

Grace That Works

1 Samuel 11

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Introduction

Have you ever received a call you knew you weren't qualified to answer?

Maybe you've been asked to step into a leadership role at work, in your community, or here at church, and your immediate response is, "I'm not qualified for this." Everyone else seems to have it figured out, but you feel like you're barely keeping your own life together. You're wondering, "Does God really provide what we need, or are we supposed to fake it till we make it?"

Or perhaps it was the realization that you were now responsible for a team at work, and you lay awake at night wondering how you'd ever manage people when you can barely manage your own schedule.

Maybe it was the moment you held your first child and thought, "They're trusting *me* with this?"

Maybe you're a parent dealing with a teenager who's making destructive choices, and you feel completely out of your depth. You love them desperately, but you don't know when to intervene, when to step back, when to show grace, when to set boundaries. You lie awake at night wondering, "Am I equipped for this?"

Or maybe God has placed a burden on your heart for your neighborhood, your school, your community. You see a need that nobody's addressing, and you sense God calling you to do something about it. But when you think about actually starting something—organizing people, raising funds, creating change—you feel completely overwhelmed. You wonder, "Can God really use someone like me?"

In each of these moments, we face a fundamental tension: **God's call on our lives versus our profound sense of inadequacy.** And here's what makes it worse—we know our inadequacy isn't just perception. It's *real*. We have the track record to prove it. We've failed before. We've disappointed people. We've made poor decisions. We carry the weight of past mistakes.

So when the call comes—when the opportunity presents itself—we're caught between two competing realities: the unmistakable sense that God is asking something of us, and the undeniable evidence that we're not up to the task.

This tension brings us to a crucial question: **Can God actually accomplish His purposes through people like us?**

That question has been hovering over our sermon series these past three weeks.

Two weeks ago, we saw Israel reject God's kingship, demanding a human king instead. Last week, we saw God's stunning response: He graciously provided Saul anyway. God selected him, anointed him, transformed him by His Spirit, and confirmed him publicly before all Israel.

But that raises the obvious question: **Does God's grace actually work?** Can God's gracious provision overcome human failure? Will Saul—this compromised king given to a rebellious people—actually be able to lead? Or will the whole thing collapse under the weight of its flawed foundation?

Chapter 11 answers that question definitively. And today we are going to see how chapter 11's answer transforms how we understand our own service to God.

Here's what we're going to discover: **Even despite our failures, God graciously calls and equips leaders to accomplish His purposes.**

We're not talking about wishful thinking. This is the testimony of Scripture. God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called. God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called. He doesn't wait for us to get our act together; He works through us in the middle of our mess. And when he does, He takes our mess and turns it into His message.

But this raises a very practical question: **How does God do this?** How does God equip leaders to accomplish His purposes? And what does divine equipping actually look like in real life?

Chapter 11 shows us a handful of ways God equips His leaders. And as we walk back through this narrative, my hope is to help you see yourself in Saul's story—not because you'll become king, but because the God who equipped him is the same God who equips you.

I.

Let's set the scene. Saul is now officially Israel's king. He lives in Gibeah. A few miles away is the town of Jabesh-gilead, which is an Israelite city under siege by the Ammonites, who were led by King Nahash, a name that means snake or serpent.

Verse 4 tells us that Israelite messengers from Jabesh-gilead arrived at Gibeah where King Saul was, and they came with devastating news: the Ammonite king Nahash had besieged their city and offered terms of surrender so brutal they were designed not just to defeat them but to *disgrace them*—he would gouge out every right eye. The Israelite messengers have seven days to find help, or they'll have to accept this humiliation.

When the people of Gibeah heard this news, verse 4 says "all the people wept aloud." Just sat down and cried. That's the sound of hopelessness. That's what happens when you face an overwhelming problem and have no idea what to do about it.

And where was their newly anointed king during this crisis? Verse 5: **"Now, behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen."**

Pause there for a moment. Saul, the king of Israel, was plowing a field. He hadn't set up a palace. He didn't have a royal court or a standing army. He was still doing his regular job. The "kingship" of Israel at this point was more theoretical than actual. Saul had a title but no real infrastructure, no military, no clear authority. Like being named CEO of a company that exists only on paper—impressive title, empty office.

When Saul arrived and saw everyone weeping, he asked the obvious question: "What is wrong with the people, that they are weeping?" They told him about Jabesh-gilead, about Nahash's threats, about the impossible situation.

