

The Siege of Jabesh-Gilead

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“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’” (1 Samuel 11:1-2).

There are, as we all know, many peculiar stories in the Old Testament of the Word, and this, surely, is one of them. Yet we also know that every story is told for the purpose of our spiritual enlightenment and is therefore filled with spiritual significance. So the question today is, what can we take from this particular story that applies to our lives now – and, how can we discover this meaning in the cruel and difficult message of the literal sense?

Our first clues can be found in a simple review of the circumstances in which the story is told, and then also from the literal meaning of the Hebrew names for people and places. A little historical background also helps. Nahash, for example, is a name derived, apparently, from the hissing sound of a snake, and it refers to someone who is a sorcerer or enchanter, in other words, someone who is likely to deceive or take advantage of people. In the spiritual sense of the story, then, he represents the deception itself that comes from the state represented by the Ammonites.

And who were the Ammonites? They were the descendants of Ammon, who was the son of Lot, born from an act of incest between the old man and one of his two daughters when he was drunk. Now obviously no child literally bears any responsibility for the actions of his parents, but in the narrative of the Word such a conception *represents* something really bad, and in this case that is the perversion of good by false thinking and self-indulgence. You may remember that the territory of Ammon was outside the borders of the land of Canaan, to the east of the Jordan River just beyond the portion of land given to the tribes of Gad and Manasseh. And since it was “beyond Jordan” all the land of this region represents what is external or natural in human life, either natural thought or natural pleasure – not exactly *IN* the body but derived immediately from the bodily senses in the mind. This part of our lives isn’t *necessarily* bad; it can be very good and useful as a foundation for our spiritual lives, but it is easily led astray and perverted, for example when we let the often misleading appearances of the senses affect our judgment, or when we let the pleasures of the senses dominate over spiritual uses and relationships.

Jabesh-Gilead was a small city also in this eastern territory, but close to the Jordan. Gilead is a word that means strong or rocky and is a reference to the nature of the land, hilly country rising up from the Jordan valley to the east, and Jabesh is a word that means dry, though it was built on a river of the same name; it was in a region that had very little rain. As you can imagine it was an important city to Israel, in that it represented a sort of gateway to the interior, and its protection was at the very least symbolic of that nation’s ability to protect all its boundaries. In the spiritual sense Jabesh represents the *good* qualities of the natural man, the pleasures, for example, of an orderly life, the delight of doing what is good, helping out, being a leader, feeling close to someone in a loving relationship, and so on. All these are very positive things, but as they are

drawn from worldly experience they are easily affected by the illusions and appearances of the senses and so they are vulnerable to temptation by what is false or evil. Enter Nahash, the Ammonite, the perversion of good in the realm of natural life – in effect the pleasures of the senses apart from any spiritual use: - self-indulgence, self-pity, laziness, contempt, resentment and the love of dominating over others; lust, pornography, drug abuse, compulsiveness; in general all the things that make our external lives more important than our internal, ourselves more important than others.

And note, when Jabesh appeals for peace and asks for a covenant, Nahash is delighted, but on one condition – that he put out the right eyes of all the men of that city, and this specifically “to bring reproach on all Israel.”

Now we know that the eye corresponds to the faculty of understanding, and the right eye to the understanding of what is good. So what is the meaning here? – Simply put, it is the sad fact that when we try to bargain with the love of self and the world, when we appeal to these loves to give us peace they are only too happy to oblige, but the price is that we lose the ability to understand what is really good. We lose our perspective. We lose our sense of nearness or distance, especially in poor light, which in spiritual terms means that we don't know how to relate properly to other people, especially when there's any doubt or lack of clarity involved. And this of course is an insult to our whole spiritual being, threatening our ability to make good judgments about anything.

So in the story the men of Jabesh-Gilead think again. They ask for time. And they allow specifically that they want this time – seven days – to see if anyone will help them. Curious! Why would Nahash even consider such a request? You'd think he'd realize that by giving this concession his whole command of the situation might be compromised. But if he does realize this he doesn't seem to care, so determined is he, and so focussed on humiliating Israel. Then again, Saul was just becoming the first king of Israel; perhaps Nahash figured his chances of raising an army were slim to none and nothing to worry about. Besides, if he could beat them at their own game and avoid having to fight the men of Jabesh, so much the better.

So Jabesh was allowed to send its messengers abroad and soon enough they came to Saul at Gibeah, some forty miles south, near Jerusalem, where they found him herding cattle. But when they told him their story “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 the messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen.’ And the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out with one consent” (1 Sam. 11:6-7).

Now here's a curious feature of the story. First of all, it seems rather gory to our western sensibilities, but we should remember that these people had a penchant for such graphic, sensory methods of communication. We see it among Arabic and Semitic peoples even today. A simple note or statement would not do. It had to involve something graphic, some physical embodiment of the message being conveyed. And the threat was real. We can well imagine a runner arriving breathless at some tribal village, calling out to the elders and heaving a big slab of raw meat on the ground or at their table, then declaring what it meant.

