

Saul anointed

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[0:00] Well, there are different ways, aren't there, to study history. I think when I was at school, history was very much a matter of kings and events and battles.

In order to pass my O-level history, I once learned the dates of all the naval battles in the Napoleonic War. Well, I did pass.

I'm not sure how useful that information is proved in the rest of my life. I can only remember one of them now. The Battle of Trafalgar was 1805, in case you wanted to know that.

But I can't remember the others. There are other ways of doing history. There's this horrible history series you get on the TV, isn't it? Maybe that's not a bad way to do history sometimes.

Certainly another TV series that I can quite recommend is called War Factories. The thesis of this is that the Second World War was won as much in the factories and in production as it was on the battlefield.

[1:12] That sees history as a matter of economics and technical progress. They were showing it again yesterday, so if you missed it the first time around, I'd quite recommend it, actually.

It's quite an interesting series. But 1 Samuel doesn't do history that way, does it? For the writer of 1 Samuel, history is mostly about people and about their relationships.

The relationships with each other and their relationships with God. And the thing about people, of course, is that they're always complex.

They can't be reduced to simple categories. Was Churchill a racist? That probably rather depends on what you mean by racism.

Was Churchill an imperialist? Certainly. And because of that, he was able to rally the empire to the defense of liberty. We find that even remote indigenous tribespeople realized they were better off under the British than the Japanese.

[2:27] And many of them felt loyally for the empire. The empire that then, after the war, was carefully dismantled. Because people were no longer prepared to put up with the moral compromises that imperialism involves.

So the scribe of 1 Samuel wants to draw attention to the fact that while all may be clear to God, in 917, human interactions are always subtle and complex and often ambiguous.

The history of the early monarchy is the story of Saul and of David and of the other players, Samuel and the others. In our passage today, we're introduced to Saul, the first leader to be given the title king.

Who was he? What would he become? Is Saul among the prophets? A good question which you find is not answered, actually, in the book.

So in this passage, we're introduced to Saul as the first king. And in a sense, we have a kind of coming of age story.

[3:43] We have an account of the events that would frame Saul's adult life, as we are told in the passage, that he would, after this, he was completely changed. Although, as it turns out, not changed enough.

So as I say, Samuel cuts out. 1 Samuel comes unto us, some ways, as a rather strange book. Obviously, it comes under the general genre of a historical narrative.

That's what it is, of course. But it's quite different from Esther, say. The story of Esther sort of flows, doesn't it, with pace and energy. You can't hardly wait to get on to the next topic.

When Esther says, give me three days to think about this, it almost looks like a cop-out. Things move so quickly. But in 1 Samuel, it's different.

I think it's fair to say that 1 Samuel meanders. As we read these stories, we find the connection between them is more thematic than chronological.

[4:53] In fact, the timeline in 1 Samuel is far from clear. It's often quite difficult to get a detailed timeline. So, if we're going to come to this, we need to buy into the narrator's way of writing.

And for instance, it's full at first sight of what seems at first sight to be a relevant detail. And there's deadpan irony, both of the dramatic type and the humorous type, actually.

There's quite intentional ambiguity. And as we saw last week, there's political ambivalence. And it has oblique resonances.

Donkeys, wells, feasts. They're all things that occur in other Bible stories. And they color the detail of what we're reading about.

We find that even the very notion of kingship is qualified. So, you notice that the term king wasn't actually used in our reading.

[6:10] The words leader or governor are used instead. In this passage, we learn that Israel will have a king, but he won't be a king like the other nations.

Samuel has already warned us about those. And as an example of that irony that you find, did you notice the irony last week of chapter 8, verse 1 to 3?

Samuel himself had spoken up against the abuse of power by the sons of his mentor, Eli, only to have the same problem himself.

There is a difference, though. In this case, the Israelites themselves complained. At least Samuel had taught them that this way of doing things was not normal.

And so, the subject of a king was introduced. And the rest of the book, basically, is the story of the early days of the monarchy. And yet, Samuel is far from convinced this is a good thing, in inverted commas.

[7:18] It's more complicated than that. Samuel is far from convinced that monarchy is a good thing.

The people want a king like other nations. Surely, that's a dubious proposition in what was supposed to be a theocracy, which was supposed to be distinct from the nations around.

Samuel's not happy about it. And as we saw last week, even when the Lord says it's okay, Samuel is at pains to point out the downside. But a king they will have, 8.22.

So, how are we going to choose one? Perhaps we should have an election. Only Samuel, you notice, tells them all to go home. And then we get this strange shift of narrative that you find in 1 Samuel.

Suddenly, we jump to the story of this young man, Saul. And of course, spoiler alert here, Saul will turn out to be the nearly man. Saul will embody all the advantages, but also all the disadvantages of monarchy that Saul has been at pains to point out.

