

Behold Your King

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Date: 14 October 2007

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[0 : 00] Guys, mammoth reading, great story, so please keep your Bibles open. Page 219 was not the Bible reading that was on the wall, but I think you worked that out.

Now, so that I don't drop things. This year, God's been teaching me a lot about his character. And it's good to know that he does teach preachers things, and it's particularly good to know that when you are a preacher. But I'm sure it's no coincidence that the story that we're looking at in this series in 1 Samuel, about the Israelites' demand for a king and God giving them a king in Saul, has played a big part in that learning for me.

I'm sure it's no coincidence that we're looking at it now. But it played its part in teaching me stuff about God by beginning to mess with my faith.

That might seem to be a weird thing to say about a Bible story, but I mean, I guess as a principle, we should be aware that our broken natures and the devil can use Scripture to confuse us, to throw us off course, and we know that the devil quoted Scripture to Jesus to try and get him to do his will instead of the Father's will.

[1 : 28] And the Pharisees believed that the scriptural emphasis on law observance meant that they could get rid of compassion, and they rejected Jesus because of that.

And we've all probably known people who, or for ourselves, have been tempted to walk away from God because they begin to resent him as they focus on only particular parts of the Scriptures, asking them to sacrifice, to lead a holy life, to deny themselves.

And instead of reading the breadth of Scripture, which also talks about the hope of glory, the strength that God gives, the gifts, the joy, they focus on that and they begin to resent God.

And I think in all these cases that I've talked about, Jesus and Satan in the wilderness and the Pharisees, and us are our friends when we kind of get this mixed up view of Scripture, one part of God's truth is magnified to the detriment of the rest of God's revelation, and then sin and Satan kind of twist that, and then it becomes error for us and misleading.

So that's kind of a confusing intro to me saying, for me, I've been thinking a lot about the choices that we make as human beings and the dignity that God gives to those and the responsibility that we have and how God takes our choices seriously.

[3 : 07] And over the last five years or so, I guess, I've had to do a lot of thinking about what path God has for me and seeking his will and guidance, seeking his blessing on lots of decisions, lots of choices.

I guess it's par for the course of being in your late 20s. This is just what you have to do. You look at so many choices. And it hasn't always been easy, especially over the last couple of years.

And so one day, as I was reflecting on God's ways in the world, it occurred to me that in their rebellion, Israel asked for a king, and despite warning them against it, the Lord said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 8.22, listen to their voice and set a king over them.

And then, as far as I remember the story, it was all downhill from there. And my worried mind and broken nature latched onto this thought.

I don't know if this ever happened to you, but in my heart, I began to think, well, if the Israelites were given what they asked for, even though it was wrong, maybe God will do that to me.

[4 : 27] Maybe I can't tell whether he's doing good for me when I ask for stuff and I get it. Maybe it's to teach me a lesson. Maybe he's going to leave me in my sin.

You know, perhaps my choices can thwart God's will because, well, the Israelites said, we want a king. That wasn't God's will for them, but they got one.

And, you know, if he knew that having a king would be bad for them, he said that, you know, it's going to be terrible, all these things. Then, does God always give us good gifts when we ask for

them?

I mean, you can see where I was going with this. And I'm thinking, what about his covenant love, his desire to deliver them? Is it all over for me? Now, I'm sure you've never been in a state like that, but perhaps you can imagine how crippling that kind of thinking could be when you take a little principle out of a passage and you say, oh, wow, this is the thing.

And what's this doing in my life? How is, who is God? And I, I'm sure that the devil had a good hand in playing with me with that scriptural truth, but let me tell you how I moved beyond it.

[5 : 51] I didn't have to ignore this story. I didn't have to stop reading the Bible. I didn't have to just say, okay, well, in my experience, I know that, that God is, is good.

I didn't have to rely on my experience. No. I actually had to read the Bible more widely and, uh, in more detail. And I had to get people to teach me the Bible in more breadth and in more depth.

