

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 8

RESPONSE



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

Nahash's cruel treaty terms earn him an overwhelming response from Saul and all the people of Israel. He's routed and run off. The people want to also give a harsh response to the men who doubted Saul's selection as king. But Saul declines, displaying grace.

Samuel then follows this pattern by noting God's grace towards His people while also noting their great sin.

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! Samuel, Week 8 — Response
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1 1 Samuel 11:1–7a

Then Nahash the Ammonite came up and encamped against Jabesh Gilead; and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, “Make a covenant with us, and we will serve you.”

And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, “On this condition I will make a covenant with you, that I may put out all your right eyes, and bring reproach on all Israel.”

Then the elders of Jabesh said to him, “Hold off for seven days, that we may send messengers to all the territory of Israel. And then, if there is no one to save us, we will come out to you.”

So the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and told the news in the hearing of the people. And all the people lifted up their voices and wept. Now there was Saul, coming behind the herd from the field; and Saul said, “What troubles the people, that they weep?” And they told him the words of the men of Jabesh. Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard this news, and his anger was greatly aroused. So he took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, “Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen.”

The cowardly surrender of the men of Jabesh inspires Nahash to great sin. His barbarous proposal is designed to permanently subject the men of Jabesh to servitude. The right eye is essential to a soldier, as the shield in the left hand impedes the vision of the left eye.

But that’s not what matters. What matters is that this is psycho wickedness and it cannot be allowed to stand. To make matters worse, Nahash specifically mentions that his goal is to *bring reproach on all Israel*. This must be met with righteous force.

And that’s precisely Saul’s reaction. Anyone who is willing to let this evil stand will be treated as a pariah.

Saul is acting like a king in more than one way. His reaction is technically correct, but it also displays compassion for his people. He isn’t thinking about himself.

Also, his “plan” displays great leadership. He leverages his power (over oxen!) to raise an army. He also shows some style. Saul mimics the actions of the Levite in Judges 19.

When he entered his house he took a knife, laid hold of his concubine, and divided her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. And so it was that all who saw it said, “No such deed has been done or seen from the day that the children of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day. Consider it, confer, and speak up!” — Judges 19:29–30

Everyone in Israel is familiar with this story.

So they get Saul’s point.

2 1 Samuel 11:7b–15

And the fear of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out with one consent. When he numbered them in Bezek, the children of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand. And they said to the messengers who came, “Thus you shall say to the men of Jabesh Gilead: ‘Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have help.’ ” Then the messengers came and reported it to the men of Jabesh, and they were glad. Therefore the men of Jabesh said, “Tomorrow we will come out to you, and you may do with us whatever seems good to you.”

So it was, on the next day, that Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch, and killed Ammonites until the heat of the day. And it happened that those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

Then the people said to Samuel, “Who is he who said, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Bring the men, that we may put them to death.”

But Saul said, “Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has accomplished salvation in Israel.”

Then Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there.” So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they made sacrifices of peace offerings before the LORD, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.

Saul’s stunt with the cut-up oxen works and Israel rallies to his side. The good guys win. The bad guys lose. Remember, the Israelites wanted a king to lead them in battle. Looks like they got what they wanted.

Saul passes his first test as king with flying colors.

But this leads immediately to a second test. Fresh off their triumph over evil, the victors want to “remind” Saul’s skeptics that they were wrong.

But Saul is having none of that. Instead, he shows class and humility. He gives credit to God and cites that as the overriding factor in why his critics should be spared.

Saul is displaying grace, something we don’t often see in the in the Old Testament. The “sons of worthlessness” that opposed him (and Samuel, and God) earlier could justly be punished.

But that isn’t necessary. The only thing that would accomplish is to set an example of justice. But it would also set an example of cruelty.

Instead, Saul’s grace towards these guys displays something that may prove more useful in the long run. It shows that their criticism didn’t sting. Saul looks confident and strong.

His administration is off to a great start.

3 1 Samuel 12:1–13 (ESV)

And Samuel said to all Israel, “Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walks before you, and I am old and gray; and behold, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before the LORD and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you.” They said, “You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man’s hand.” And he said to them, “The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.” And they said, “He is witness.”

