we are told that Samuel summoned the people of Israel to the Lord at Mizpah.

My suspicion is that there is not much gap in time between verse 16 and verse 17.

A whole lot of people had been involved in the events of chapters 9 and 10 and news would have travelled fast.

Samuel starts off with an oracle of doom but he never announces the doom.

What's more, he quotes the words of God and gives the impression that the whole oracle is from God but in reality, God's words are only quoted in the first sentence.

In any case, Samuel presents the context:

- Israel has asked for a king.
- Asking for a king is a rejection of God and his kingship.
- Now they should gather together.

The implication is that God is about to give them the king they had gone home without at the end of chapter 8.

Now things move fairly quickly.

Lots are drawn.

The tribe of Benjamin is chosen.

Then the clan of Saul is chosen.

And then, finally, Saul is chosen.

But he is nowhere to be found.

Eventually God reveals that he is hiding in the baggage.

They find him.

We are not told anything about him except that he is very tall and that he is the Lord's choice.

In other words, God has chosen him and he appears to be the sort of candidate the people are looking for.

Anyway, the people shout, 'Long live the king!' and Samuel explains the regulations of kingship.

This is the first time Saul is explicitly linked with the language of kingship.

My guess is that what Samuel does here is that he outlines some of the stipulations that are listed in Deuteronomy 17.

These things are written down and deposited before the Lord.

And then the people are dismissed.

Saul himself goes home.

Verse 9 told us that God changed Saul's heart.

Now we are told that he is accompanied by a group of warriors whose hearts God had touched.

Here is God's man, surrounded by godly warriors.

However, not all is smooth sailing.

Kingship never comes without politics.

And politics are present here in Israel right from the beginning.

In verse 19 we were told that God is a God who saves Israel from all their calamities and distress.

But there are a group of people in Israel who are not at all convinced that God is going to save through this man Saul.

The first test (11:1-15)

So, Israel now has its king.

He has been chosen, anointed, and confirmed.

Now comes the first test of his leadership.

Nahash the Ammonite besieges Jabesh Gilead and the men of Jabesh Gilead are in danger of losing an eye each.

But Nahash has a bigger goal in mind.

He is not just after the eyes of the men of Jabesh.

His eyes are on the humiliation of Israel as a whole.

His goal is to bring disgrace on all Israel.

And it looks as though, in their despondency, Israel is compliant.

Now before we move on, I want you to notice a couple of things.

First, I want you to notice which eye it is that Nahash wants cut out.

It is the right eye.

Traditionally, ancient soldiers held their shields over their left eyes.

So, not only will gouging out the eye bring humiliation.

It will also weaken the army in battle.

Second, I want you to notice what the elders say.

They say that they want seven days to send messengers throughout all Israel.

Nahash is in a strong position.

He is magnanimous.

He expects no rescuer.

Now turn to verse 4.

Notice that it is not just one messenger that comes to Gibeah of Saul.

It is messengers (in the plural).

In other words, I think that all the messengers have not dispersed throughout Israel.

All the messengers head to Gibeah of Saul.

The men of Jabesh know the state of Israel.
They know there is only one hope.
Their only hope is their newly appointed king.
And so they send every messenger to him.
He will know what to do.
And just to show us how low an ebb there is in the nation at the moment, the narrator tells us that Saul is not there to meet them in person.
The first person they meet is the people of Gibeah.
And they simply cave in.
They collapse weeping.
But then Saul appears.
He inquires.
And the Spirit of God inspires holy rage and fury in him.
He crafts a potent non-verbal message by cutting up a pair of oxen.
And then he sends the messengers of Jabesh out again with an accompanying verbal message.
And God is at work again.
The terror of the Lord falls on the people.
They come out in phenomenal numbers.
And as one man they turn out behind their new king.
The messengers of Jabesh appear again.
This time they are to report the news back to Jabesh.
Although some had doubted his ability to save 9 verses earlier, now the whole people are brimming with confidence.
By the time the sun is hot tomorrow, Jabesh and its people will be delivered.
The despondency of Israel is gone.
It is reflected in the elation of the men of Jabesh in verse 9.
And brimming with confidence, they tell the Ammonites.
There is a deep irony in verse 10.
The Hebrew literally reads:
'Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good in your eyes.'
We already know what is good in the Ammonites eyes.
Their intention is to do what is good in their eyes tomorrow by taking out the right eyes of the Israelites.
And so the Ammonites would be brimming with confidence and anticipation.
Tomorrow they will accomplish their goal.
They will be lord and master over Israel.
And Israel will be humiliated.