And then verse 6 gives us the turning point: **"And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled."**

Right here we see the first way God equips leaders: **God Equips through spiritual empowerment.**

Notice the language: the Spirit of God *rushed* upon Saul. This isn't a gentle suggestion or a mild inspiration. The Hebrew word suggests forceful movement—like wind breaking through a barrier. The Spirit came *upon* him with power.

And notice the result? His anger was "greatly kindled." Now, we need to be careful here. This isn't sinful anger or personal rage. This is what we might call righteous indignation—

- a Spirit-produced passion for justice,
- a holy outrage at evil and oppression.

The Spirit didn't make Saul calm and contemplative; He made him *angry* at injustice and *energized* for action.

Here's the principle that comes forward for us: **God's Spirit transforms passive inadequacy into passionate capability.**

Think about what happened. Before the Spirit came, Saul was a farmer walking behind oxen. After the Spirit came, he was a military leader mobilizing a nation. Before the Spirit, he was returning from a day's work. After the Spirit, he was taking decisive action that would change Israel's history.

The Spirit didn't just give Saul warm feelings. The Spirit gave him *capacity* he didn't have before—capacity to lead, to strategize, to inspire, to act decisively in a crisis.

This is how God equips His people.

- Not through our natural talents alone, though He uses those.
- Not through education and training alone, though those matter.

God equips primarily through His Spirit.

And here's what's crucial for us: the same Spirit who rushed upon Saul is available to every believer today. In fact, the New Testament tells us that the Spirit's presence in our lives is *permanent*, not

temporary. You don't have to wait for a special anointing. If you're in Christ, the Spirit already dwells in you.

The question isn't whether the Spirit is present. The question is whether we're depending on Him who is present.

How many of us face challenges we try to handle in our own strength? We know we're supposed to lead this small group, parent this child, manage this team, serve in this ministry—and we approach it with our own wisdom, our own energy, our own resources. And we wonder why we feel so depleted and ineffective.

God equips through spiritual empowerment. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:13: **"It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."** The willing and the working both come from Him.

But notice—God's empowerment doesn't eliminate human action. The Spirit came upon Saul, and *then* Saul acted. Spiritual empowerment isn't passive mysticism; it's active obedience energized by divine power.

Which leads us to the second way God equips...

II.

Look at verse 7: **"He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, 'Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!' Then the dread of the LORD fell upon the people, and they came out as one man."**

This is brilliant leadership. Saul took the very oxen he'd been working with—symbols of his ordinary life—and turned them into an urgent call to action. He cut them into pieces and sent the pieces throughout all Israel with a clear message: Join us, or lose your livelihood.

Now, this might seem harsh to us, but remember the context. Ancient treaties regularly included mutual defense clauses. When one tribe was attacked, others were obligated to help. Jabesh-gilead was an Israelite city under siege. This wasn't optional; this was a covenant obligation. Saul was holding Israel accountable to what they already owed their brothers.

And notice what happened: "the dread of the LORD fell upon the people, and they came out as one man." You see what Saul is doing? He is strategically unifying his people so that he can mobilize them for battle.

Right here we see the second way God equips leaders: **God equips through strategic mobilization.**

Remember: God equips the called; he doesn't call the equipped. Here's the principle: God accomplishes His purposes through unified community, not isolated individuals.

Think about what Saul needed to accomplish. He needed to defeat a well-equipped Ammonite army that had already laid siege to a fortified city. He couldn't do that alone. He couldn't even do it with his hometown of Gibeah. He needed the whole nation.

And that's exactly what God provided. Verse 8: *"When he mustered them at Bezek, the people of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand."*

The point is clear: God provided overwhelming force. When the people responded to God's call through Saul's leadership, they discovered they weren't alone. They were part of something much bigger than themselves.

This is crucial for us to understand. When God calls you to serve, He doesn't expect you to do it alone. He equips you, and he does this through His community. And so I ask you:

- Are you trying to parent alone? God designed his church to be a family where no one parents alone—where older women mentor younger women, where fathers encourage other fathers, where children see faith modeled by more than just their parents.
- Are you trying to lead a ministry alone? God gifts the body of Christ diversely so that we need each other. Your weakness is someone else's strength. Your blind spot is covered by someone else's gifting.
- Are you trying to accomplish God's purposes through your own isolated effort? That's not how God designed it. Membership.

Notice something else in verse 7: Saul said, *"Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel."* Even though Saul was king, he explicitly linked himself with Samuel. He wasn't replacing the established spiritual leadership; he was working *with* it. Saul understood that even though he had new authority, he still needed the credibility and wisdom of proven leaders.

That requires humility. That requires wisdom. That's recognizing that God equips through strategic mobilization—through bringing the right people together at the right time for the right purpose.

(Verse 8 also mentions that the people of Israel and the men of Judah were counted separately. Even this early in Israel's history, there were regional tensions. North and south didn't always see eye to eye. But in this moment, facing a common enemy and responding to God's call, they came together.)

God's purposes require God's people working in unity.

When we isolate ourselves—when we try to accomplish kingdom work through individual effort alone—we limit what God can do through us. But when we come together, when we mobilize around God's purposes, when we link arms with other believers, we discover resources and strength we didn't know we had. Like individual threads that are fragile alone but woven together form an unbreakable rope.

This is why church membership matters. Why small groups matter. Why accountability matters. Why teamwork matters. Because God equips us through unified, strategic mobilization.

But mobilization alone isn't enough. You need more than an army; you need action. Which brings us to the third way God equips...

III.

The messengers returned to Jabesh-gilead with an audacious promise. **Verse 9: "Thus shall you say to the men of Jabesh-gilead: 'Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have salvation.'"**

By noon tomorrow, you'll be saved. That's not a cautious promise. That's not "we'll do our best" or "we'll see what happens." That's a confident declaration of coming deliverance.

And the men of Jabesh caught the vision. **Verse 10: "Therefore the men of Jabesh said, 'Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you.'"**

Wait a minute. It appears here that the men of Jabesh are giving up. No, actually, it's a clever strategy. They're feeding disinformation to the enemy. They're making Nahash think they've given up, that they'll surrender peacefully tomorrow. So Nahash and his army settle in for the night, probably celebrating their impending victory, completely unprepared for what's coming.

Verse 11: "And the next day Saul put the people in three companies. And they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. And those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together."

Here we see the third way God equips leaders: **God equips through decisive action.**

Notice the strategy. Saul divided the army into three companies—a classic military tactic that allowed for coordinated attack from multiple directions. He attacked during the morning watch—the last part of the night before dawn—when the enemy was most vulnerable, still sleeping off their premature celebration.

The result? Total victory. They struck down the Ammonites until noon—the exact time Saul had promised deliverance would come. The survivors were so thoroughly routed that "no two of them were left together." Complete defeat.

And here's the principle: **God's equipping demands our obedience in courageous action.**

Think about what this required from Saul. He had to act on the empowerment he'd received. He had to trust the mobilization God had provided. He had to actually *do* something with what God had given him.

Yes, the Spirit rushed upon him—but Saul still had to cut up the oxen.

Yes, the people rallied—but Saul still had to lead them into battle.

Yes, God provided the resources—but Saul still had to deploy the strategy.

Divine equipping doesn't eliminate human responsibility; it enables human obedience.

This is where many of us get stuck. We pray for God's help. We gather with other believers. We sense God's call. But then we hesitate. We wait for absolute certainty. We want all the details worked out before we take the first step.

But look at Saul. He didn't have a professional army. He had farmers with whatever weapons they could grab. He didn't have extensive military experience. He had the Spirit's empowerment and the moment's opportunity. He didn't have months to plan. He had one night to execute.

And he acted decisively.

Hebrews 11, that great chapter on faith, is full of people who acted on incomplete information, who obeyed when the outcome wasn't guaranteed, who stepped forward trusting God's equipping more than their own capabilities.

What decisive action is God calling you to take?

Maybe it's having the hard conversation you've been avoiding. Maybe it's starting the ministry you've been planning for months. Maybe it's making the sacrifice you know God's been prompting. Maybe it's forgiving the person you've held a grudge against.

God equips through spiritual empowerment—but we have to act on that empowerment. God equips through strategic mobilization—but we have to lead. God equips through decisive action—but we have to act.

And here's what's beautiful: when you act in obedience to God's call, trusting His equipping rather than your own adequacy, you discover that God shows up in power. The Ammonites were defeated. Jabesh-gilead was delivered. God's purposes were accomplished.

Not because Saul was perfect. Not because the people were righteous. Not because they deserved it. But because God equips those He calls to accomplish His purposes.

And there's one more way God equipped Saul that day...

IV.

After the victory, there's a moment that's easy to miss but absolutely crucial. **Verse 12: "Then the people said to Samuel, 'Who is it that said, "Shall Saul reign over us?" Bring the men, that we may put them to death.'"**

Remember back in chapter 10, verse 27? Some "worthless fellows" had despised Saul, questioning how he could save them, refusing to bring him gifts. Now, after Saul's stunning victory, the people want revenge. They want to execute Saul's critics.

But look at **verse 13: "But Saul said, 'Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has worked salvation in Israel.'"**

This is the fourth way God equips leaders: God equips through gracious character.

In his moment of triumph, when he had every human right to punish those who had opposed him, Saul showed mercy. And notice his reasoning: "*The LORD* has worked salvation in Israel."

Here's the principle: a God-equipped leader reflects God's character by showing grace to opponents.

This is profound. Saul could have consolidated his power through fear. He could have made an example of his critics. He could have used this moment to silence all opposition. That's what most ancient Near Eastern kings would have done.

But Saul didn't. He showed grace.

Why? Because he had been shown grace. Why? Because he recognized that the victory wasn't ultimately his. It was the LORD's. And if the LORD was gracious enough to work through a flawed king leading a rebellious people, then that same grace should extend to those who had doubted.

This is where God's equipping goes deepest. It's one thing to be empowered by the Spirit for action. It's another thing to be transformed by the Spirit in character.

The ultimate evidence of God's equipping isn't just what we accomplish but who we become in the process.

Think about how easily power corrupts. How quickly success breeds pride. How naturally victory leads to vengeance. Saul had every reason to let his ego inflate. He'd just pulled off a stunning military victory. He'd proven his critics wrong. He'd saved an entire city from mutilation and disgrace.

But in this moment—and tragically, it wouldn't last—Saul showed us what God-equipped leadership looks like: strength paired with mercy, victory accompanied by humility, power exercised with grace.

This is what the New Testament calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These aren't optional add-ons to effective ministry. They're evidence that God is truly at work in us.

We can accomplish great things for God in the Spirit's power and still fail at this. We can mobilize people effectively and still lack character. We can take decisive action and still miss gracious compassion.

But when God truly equips you, He doesn't just enable your actions—He transforms your character.

How does this apply to you?

When you're proven right, do you rub it in or extend mercy? When you succeed in ministry, do you show grace to those who doubted you? When God uses you powerfully, do you deflect glory to Him or absorb it yourself? The leader God equips is the leader who reflects God's character.

And what is God's character? Grace. Mercy. Long-suffering patience with flawed people. Working through imperfect instruments to accomplish perfect purposes.

Conclusion

God's gracious provision worked. God's grace works. The compromised king given to a rebellious people actually delivered them. Not perfectly—we know Saul's story ends in tragedy. But in this moment, God demonstrated that He can accomplish His purposes even through flawed leaders.

Which means there's hope for all of us.

Even despite our failures, God graciously calls and equips leaders to accomplish His purposes.

Do we believe this? Not as an abstract theological idea, but as a lived reality in our own lives?

Because here's what this text is telling us: Your inadequacy doesn't disqualify you from God's service. Your past failures don't prevent God's future use. Your sense of being unequipped is actually the *perfect* starting point for experiencing God's equipping.

God equips through spiritual empowerment—so depend on His Spirit, not your strength.

God equips through strategic mobilization—so embrace community, don't isolate yourself.

God equips through decisive action—so step forward in obedience, even when you're uncertain.

God equips through gracious character—so reflect His heart in how you treat others.

The call you've received that feels too big? God specializes in equipping inadequate people for impossible tasks.

The failure in your past that makes you feel disqualified? God graciously calls leaders *despite* our failures, not because we've earned it.

The responsibility you're carrying that feels overwhelming? God provides what He requires.

This isn't about self-confidence. It's about God-confidence. It's not about your adequacy. It's about His faithfulness.

So as you leave here today, I want to ask you: What is God calling you to that feels beyond your capacity?

Maybe it's serving in a ministry you've been avoiding. Maybe it's having a spiritual conversation with a neighbor. Maybe it's leading your family with greater intentionality. Maybe it's using your gifts in ways that feel risky.

Whatever it is, here's what I want you to remember: If God is calling you to it, God will equip you for it. Not because you're capable, but because He's faithful.

The same God who equipped Saul—a farmer turned king, an inadequate leader who nevertheless delivered his people—is the same God who equips you.

So let's stop waiting until we feel qualified. Stop letting past failures define our future service. Stop thinking we need to have it all together before God can use us.

Instead, let us depend on the Spirit's empowerment. Let us embrace the community God has given us. Let us take decisive action in obedience. And let us reflect God's gracious character in all we say and do.

And watch what God accomplishes through us—not because of our adequacy, but despite our inadequacy, through His abundant grace.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You that You don't call the equipped; You equip the called. We thank You that our failures don't disqualify us from Your service, because Your grace is greater than our inadequacy. Would You help us to depend on Your Spirit's power, to embrace the community You've given us, to step forward in obedience even when we're uncertain, and to reflect Your gracious character in all we do. Equip us, Lord, not for our glory but for Yours, not for our purposes but for Your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.