And Samuel said to the people, “The LORD is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. Now therefore stand still that I may plead with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous deeds of the LORD that he performed for you and for your fathers. When Jacob went into Egypt, and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your fathers cried out to the LORD and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place. But they forgot the LORD their God. And he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab. And they fought against them. And they cried out to the LORD and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD and have served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you.’ And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety. And when you saw that Nahash the king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ when the LORD your God was your king. And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the LORD has set a king over you.”

This is a bold and surprising move by Samuel. Saul has just won a great victory and displayed great competence in doing it. His grace afterwards towards his detractors is impressive too. He doesn’t seem out of his depth. The kingdom looks to be in good hands.

So Samuel chooses this moment to light into the people about their desire for a king. He begins by defending his own actions. “*Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed?*” They all admit that it’s no one, and, “*The LORD is witness.*”

But that’s just the warm-up. Next Samuel plays off the phrase, “*The LORD is witness.*” He recounts *all the righteous deeds of the LORD*. Time after time the LORD came through (*when the LORD your God was your king*). Yet the people eventually say, “*No, but a king shall reign over us.*” They don’t trust Him.

“And now behold the king whom you have chosen ... the LORD has set a king over you.”

This is all a set-up for what’s next. It seems like an odd time for a call to repentance, but that’s what it is.

4 1 Samuel 12:14–18 (ESV)

“If you will fear the LORD and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king. Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon the LORD, that he may send thunder and rain. And you shall know and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking for yourselves a king.” So Samuel called upon the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

Now Samuel gets to the point—having a king doesn’t actually make any difference. If you (and the king) *will follow the LORD your God, it will be well*. If not, then it won’t be well. That’s the same as it was before when they didn’t have a king.

This highlights their stupidity in asking for a king, but it also highlights God’s grace. They wanted a human king instead of the LORD as their king. They got the human king but didn’t lose their relationship with the LORD.

Then Samuel displays the LORD’s power by calling for a thunderstorm. He points out that it’s the time of the wheat harvest. That’s because the wheat harvest in Israel is in the dry season; they don’t get thunderstorms then.

This is not punishment. The thunderstorm isn’t destructive. Neither is it helpful.

It’s just surprising.

Not all wake-up calls from the LORD are punishments. Yes, painful consequences are great for getting someone’s attention, but that isn’t the only way.

And pain doesn’t always work anyway. It all depends on where one falls on the foolishness spectrum.

*Rebuke is more effective for a wise man
Than a hundred blows on a fool.* — Proverbs 17:10 (NKJV)

Christians should always “keep their radar on.” God will get our attention, one way or the other, when He wants it. Whether that involves pain is up to us.

Wise folks respond to rebukes and learn from them. That’s how they got wise in the first place. Fools are stuck in their foolishness because they won’t learn.

But most wise of all are those that learn, not just from their own mistakes and rebukes, but from watching others.

Learning things “the hard way” is not the best way to learn.

5 1 Samuel 12:19–25

And all the people said to Samuel, “Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of asking a king for ourselves.”

Then Samuel said to the people, “Do not fear. You have done all this wickedness; yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing. For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people. Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way. Only fear the LORD, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”

A thunderstorm in the dry season does the trick. The people are so surprised (even intimidated) by all the light and noise that they jump into full repentance mode.

But, as always, the problem is that this will be temporary. The people are “feeling” repentant right now, having just been subjected to the crack of some thunderbolts, but tomorrow will bring complacency.

So Samuel tries to make it all stick by explaining, for the zillionth time, how this all works.

It’s a stark blending of grace and justice. Samuel’s opening sentence has both, beginning with grace but then abruptly shifting to blunt truth. *“Do not fear. You have done all this wickedness; yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.”*

His next sentence is all truth. *“And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing.”*

But the next is all grace. *“For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people.”*

Finally, Samuel ends with the harshest justice line yet. *“But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king.”*

This contrast is the essence of the gospel.

Grace is confusing. In the geopolitical arena, grace is often perceived as weakness. A suspicious eye is cast upon every action. Thus, people search for a hidden agenda behind forgiveness.

But there’s an exception—total surrender. America’s grace towards Japan after WWII was not seen as weak. It couldn’t be; there were no challenges to our will.

So it is with the gospel. God’s absolute power over everything let’s grace run free.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What kinds of evil justify a violent response?
2. When does grace work best? When doesn't it?
3. When has victory been used as a springboard for strong admonishment?
4. What's the greatest lesson you learned painlessly?
5. Which half of the gospel (guilt, grace) needs more emphasis?

Items for prayer: