

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 11

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Samuel 11 narrates Saul's first military crisis and first act as functioning king. Nahash the Ammonite besieges Jabesh-gilead and proposes terms of surrender so brutal — gouging out the right eye of every man — that they amount to a declaration of contempt against all Israel. The men of Jabesh-gilead buy seven days to seek help, fully expecting none to come. When the news reaches Gibeah, Saul is returning from the field. The Spirit of God rushes upon him, and his anger is ignited. He musters all Israel through the iconic act of sending cut-up oxen throughout the tribes — a graphic summons backed by an explicit threat. The muster is total: 330,000 men. Saul divides the army into three columns, attacks at dawn, and routs the Ammonites before midday. The deliverance is total and complete.

The chapter closes with a politically significant coda: the people, flush with victory, want to execute those who had questioned Saul's kingship (10:27). Saul refuses, attributing the victory to the LORD and declining to sully the day with reprisals. Samuel then calls the people to Gilgal to renew the kingdom — a formal public reaffirmation of Saul as king, with sacrifices and great rejoicing.

This Text — Intent:

God is using this narrative to accomplish several interlocking things simultaneously. He is validating Saul's kingship by demonstrating Spirit-empowered deliverance — Saul here looks exactly like what Israel asked for and what Samuel described. At the same time, the passage is quietly calibrating where the power actually resides: the Spirit rushes *upon* Saul, the victory belongs to the LORD, and Saul himself acknowledges this. The reader is meant to see that the king Israel wanted can work — when he is a vessel of the Spirit and yields the glory to God. But the passage's canonical position between the warnings of chapter 8 and the farewell address of chapter 12 means the reader is also positioned to feel the fragility of this arrangement. The intent is to show genuine deliverance, genuine kingship, and genuine glory — while quietly training the reader to ask whose hand is actually behind it.

Subject Sentence: The Spirit-empowered king delivers Israel and deflects glory to the LORD.

Primary Claim: God demonstrates through Saul’s Spirit-driven victory that Israel’s king can be a vehicle of divine deliverance — but only insofar as the Spirit animates him and the glory returns to God; the king is never the source, only the instrument.

Interpretive Evaluation

The primary interpretive question in this chapter is the relationship between Saul’s kingship and the Spirit’s activity — specifically, what the Spirit’s coming “upon” Saul (v. 6) implies about the nature and permanence of Spirit-empowerment in the Old Testament monarchy. Pentecostal and Charismatic interpreters tend to read this as an initial filling or baptism of the Spirit, emphasizing the dramatic, affective quality of Saul’s response (burning anger, decisive action) as a paradigm for Spirit-filled leadership. This reading *acknowledges* something real — the Spirit’s action is visibly, dramatically effective here — but it *qualifies* when it imports New Covenant categories of indwelling or sealing. The OT pattern is consistently one of the Spirit coming “upon” figures for specific purposes and specific seasons, not a permanent indwelling. That this same Spirit will depart from Saul in chapter 16 (and an evil spirit be sent in his place) is the canonical counterweight that any Charismatic emphasis must reckon with.

A second interpretive issue concerns the chapter’s relationship to Saul’s characterization. Some critical scholars read chapter 11 as an originally independent tradition that knew nothing of Saul’s prior selection (chapters 9-10) and was secondarily joined to it — reading the narrative’s positive portrait of Saul as evidence of a competing, more favorable source. This is an older source-critical position that must be *refuted* on literary grounds: the chapter functions coherently within the MT as we have it, the political tension created by the doubters in 10:27 is resolved in 11:12-13, and the Gilgal renewal in 11:14-15 explicitly echoes and extends what Samuel did in 10:17-25. The canonical shape of the chapter is intentional and internally consistent.

A third issue involves the closing scene (vv. 12-15). Dispensational readers sometimes treat the Gilgal renewal primarily as a reset or second chance for the theocracy — arguing that the kingdom arrangements here are still conditional in a way that prefigures Israel’s repeated national failures. This reading partially holds — the Sinai covenant framework certainly conditions the Israelite monarchy — but it *qualifies* when it becomes too schematic, turning the scene into a typological placeholder rather than a genuine narrative and theological climax. The chapter ends with great joy and sacrifice not as theological fine print but as a moment of genuine covenant celebration, however fragile the arrangement will prove.