So yes, I had to hear things like, um, uh, in Luke, where Jesus is saying, no, if you ask for a fish, are you going to get a stone?

Are you going to get a scorpion? Um, no, your father gives good gifts. But not only did I have to listen to the whole breadth of scripture about the goodness of God, I had to listen to the detail of this particular story.

See, my problem was I was just remembering it from what I thought I kind of knew. But actually, I didn't get back to rereading this story and looking at every detail. And if I had, as we are doing tonight, I would have seen the truth.

[7 : 05] The truth is that even though human choices are genuine and respected by God, God is always working to save his people.

And God is always in control. He is always good. And he is always powerful. So, let's look carefully at the details in this story tonight to see how this truth is actually clear.

So we start at verse one. There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Bekorath, son of Aphia, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth.

He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else.

The Israelites have clamored for king, as we heard last week in the last chapter. And the final thing we read in that chapter is that they've all been told by Samuel to go home.

[8 : 15] So it's kind of like the stage has been cleared and there's this silence. People are in their homes waiting. We're waiting. What next?

And then the scenery changes and it's like the spotlight falls on one house and the camera kind of does that cool thing where it goes in like through the keyhole or something and around the corner and into the living room.

And we see one man, Kish. We've probably seen all his family photos or portraits up on the wall as well. So we know where he sits in the scheme of things.

And looking around, we can tell immediately that he's a man of wealth. But the language used by the narrator also indicates, and it was clearer in the version that we had our reading from, that he's a man of some influence or stature in the society.

So Sharon read, a mighty man of valor, not just a man of wealth. He's a powerful man. He's well-bred. He's well-groomed. He's well-heeled. Perhaps this could be king.

[9 : 21] But then into the room walks a younger man. And he is all that and more. He looks like, I'm imagining, an AFL player on a good day when they haven't been up all night partying.

You know, he's like tall, well-built, you know, not a messed up hair out of place, all in its messy spot, just the right amount of stubble.

And as he just stands there in the spotlight, we get a good look at him. It's as if the narrator, even as if God himself is saying, okay, Israel, you've looked around at the nations, and you've decided, by just looking at them, that you want a king so you can prosper like them.

If that's how you're going to make your decisions, by outward appearance, then this is the kind of guy you're going to choose to rule over you, right? It's kind of like Californians, you want Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor?

You got him. But as we keep going in the story, this emphasis on the outward appearance kind of fades into the background. And we'll see that even though this is the guy that the Israelites would have chosen for themselves, it's God who chooses him.

[10:50] It's God who gets in first. It's God that sets up a string of events that will bring this man out into the open, first to Samuel and then to the community at large. The people's choices are real.

They are respected. But God is actually doing it all. And he starts by giving a donkey a kick. Or a carrot. It's not in the text, so we can't be exactly sure.

Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, had strayed. So Kish said to his son Saul, take one of the boys with you. Go and look for the donkeys. Now donkeys weren't cheap.

So this was an important mission. But there was nothing royal or extraordinary about this excursion. We've kind of got the suddenly very ordinary Saul just going out with his servant, schlepping across the countryside.

And the narrator tells us how much land they cover so that we know it was a long time. But no matter how far they walk, the donkeys are always just one step ahead.

[11:58] Very donkey-like. Finally, they get to the land of Zuff. And we, the readers, or if we were more educated readers, we would know that this is the place where Samuel lives.

And so just when it looks like it's going to get interesting, Saul decides it's about time they turn around and go home. They've been gone for long enough.

Dad's probably worried. But no. Saul's servant has a brilliant idea. He'd heard on the servant's grapevine that there's this kind of magical man, a seer, a kind of fortune teller who lives around that place.

And if they pay him, he could tell them exactly where to look for those blasted donkeys. Then the narrator explains, in an aside, why a servant in the people of God would have thought that Samuel would do something like that.