[8:39] But we don't find a logical argument to this effect. Instead, what we find is a series of vividly described stories, actually a little attempt to link them together, certainly not chronologically.

And in particular, for instance, chapter 10, verse 8, as I'll refer to later, appears to be out of chronological sequence. But it's obviously there for a reason.

Perhaps to give us a clue about what's to follow. Sometimes, if you're the writer of a detective novel, we'll slip in a vital clue disguised as a minor detail.

See if you pick it up when you're following the story. 10, 8, about going down to Gilgal and waiting seven days, turns out to be that vital clue in the story.

And the other thing we notice about the scenes is that, far from lacking in detail, there sometimes seems to be altogether too much detail at first sight.

[9:46] Do we really need to know the exact amount of cash that Saul's servant had in his pocket? Well, it seems that we do.

All scripture is profitable for teaching. So if the Spirit of God thought it profitable to record that the gift was a quarter of a shekel, we need to take notice of that.

Because we must be told that for some reason. So who was Saul anyway? As I say, a good question. Was Saul among the prophets?

Well, what are we told about Saul? First of all, we're told he was a Benjamin. A tribe with a checkered history. I won't go into all the details, but in Judges 20 and 21, the Benjamites had been involved in a civil war against the other tribes over a murdered concubine.

And as such, the tribe had nearly died out. So it wasn't in that sense a great background. And Saul himself says he's one of the...

[10:55] Benjamin is the smallest tribe, largely for that reason. And yet, we're told that Kish was a man of substance. We're given his genealogy.

So Saul comes, in fact, from a good family. And then we get one of these bits of irony that you find all in the story. Saul himself is an impressive man, verse 2.

Well, at least he's tall. By the way, I checked one commentator, and they agree that this is a...

The commentator agreed that this is an intentional piece of irony. Just do you think I was making that up. You know, the Lord looks on the heart.

We look on the external appearance. So Saul's father was a prominent man, yet he wasn't so rich as to ignore the loss of a few donkeys.

[11:58] So here's an opportunity, then, for Saul to show some responsibility. Kish doesn't send his son out alone. He'll be accompanied by a member of the staff.

And clearly this servant was more than just a sort of dog's body. The term used means a lad, which suggests he was a youngish servant. Yet it is clear that he was sent along to give advice.

And do you notice he was the one who was entrusted with the emergency cash? Perhaps as they went out, Kish sort of whispered to the servant, keep an eye on my boy, please.

And the servant took that seriously, and he did. And will Saul listen to that servant's advice? That's one thing we want to know.

And the answer, of course, is, well, up to a point, yes. And so they set out on their apparently fruitless quest. They travel all the way from Benjamin.

[13:01] The exact route is difficult to trace, but it seems to imply that they travel all the way from Benjamin in the south to Ephraim in the north, and then back again, doing a sort of circular search pattern.

Saul's ready to give up, verse 5. But the servant proposes what perhaps they should have done before, to consult with God about their quest.

So they seek out Samuel. Yet they seem to have a pretty hazy idea of who he really is. They do know that unlike his sons, he's respected and honest, and seems to know about the future.

And yet we get this hint, they're kind of looking for a seer, a fortune teller, rather than a true prophet. And what are they going to do? They're going to cross his palm with a little silver, and it's not very much.

For a clue as to the whereabouts of some missing livestock. But then we find a meeting change.

[14:05] Samuel and God himself have more important business in mind. And again, we pick up a common Bible reference. The first contact is with women at the well.

There's echoes of Abraham's servant and Rebecca, and of course future encounters at Wells too. But here Saul's not after a wife, but some donkeys.

So there's no time to flirt, say the girls. If you hurry, you'll catch Samuel before the feast. So on they go. They're looking for Samuel, but Samuel, we read, is already looking for them.

He'd been prompted by God, and he goes out to meet them at the gateway. So they're not to enter the town, at least not yet, but rather go up to the high place.

It's all been laid on already. Saul is the honored guest at the feast. I'm sure Daniel and Becky have had to put a lot of preparation into organizing their wedding. But at this particular feast, Saul finds it's all been laid on before he even knows he's invited.

[15:22] Samuel is to be the honored guest at a feast. And so it's time to forget the donkeys and think about some more important issues. The future of Israel in verse 20.

Of course, this is all a bit of a surprise for Saul, but not for Samuel. He's already invited guests. And notice he's set aside the prime cut of meat for Saul to show that he's the honored guest.

So that contact is made, and Saul and Samuel dine together. And then they get down to discussing business, God's business.

Verse 27, we see that the servant is sent on ahead. His role as mentor is no longer required. He's no longer to be Saul's advisor, because Samuel has that role now.

And now the tale takes on a more symbolic quality.

[16:28] First of all, Saul is anointed. But even here, there's an interesting detail. It's Samuel who pours the oil.

But what he says is that the Lord is the one who has anointed Saul over his inheritance. It's the Lord's inheritance, and it's truly the Lord who is doing the anointing, not Samuel.

He's just the servant who actually has the oil. And we notice, moreover, that Saul is anointed as leader, not as an absolute king.

As I said, the term king is not used in this passage. The true king of Israel, of course, is Yahweh himself, as Daniel was reminding us last week and earlier.

Israel is the Lord's inheritance, not Saul's. Saul's role should be that as a steward. And he's given three signs.

[17:31] The first one, we're told, takes place near Rachel's tomb. And surely even this is significant. Rachel was a farmer's wife, yet she was far more than that.

Her children were the very children of promise. And we remind you that donkeys might be important, but having a son to inherit, much more so.

So don't worry, Kish, keep your son safe and on his way home. He now has a more important task to fulfill than looking for a few missing donkeys. And the second sign's interesting as well.

It puts Saul's role in the context of Yahweh worship. We notice that Saul receives bread from the pilgrims. Of course, he needs the food, because they've run out of food.

We've already been told that. But more than that, he needs to remember that it is God's supply and sustenance, not Saul himself. It's those pilgrims who have got the bread that has already been dedicated to God, it seems.

[18:40] It was actually given to Saul as a sort of picture of spiritual food. He needs spiritual food even more than he needs the bread.

He needs the word of God even more than he needs the bread. And so we come to that third sign, the one that in a sense is given the most attention.

Is Saul among the prophets? We are reminded that there is a war on, and Saul certainly needs spiritual power to engage the Philistines.

Yet even here there seems to be a certain ambiguity. The processions seem to be engaged in some sort of ecstatic utterance brought on by the music, rather than actual prophecy in the sense that we understand it today.

Even the term for the spirit coming upon Saul is an unusual one. The Hebrew means apparently that the spirit rushed upon Saul.

[19:49] And previously this had been said only of Samson. And Samson is hardly the most propitious precedent, is he? We're told that this experience was certainly life-changing, verses 6 and verse 9 of chapter 10.

But sadly, and I say, I'm very sorry about the spoiler alert, but to make sense of the story, we have to look ahead a bit. This was sadly, ultimately, not life-enhancing.

Saul's was changed, but not reborn, as the older commentators delight in pointing out. This last bit all reads a bit like a Hans Anderson fairy tale, doesn't it?

But unfortunately, unlike in the fairy tale, they don't all live happily ever after. In fact, there is a twist in this tale.

And our narrator, by way of dramatic irony, introduces verse 8. Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.

[21:09] But you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do. So why this is here in terms of the chronology is not entirely clear because it appears to refer to an event which is months or even years in the future.

We read of in 1 Samuel 13. In that event, Jonathan, Saul's son, is involved and we haven't even heard of him yet. Perhaps Saul is older than the peers from the story and his son has already grown up, but it doesn't read that way.

But certainly the chronology is not entirely clear. But thematically, this serves as a warning to the reader, a hidden clue in an apparently minor detail.

See, Samuel has said, when these signs are fulfilled, do what you will because God is with you. But that wasn't licensed to do his own thing.

And so we're given this license here. If he stops listening to God, God would no longer be with him. And as I say, ultimately, when tested, we find that Saul will not heed God's words, but instead will trust to his own wisdom.

[22:29] Notwithstanding God's anointing, notwithstanding all Saul's advantages, be prepared for disappointment. So don't we miss next week's exciting installment and the story as we read on.

So what are we to learn from this story? If all scripture is profitable for doctrine, what should we learn from the tale?

I say we can examine it in different levels, I think, because it's full of subtlety and nuance. There's nothing wrong with being a farmer. Nothing wrong with owning donkeys.

But there are more important things. That's what the story wants to tell us, that there are more important things than this Monday business, valid that it is.

And the first thing that Paul wants, that Saul, sorry, sorry again. First thing that 1 Samuel wants to tell us is that law is king.

[23:48] The community does need a leader. And I said here, Saul is not called a king, but with all the baggage that entails, but he is described as a leader. In 10 verse 1, he's a leader to show the way forward.

But interestingly, in 9:17, he's described as a governor, more literally a restrainer, one whose role is to hold the people in check. Saul is later given the title king, but only in a limited sense.

He's not to hold absolute power, like the rulers of the nations that Samuel has warned about in chapter 8. They're not to vote themselves into slavery. The king enforces and interprets the law, but he's not above the law.

If there is a divine right of kings, it's only the right to rule by divine law. Samuel Rutherford wrote a famous political treatise in 1644 called *Lex Rex*, Law is King.

And that was the thesis of it. Of course, this was in the context of Charles I and his arguments about divine right. Charles I interpreted divine right to do more or less whatever he thought it wanted to.