The Reformed reading holds that chapter 11 is best understood as a Spirit-empowered type of deliverance — genuine, complete, and God-attributed — that serves the larger Samuel narrative by showing what Spirit-animated kingship *could* look like, precisely so that Saul’s subsequent failure will be read against this high-water mark. The victory is real; the Spirit’s power is real; Saul’s momentary humility is real. The theological weight is the

demonstration that the king’s effectiveness is entirely derivative — a theme that will carry forward to David, and ultimately to the greater Son of David who is the Spirit’s permanent bearer.

Key Canonical Support

- **Judges 6:34; 14:6; 15:14** — The Spirit “clothing” or “rushing upon” the judges establishes the OT pattern that governs 1 Samuel 11:6; Saul here stands in the judge-tradition before the monarchy’s character hardens. The comparison illuminates both the continuity (same Spirit-pattern) and the coming discontinuity (a king is not merely a judge).
 - **Isaiah 11:1-4** — The Spirit of the LORD resting upon the Branch of Jesse describes the king upon whom the Spirit permanently rests — the antithesis of Saul, whose Spirit-anointing is temporary and conditional. This passage illuminates the trajectory 1 Samuel 11 initiates.
 - **1 Samuel 16:13-14** — The Spirit departing from Saul and rushing upon David is the canonical counterpart to 1 Samuel 11:6, showing that Saul’s Spirit-empowerment was instrumental and conditional, not permanent — the contrast that makes David’s anointing theologically decisive.
 - **Luke 4:18-19; Acts 10:38** — Jesus as the one anointed with the Spirit without measure is the fulfillment of what Israel’s king was meant to be: deliverer, Spirit-bearer, glory-returner. The Saul narrative is part of the canonical pressure that drives toward this fulfillment.
 - **Deuteronomy 17:14-20** — The Torah’s law of the king establishes that Israel’s king is to be subordinate to God’s word, multiplying neither horses nor wives nor gold, reading the Torah daily. Chapter 11 shows Saul momentarily conforming to this ideal (deflecting glory, refusing retribution); later chapters will show systematic deviation from it.
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Aim: To demonstrate that Spirit-animated leadership that attributes victory to God is the passage’s own standard — and to apply that standard both as a call to humility and as a pointer toward the one King who permanently embodies it.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Nahash the Ammonite	“Nahash” means “serpent”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	besieges Jabesh-gilead; the men of Jabesh offer to make a treaty	— the name carries menace; Jabesh-gilead has prior narrative significance (Judges 21)
2	Nahash's terms: gouge out every right eye as a reproach to all Israel	The demand is deliberate humiliation, not mere conquest — it targets military effectiveness (right eye used in aiming) and national honor simultaneously
3	The elders of Jabesh buy seven days to seek a deliverer throughout Israel	Their expectation seems low — they are buying time, not expressing confidence
4	Messengers arrive at Gibeah; the people weep	Gibeah is Saul's home city — the narrative is routing the crisis directly to him
5	Saul arrives from the field; learns of the weeping; asks what is wrong	He is plowing — still in his pre-kingly role; the contrast with what follows is sharp
6	The Spirit of God rushes upon Saul; his anger burns greatly	Precise parallel to judge-language (Judges 14:6; 15:14); the Spirit is the initiator, not Saul
7	Saul cuts up his oxen, sends pieces throughout Israel with a threat; the fear of the LORD falls on the people	The act echoes the Levite's act in Judges 19:29 — extreme measures, total summons; the fear of the LORD, not of Saul, is what moves Israel
8	The muster at Bezek: 300,000 from Israel, 30,000 from Judah	The separation of Israel and Judah foreshadows the later division
9	Saul sends word to Jabesh: "Tomorrow by the time the sun is hot, you will have deliverance"	The word to Jabesh precedes the battle — it is a declaration of certain victory
10	The men of Jabesh tell Nahash they will surrender tomorrow — strategically	A ruse that cooperates with Saul's plan