And there seems to be some kind of remnant of pagan notions that prophets were seers, people that would tell you your future or what was going on, rather than that kind of voice of God.

[13:10] But he still called him a man of God. So he's kind of a little bit confused, but he's getting there. So he said, let's go there. And Saul says, we haven't got any money. I've eaten all our bread.

What do we, we can't pay him. But even though Saul, the son of the mighty man of valor, great man of wealth, has got no money, no bread, the servant has got enough money on him to pay this man of God to help them out.

I think as the reader, we get the sense, well, first it was the donkeys. Now it's the servant that are being used by God, the powerless being used by the power of God to bring Saul to exactly where God wants him.

So we read, Saul said to the boy, good, come, let us go. So they went to the town where the man of God was. And then they meet these girls in the town that have come to draw some water.

And they ask where the seer is. And so then the girls say, yep, he's here, but he's just about to go to the sacrifice. And if I read all of that, we've got significant detail again.

[14:23] We've got these girls, they're coming out just to draw water. They're not, they're not part of the action. They're even going the wrong way. They're not invited to the sacrifice. They're not, they're not going to go, oh, you're here when they get to the party.

No, they're just going out, get the water. But just like the donkeys, just like the servant, these girls are going out to draw the water.

They are the powerless being used by the power of God to get Saul where he needs to go. These are not a string of coincidences. This is God's way of accomplishing his will.

The Israelites haven't thrown him off balance at all with their demand for a king. I don't throw him off balance at all with my demands, with my prayers, with my mistakes, with my failings.

Not at all. He's just as in control as ever. And then I wonder whether this conversation that he has with the girls is an indication of the way he was supposed to keep or the way he would perhaps lose his anointing as king or at least begin the unraveling.

[15:43] Because they say, As soon as you enter the town, you will find him, that is Samuel, before he goes up to the shrine to eat. For the people will not eat until he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice.

Afterwards, those eat who are invited. Now go up, for you will meet him immediately. Now it could be they're just saying, look, they're all waiting on him, so he's going to be hurrying.

But we're going to hear in weeks to come that in fact, Saul had an option at one stage in his career as ruler to wait on Samuel to come and offer a sacrifice for the blessing of a battle for their prospering.

And he doesn't wait. Instead, he goes ahead and does it himself. And as we see, that kind of starts things going downhill for him.

But here, the people are waiting. In God's goodness, perhaps, Saul's kingship is beginning in the right way.

[16:55] In a righteous way. Now we come to verse 15, 16 and 17. You might have a look at those.

If these three verses were removed from our passage, the story of Saul would go on without a hiccup.

However, our understanding of God's grace and goodness would not. Let's read them. Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel, tomorrow about this time, I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin and you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel.

He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have seen the suffering of my people because their outcry has come to me. When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, here is the man of whom I spoke to you.

He it is who shall rule over my people. Now up to this point, I hope you've seen that really we've only had inferences of God's work behind the scenes.

[18:14] So I've, you know, talked about him kind of exercising his power through these coincidences, through these incidental people, if you like, and the donkeys. But now, we see it in sharp clarity.

The Lord reveals, well, he has revealed already before any of this donkey chasing has taken place, the Lord has revealed to Samuel at what time and from where the man will be sent to him.

And he tells him that he is to anoint him as ruler over God's people. And it's very interesting because the word that he uses here, ruler, is not the word for king.

There's a very clear Hebrew word for king. But the narrator and in this story and God is using a word that means like prince or happily translated here as ruler.

And so there's a sense in which this anointing of Saul as leader could actually be a positive thing. He doesn't have to be being anointed as this king that will usurp God's authority.

[19:25] He doesn't have to be. In fact, he will be anointed by Samuel, God's prophet, to be a leader like God wants. He's not going to be set up for a fall.

He's going to be anointed to be a leader who is limited in power, not an absolute monarch, but one who would lead under God's kingship.

So we don't have the word king in this point. It does come later. He is called king. But here, it's like he's going to be a leader, but we're not talking about that kind of rebellious king.

Samuel would anoint Saul to be that leader, and so I think he would have the option of continuing in that way or to be that usurper king, the one that would cause all that trouble.

The choice would be his, but either way, of course, we know that God's will will be done.

Furthermore, even though the Israelites have asked wrongly for a king, you know, my big freak out, God will use that very man to be their deliverer.

[20:35] Did you get that in the passage? These amazing words of mercy. He said, you don't want a king, it's going to be awful, you're rejecting me, but I'm going to use this king to deliver you because I've heard your cry, I have seen your suffering.

Doesn't that just strike in the heart? Our God is a God who in the middle of the mess of people's sin is still using that mess to rescue them.

And there's no contradiction here between the stern warning and judgment of chapter 8 and this grace, frankly, of chapter 9.

This is always God's way, his justice and mercy always working together so that his will in salvation wins out. Always.

We can see it in a broader sense in this kind of story arc across 1 and 2 Samuel where Saul's kingship leads to David's kingship and then, of course, we know in the fullness of Revelation David's kingship is the Messiah's line.

[21:46] It leads to the Messiah's line. Jesus Christ, saviour of the world, comes from David who follows on from Saul. And Jesus Christ himself is executed at the hands of those who are choosing against God and yet God turns that uses that, in fact, orchestrates, gives power for that crucifixion to be the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, salvation for all who would believe.

God is in the business of bringing rescue out of mess. In fact, working rescue right in the mess, including our sinful mess.

justice and mercy, choices, grace, God is in control of it all, in my life and your life.

Well, the story goes on, as I said in verse 18, but now we've got this rich understanding of the God of mercy and grace at work behind this donkey chasing.

And so Saul and Samuel finally meet and Saul and the servant learn three things. First, that they're to eat with Samuel. Second, that the donkeys have been found.

[23 : 11] And then third, that the next day they're going to learn something important, something that has to do with what's in their mind or heart, Saul's mind or heart, and something to do with the desire of all Israel being fixed on Saul.

Naturally, we see in the story that Saul is mystified and he's humbled at hearing such things, but even in his kind of modest reply, oh no, I'm a Benjaminite, it's a very small and we're actually, even though my dad's a mighty man of valor, in a very small family, even in that, it's confirmation that yes, this is the man, yes, you've got your Benjaminite here, Samuel.

But, even if Saul wanted to get answers straight away, he doesn't because dinner is about to be served and we know that everyone's waiting. So, verses 22 to 24 describe the dinner, but it's not the guests or even the ritual or even the entertainment that are the focus of the story here, there's no entertainment mentioned, don't get distracted, but it's the menu, it's the menu for Saul that is the detail that we're drawn to.

And so we read in verse 23 on to 24, Samuel said to the cook, bring the portion I gave you, the one I asked you to put aside. The cook took up the thigh and what went with it and set them before Saul. Samuel said, see what was kept is set before you, eat, for it is set before you at the appointed time so that you might eat with the guests.

[24 : 59] Now, we're not supposed to think that Saul is getting the big helping because he looked hungry, or that his muscles needed feeding. In fact, we're seeing here that Saul is getting the priest's bit, the special set aside bit.

And that wouldn't have been lost on the guests. And there's a sense in which this is somewhat formal. It's kept, it's set before you, it's the appointed time, you are to eat in this group.

And I think, again, we're seeing that God is setting before Saul the type of kingship or leadership that he is looking for. A leader who will heed the words and requirements of God, who hears from God, who intercedes to the people, a leader in relationship with God, a priestly leader.

God, and so he gets the priestly portion of the sacrifice and he eats it, yes, at this dinner party, but also at this solemn occasion, this sacrifice blessed by God's man.

And so it says, and Saul ate with Samuel that day. And we can imagine that Samuel starts to just get to know this man over the time of the dinner, and then he goes home and he doesn't get any more answers.