[25:13] And Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish theologian and philosopher, said, no, that's not right. Law is the ultimate king, God's law.

Worth reading the book. Fortunately, you only have to read the first two chapters, because the rest of it's detailed stuff on 17th century politics, which is not particularly relevant.

In the first two chapters of the book, he sets out this argument that it is law that is king, that the divine right of kings is only the right to obey God's law.

A couple of centuries later, a gentleman by the name of Lord Acton said, power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Democracy, the consent of the people, can hold that in check to some extent, as we will see in what follows, but only up to a point. Come a crisis, a war, a plague, and a state of emergency is declared, harsh rules are put in place, and it becomes difficult to unwind them when the crisis is over.

[26:28] The ruler has had a taste of absolute power. And in 1 Samuel, remember that it's the people who have called for a king against Samuel's advice that they would sell themselves into slavery.

Sometimes a democracy can bring the worst tyranny of all. Always remember that Adolf Hitler was elected to power on a wave of populism. Democracy is not an absolute guarantee against tyranny. Well, that may all seem a bit abstract and philosophical. So at the same time, we remind ourselves that this passage is primarily about people.

And it serves as a warning on a more personal level. Saul had all the advantages, didn't he? He came from a good, respectable family.

He looked the part. Which later we find that David didn't so much. Saul certainly looked the part.

[27:38] And he had all the good advice he could possibly need. He had advice from his father, from his servants, even from the girls at the well.

And most of all, from Samuel himself. And largely, he listened to that advice. And God was certainly at work in Saul's life. We were told that it was, God anointed him as leader.

And we see that from the providences as well, from the prophetic words of Samuel, from those three signs. And indeed, most of all perhaps, from the anointing by the Spirit.

Yet it will turn out that even this work of the Spirit was empowering, but not regenerating. At its deepest level, Saul's heart was changed, but it wasn't renewed.

We know that. Why do we know that? Because he would come to rely too much on his own wisdom and not listen to God. Saul would achieve victories over the Philistines, but after these, it was all pretty much downhill.

[28:56] None of these advantages, not even spiritual power and real spiritual power, can compensate for a refusal to listen to God's Word. Just remember those fearsome words of Jesus himself.

Matthew 7, 21 to 23 says, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you.

Away from me, you evildoers. The evidence of a truly regenerate heart is not spiritual power, the ability to perform miracles, but to do the will of the Father in heaven.

Saul had a namesake in the New Testament and he wrote many centuries later, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 to 3, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

[30:19] If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Saul was the nearly man. He started well, but in the end he would be proved a fool in the sense the Proverbs talks about a fool.

Proverbs says, Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your path straight.

Do not be wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and shun evil. We all know, don't we? We read it in our papers, we know in our individual contacts of people who seem to have spoken with real spiritual power and yet have fallen one way or another into sin.

Some have repented, some have not. but certainly their spiritual authority is undermined.

[31:36] Spiritual power is not in itself evidence of grace. It's doing the will of the Father in heaven that is evidence of grace and we all need to remind ourselves of that.

Whatever our gift is, whatever our power is, is it Hebrews? I think it's Hebrews that talks about denying the gift that bought them, isn't it?

And theologians puzzle over that because don't we believe in perseverance of the saints? But certainly, Saul had some anointing for the spirit that it appears that his heart was not really regenerate.

But the Israelites did get one thing right. We need a better king. If only Saul had listened.

As we read on in our histories, we find that David and Solomon did better than Saul. Yet each, to some extent, was corrupted by power. And in both cases, that sowed the seeds of future decline.

[32:43] And if we read on into the later kings of Judah, we find that even the best, Hezekiah, Josiah, and one or two others, Asa, even the best of them were but sadly flawed.

Isaiah holds out hope of a better ruler who is qualified in wisdom rather than stature. See, my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

Just as there were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, his form marred beyond human likeness.

He was the one who will sprinkle many nations and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they are not told, they will see. And what they have not heard, they will understand. This ruler doesn't look as impressive as Saul did, but he is the one who will bring understanding to the kings of the nations. And who is this king? This king is Jesus of Nazareth, who we're told is great David's greater son.

[34:00] On trial, Jesus said, My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.

You are a king then, said Pilate. Jesus answered, You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth.

Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. That same New Testament namesake of Saul, who of course was the follower of Jesus who changed his name to Paul, wrote, For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.

And we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. So as I say, the Israelites did get one thing right. They did need a king who would lead them into battle.

[35:17] And our king Jesus leads us into battle. Not the same sort of battle as they were thinking of, but a war nonetheless. So let's sing this great battle hymn together.

It reminds us that the son has gone out to war to slay the ancient foe. Who follows him today? Who will follow him into the battle?

Let's sing this hymn. It's hymn number 865 in your hymn books, but I guess it will be on the screen anyway. So let's sing.