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
11	buying the night Saul attacks in three columns at the morning watch; the Ammonites are routed; survivors are scattered	Morning watch = approximately 2-6 a.m.; the victory is total before the heat of the day
12	The people call for the execution of those who questioned Saul's kingship (10:27)	The question is politically charged — the people are now ready to enforce Saul's kingship through violence
13	Saul refuses: "No one shall be put to death today, for today the LORD has worked salvation in Israel"	Saul's finest moment — he correctly attributes the victory, refuses vengeance, and shows magnanimity
14	Samuel calls the people to Gilgal to renew the kingdom	Samuel directs the formal ecclesiastical act — the king does not self-install
15	The people make Saul king before the LORD at Gilgal; peace offerings; great rejoicing	The renewal is covenantal, sacrificial, and corporate — a high moment before the long decline

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Crisis: Contempt, Siege, and the Helpless City
2	6–11	The Deliverance: The Spirit, the Muster, and the Rout
3	12–15	The Renewal: Magnanimity, Attribution, and the Kingdom Confirmed

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Spirit-empowered king delivers Israel and deflects glory to the LORD.

Primary Claim: God demonstrates through Saul's Spirit-driven victory that Israel's king can be a vehicle of divine deliverance — but only insofar as the Spirit animates him and the glory returns to God; the king is never the source, only the instrument.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] The victory at Jabesh-gilead does not belong to Saul — the Spirit rushed upon him, the fear of the LORD moved the troops, and Saul himself said so. Wherever God grants success through your leadership, competence, or effort, the narrative of this chapter demands a reckoning: you were the instrument, not the source. The specific form this belief must take is not generic humility but a concrete refusal to internalize effectiveness as evidence of your own sufficiency. Saul got this exactly right on his best day — and catastrophically wrong on his worst. The question is whether you know the difference before the crisis comes.

2. [Affections/Worship] The chapter closes not with a victory parade celebrating Saul but with peace offerings and great rejoicing *before the LORD* at Gilgal. The right emotional and doxological response to deliverance is not relief or self-congratulation — it is worship. When God resolves what felt unresolvable, the affection he is seeking is not merely gratitude directed at him in passing but the kind of celebratory reorientation that makes an altar, brings a sacrifice, and declares publicly that this was his doing. Let the joy of Gilgal instruct the texture of your worship after answered prayer.

3. [Will/Behavior] Saul's refusal to execute his political opponents on the day of victory is one of the most practically instructive moments in the chapter. He was urged to do it; he had the power to do it; it would have been politically expedient. He declined because the day belonged to the LORD and not to score-settling. The application is specific: identify the retributive action you have been rehearsing that is waiting for your moment of advantage — and refuse it on the same grounds Saul used. The LORD's work in your circumstances is not a mandate for settling old scores.

4. [Mind/Belief] The men of Jabesh-gilead sent out messengers fully expecting no help to come. The seven-day window was a formality — not a faith-filled cry but a diplomatic last resort. The chapter insists that deliverance arrived anyway, from a source no one in Jabesh anticipated, through means no one in Jabesh engineered. The belief this passage targets is the half-conscious assumption that the size of your problem determines the probability of your rescue. It does not. The Spirit of God can rush upon the most unlikely instrument in the most unpromising situation and produce total deliverance before noon.

5. [Affections/Worship] The fear of the LORD that fell on the people of Israel (v. 7) was not merely social pressure responding to Saul's graphic summons — it was a work of God that produced decisive, unified obedience from a fractured and reluctant nation. This fear is not the fear of consequence but the fear of the LORD himself — an affection that properly orients a person toward God's authority and makes obedience natural rather than coerced.

Cultivate that fear. A people who fear the LORD move; a people who merely fear consequences calculate. The difference in this narrative is 330,000 men versus paralysis.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This passage teaches that God's sovereign deliverance works *through* human instruments without becoming *dependent* upon them. The Spirit initiates (v. 6), the fear of the LORD mobilizes (v. 7), the victory belongs to the LORD (v. 13) — Saul is genuinely present and genuinely active throughout, and yet the reader cannot finish this chapter attributing the outcome to him. The chapter also teaches that there is a proper form for receiving divine victory: worship, sacrifice, and communal covenant renewal — not self-promotion or retribution. Finally, the passage teaches that legitimate human authority is delegated, not inherent — Saul's kingship is renewed by Samuel, celebrated before the LORD, and authenticated by what the Spirit did through Saul, not by what Saul did on his own.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: First Samuel 11 is a key exhibit in the Reformed understanding of common grace and special instrumentality — God working through imperfect, Spirit-empowered instruments to accomplish genuine covenant deliverance without those instruments being the source of either the power or the glory. The chapter also contributes to the Reformed doctrine of Spirit-empowerment as always purposive and always God-glorifying: the Spirit does not come upon Saul to exalt Saul but to deliver Israel and demonstrate God's covenant faithfulness toward a people who had just rejected him as king. Saul's finest moment in this chapter — "the LORD has worked salvation in Israel" — is a Reformed confession before Reformed confessions existed. The passage ultimately points beyond Saul to the Son of David upon whom the Spirit permanently rests (Isaiah 11, Luke 4), who will accomplish the greater deliverance and attribute every ounce of it to the Father — making this chapter part of the long canonical preparation for the gospel.