Results

And in the final few verses we hear of the results.
Before daybreak the army of Israel strikes.
And the battle rages until the sun shone hot overhead.
And the cocky Ammonites are scatted and humiliated themselves.
And then, in the final few verses the people come to Samuel and ask a question.
But notice that it is not Samuel who answers the question.
It is Saul, the man who had to be dug out of the baggage a chapter earlier, who answers.
Full of diplomacy, he acts the part of a wise ruler in a position of strength.
He also ascribes the victory to the proper person.
It was God who chose him and filled him with holy fury.

This is the Lord's victory and all glory should go to him alone.
And so the people go to Gilgal.
And there they confirm or reaffirm the kingship in the presence of the Lord.
Despondency is replaced with celebration.
God is amongst his people.
And God has raised up for his people a mighty deliverer.

Searching for a king

Saul

So, there is the story.
Now what I want to do now if to draw together some of the patterns we have seen here.
Remember that Saul is the first king of Israel and so it is important that we hear what God tells us about how he goes about searching for and appointing a king.
First, he makes the choice himself.
We are told this in 9:16 and 10:24.
Second, God involves the prophet by bringing the king to the prophet to be anointed.
We see this in chapter 9.
Third, God's king is endowed and empowered by God's Spirit.
We see this in a number of places in chapter 10 and 11.
And finally, God's king is publicly affirmed in mighty acts.
We see this in 1 Samuel 11.
So, there is the pattern: divine choice, anointing, empowering by the Spirit, and public mighty acts of deliverance.

David

This pattern is repeated with David.
He is chosen by God in 1 Samuel 16:1.
He is anointed by the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:13.
He is endowed with the Spirit in 1 Samuel 16:13 and the Spirit is taken off Saul in 1 Samuel 14.
And finally, David performs mighty acts of deliverance in 1 Samuel 17.
Again, we see the pattern: divine choice, anointing, empowering by the Spirit, and public mighty acts of deliverance.

Failure

However, let me tell you that neither Saul nor David every fully lived up to expectations.
This chapter is the highlight of Saul's kingship.
Things go rapidly downhill from here and Saul only last a few chapters.
And when David finally receives the kingship, he abuses it as well.
God promises him an eternal kingship in 2 Samuel 7 and the rest of 2 Samuel tells us how he fails to exercise kingship properly.
He does not fulfil the sorts of requirements of kingship that were outlined in Deuteronomy 17.
And his descendants follow suit.
And the catalogue of their shortcomings is graphically depicted in 2 Kings 17.
In other words, kingship fails.
As God had given hints in 1 Samuel 8, kingship never lives up fully to the expectations of the people.
And in the Old Testament it never fully lives up to God's expectations either.
And we never see the pattern we have seen with Saul and David repeated again in the Old Testament.

God never again goes through these four steps with any Old Testament individual.

Success

But he does in the New Testament.

For in the New Testament, we again see a man chosen by God.

We see him brought to the prophet.

We see him anointed.

We see him filled with the Spirit.

And we see him perform mighty acts of deliverance for the people of God.

We see Jesus, the one true king of Israel.

Jesus: Saviour and...

The troublemakers of 1 Samuel 10:27 put forward a good question, didn't they?

They asked about Saul, 'Can this fellow save us?'

Well, the question is a good one.

And it could be addressed to all the kings of Israel, 'Can these fellows save us?'

And the answer of the Old Testament is clear.

They may be able to save Israel from the occasional foreign army.

But the problem is that in the long run they were people of sin themselves.

They were tarred with the same brush as the people over whom they ruled.

And so they were people of self-interest... self-serving.

But Jesus is of a different calibre.

He was a human but he was also without sin.

And he waged war against the worst enemies of the people of God – the enemies of sin, the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And he won!

This fellow Jesus won the greatest victory of the worst enemies.

And in doing so, he brought the greatest salvation.

Jesus is the rightful king of all Israel.

He is the only rightful king of all the world.

He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

In 1 Samuel the people of God were despondent.

They longed for a saviour, a hero.

And they found great courage and joy in their very flawed hero.

How much more can we turn to Jesus, this greatest hero, in our fear and despondency.

Jesus is the one to whom we can look not only to deliver us from sin, death and the devil.

We can also look to him in the vicissitudes of life.

We can look to him in our despondency.

We can look to him in our frailty and weakness as we face life itself.

In our anxiety and depression we can call upon him.

For we know that in him we have one who cares for us.

We know that we have one who can lift our heads.

Friends, today I urge you to listen to the words of Hebrews 12.

As we feel in danger of being slowed down by the slough of despondency, let's look to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith.

Let's lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees.

Let's not drift away because of hardship.

Let's not sell out for something of much less value.

Let's follow our hero and saviour, Jesus Christ, into the battle.

And let's do so with heads held high.

The results of the battle have already been assured for us on the cross.
God is for us.
And this man Jesus is God's guarantee.