But of course, it meant much more than they themselves knew. For the ox, as big and powerful

as it is for plowing fields or hauling great wagon loads of stuff, corresponds to the powerful affection for doing what is good in our natural lives. And the point? – unless we are prepared to stand and fight against the temptation to let the fallacies and cravings of our senses rule our lives we will lose our ability to do any genuine good in any aspect of our lives.

So, to summarize so far, the initial threat was against Jabesh-Gilead, one little city in the territory of Gad, beyond the Jordan in the realm of the Ammonites. What difference would it make in the grand scheme of things if this one city fell to a local warlord? But remember that the two and a half tribes, Reuben, Gad and Mannasseh, that settled on the east of the Jordan had pledged to support the other nine and a half tribes throughout the conquest of the whole land of Canaan and they had done so. Now it was the others' turn to repay the debt, and to stand in unity against this fellow who was determined to "bring reproach on all Israel" by taking out all their right eyes.

Gilead represents our external, natural lives. For the men of that city to give in and lose their right eyes represents the loss of our ability to understand what is good in our natural lives. *But for all of Israel to give in* and lose their oxen represents the loss of our ability to DO what is good, and this at ANY level of our natural or spiritual lives.

The problem is described in a way by the saying in the churches that anyone who offends against one of the Ten Commandments, offends against them all, by which we are to understand that "anyone acting *of set purpose or by assent* contrary to one commandment is acting against the rest, because acting of set purpose or by assent is to deny utterly that it is a sin, and anyone who denies that it is a sin treats acting contrary to the rest as a matter of no consequence" (CL 528).

This seems a little harsh in the context, since Jabesh-Gilead was being besieged by Nahash; the men of that city were not *looking* for trouble; it came to *them*. Still, isn't this the way it works in our lives most of the time? We hardly ever go out looking for trouble, that is, looking for ways that we can break the Ten Commandments! Rather, what usually happens is that evils and falsities sneak up on us and catch us off guard. Someone suggests something inappropriate, or a colorful, seductive ad pops up on our TV or computer screen; a bit of gossip comes our way, or an opportunity presents itself to take advantage of another person without him even knowing, and suddenly we have a crisis on our hands, a crisis which, if we concede to our merely natural instincts, will result in the partial loss of our spiritual sight and a total loss of our depth perception, that is, the perception of what is genuinely good. What can we do?

In the story the men of Jabesh asked for time – a full week – to see if they could get help, and amazingly Nahash gave it to them. What if we asked for time, too? Chances are the evil that is threatening will wait. In fact this sort of evil *always waits for our co-operation*; it never actually attacks us until we give it permission. It just sits there, threatening, happily anticipating our compliance. But if we take seven days, or seven hours, seven minutes, *or maybe even just seven seconds* to think it all the way through, the Lord may be able to send reinforcements to demolish the threat. For the word, day, in the context simply represents a state of mind, and the seven represents a full, complete or holy state, that is, one in which we have given something full consideration in the light of heaven so that we can make a good decision.

Take for example any temptation to indulge in lust or avarice or sensual pleasure apart from any real use or spiritual affection, or think of any opportunity to take advantage of a person, or even

an institution unjustly, or any excuse to shirk your duty or self-discipline, and consider the implications for your spiritual life. Does this please the Lord? Does it attract the sphere of angels? Is it going help you or hurt you in the long run? Can it wait a little, while you think about it?

If you wait, and give it full consideration, and recognize the implications before you concede to the temptation, and especially if you send for help, the Lord, who is represented in the story by Saul, will hear your prayer and gather the forces needed to overcome this enemy. In fact Saul *as king* represents the Lord as to the truth of His Word, and especially in his case the truth of the literal sense of the Word – just the thing needed to overcome the temptations that come at us on the natural plane of life.

So, it may sound trite but it's as true for us as it is for any child that when we are confronted by the very enchanting, deceptive lusts and fallacies of our worldly senses the thing to do is stop, reflect, turn to the Lord *literally* in His Word and pray for help.

Again, the senses are not bad, nor is the delight of sense experience! These really are, or can be, wonderful blessings. But they are only good and safe in the context of the spiritual life represented by the tribes of Israel west of Jordan. The threat of Ammon is the threat of the natural dominating over the spiritual, compromising our understanding of what is truly good, and making us slaves to our worldly passions. But there is no need to give in, no need in this case to despair. We just need time, clear thinking and the Lord's help, and we can overcome the pressures of the world to dominate and control our lives. "For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations" (Ps 100:5).

"The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him" (Nahum 1:7).

"The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (Lamentations 3:25-26).

Amen.

Lessons: 1 Samuel 11
Children's talk on How Saul Rescued Jabesh-Gilead

Matthew 10:16-31
Arcana Caelestia #2468:selections