Main Takeaway

The king delivered Israel today — but he didn't do it. The Spirit did. And Saul, at his best, knew it. That is the exact posture God is after in every leader, every deliverer, every person through whom he accomplishes anything: the instrument held loosely, the glory given back, the victory celebrated before the LORD rather than in the mirror. Saul would forget this. The greater Son of David never did. Receive whatever deliverance God brings you with Saul's best words in your mouth: *the LORD has worked salvation here* — and mean it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Saul as a leadership model without qualification.** The temptation is to take chapter 11 as a straightforward “leadership lessons from Saul” text — decisive action, unified command, magnanimous victory. The problem is canonical: Saul is being held up here precisely to be contrasted with what follows. A sermon that turns this into a leadership seminar extracts the chapter from the narrative arc in which it functions. The positive portrait of Saul in chapter 11 is the high-water mark *against which* his subsequent failures are measured — it must be preached with that shadow visible on the horizon, not suppressed.
- **Treating the Spirit’s activity here as a permanent or normative indwelling.** The Spirit “rushing upon” Saul (v. 6) belongs to the OT judge-pattern of Spirit-empowerment for specific tasks. Preaching this as a model for ongoing Spirit-filled living misreads the genre and the pattern. The canonical counterpart — the Spirit’s departure in 1 Samuel 16 — is essential for understanding what kind of Spirit-activity this is. The passage’s theological freight is precisely that this empowerment is instrumental and conditional, not permanent.
- **Spiritualizing Jabesh-gilead’s crisis into a generic “when life is hard” text.** The crisis in verses 1-5 is vivid, specific, and culturally embedded — a siege, a grotesque demand, a desperate people with nowhere to turn. Preachers who rush past this to the “application” flatten the passage’s dramatic force. The specificity of the threat (right eyes, reproach to all Israel) is load-bearing — it establishes the totality of the humiliation that the totality of the deliverance answers. Let the crisis be the crisis.
- **Missing Saul’s theological statement in verse 13 as the passage’s interpretive key.** “The LORD has worked salvation in Israel” is not a pious add-on — it is the Primary Claim of the chapter in Saul’s own mouth, and it controls everything around it. Preachers who read past it to focus on Saul’s magnanimity (interesting but secondary) or the kingdom renewal at Gilgal (important but derivative) miss the moment where the chapter names its own theological center. Exegetical care requires pausing here.
- **Treating the Gilgal renewal as mere political consolidation.** The closing scene (vv. 14-15) is covenantal and doxological — peace offerings, rejoicing *before the LORD*, renewal of the kingdom. Reducing it to a political ratification ceremony (Saul’s mandate is now confirmed, the doubters are silenced) strips it of its theological weight. This is a worship scene. The people are not merely confirming a king; they are celebrating with sacrifice before the God who just delivered them. The scene’s tone — great rejoicing — is the proper emotional and liturgical response to the whole chapter.

- **Failing to trace the chapter toward its Christological horizon.** A Reformed exposition of 1 Samuel 11 that ends with Saul is exegetically incomplete. The chapter is part of the canonical argument that Israel needs a king who is *permanently* Spirit-borne, who *never* departs from “the LORD has worked salvation,” who delivers completely and attributes completely. Saul’s best day is a type; the antitype is the Son of David who is anointed with the Spirit without measure and who cries from the cross, “It is finished” — not “I am finished.” The application of the chapter is not merely “be more like Saul at his best” but “behold the one Saul at his best was pointing toward.”