[26 : 27] If he wondered what was going on, too bad, you have to sleep on it and that on the roof. But he lies down to sleep and then at the break of dawn, Samuel says, get up so that I may send you on your way.

And we think, oh, but this is all very secretive and he hasn't even said to him exactly what's going on. But then as they get to the outskirts of the town, Samuel shows his cards and he says, okay, tell the servant boy to go.

That's all fine. He can go home and I want you to stay because I've got something just for the two of us. Now, it's interesting, why would Samuel want to anoint Saul in secret?

And we see actually this occurs at other times in the scriptures, David originally is anointed when he's taking over from Saul just with his brothers, with his family there before, and this is like if you're kind of counting chapters, this is a fair way before David becomes the actual king.

But this pattern, I think, and it's obviously much shortened here because we'll find out next week the public coronation, I suppose, of Saul, but this pattern is, I think, to show that the king or the leader is God's man first.

[28 : 01] This is an interaction between God's man, the prophet, and the leader who needs to first make this agreement with God.

It's not about the accolades of the people, even though he's this great, good-looking man who will be chosen and will be a great warrior. No, it's actually about his relationship with God and God's empowerment on him first.

And so we read this very important verse, the start of chapter 10. Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him.

He said, the Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around.

For me, this is an amazing verse of mercy and grace as well. There is nothing begrudging about the anointing of this leader, leader, even though the Israelites wanted it and were warned against it.

[29 : 22] Even though this leader has come from the rebellion of Israel, he's not going to be set up for a fall. He is anointed properly, fully, with God's blessing, the kiss of the prophet, and this symbol, the oil of the empowering of God's spirit on him.

He won't be left to do it in his own strength. If he maintains this relationship with God through, I think, the man of God, Samuel, and there were to be prophets to follow after him, if he maintains this relationship, he should know that he will indeed be the one to reign over the people of the Lord and save them from the hand of their enemies all around in the power of God's spirit.

And of course, we see that signified a little further down. And so these signs are important because he set out to chase donkeys, not to find a kingdom.

And so he does need this to be proved to him. And so at the end of that verse, Samuel says, now this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you ruler over his heritage.

When you depart from me today, you'll meet these two men who are going to tell you that the donkeys are fine and your father's looking for you. Then you'll go and you'll find three men going up to God at Bethel and they're carrying things that are appropriate for a sacrifice, kids, bread, and wine.

[31 : 03] And they're going to give you some of that bread. And then this really weird thing is going to happen. You're going to meet this band of travelling prophets making big noise and you're going to become one of them.

And we'll look at that in a second. Now, all those three signs are meant for Saul to change him, to change his mind that yes, God is actually calling him and to change his heart and to prove to him that God's word is true.

And we don't get a repetition of those first two signs. We just know that they did happen. It's very interesting with this sacrifice that these men are carrying, these three men with their goats and bread and wine and they give some to Saul and you might remember that there was another king who once ate bread that was meant for a sacrifice.

That was King David. And so again we've kind of seen a pattern that if the leader is to be God's man he gets to I guess do some priestly things, eat sacrifices and here it's the bread just on the journey, just on the journey as they go up to God at Bethel.

But the big ticket is when they get to the town where there's a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute and lyre playing in front of them and they are in a prophetic frenzy.

[32 : 41] Now we often think about Old Testament prophets as solid preachers who are telling you things that they're expounding the word of God especially applying the word of God in Deuteronomy to situations further on down the track of history but pretty solid men.

But here you've got this band of prophets who I kind of imagine like a bunch of Hare Krishnas in the city you know I mean not that of course because they're like God's people and stuff but you know they're making that noise and you can't help but see them and we imagine that in their prophecies they are both calling out praises to God they might be really kind of making a big show of themselves a big physical show of their devotion to God and also they may be calling out things that seem quite supernatural to people so they may be predicting things they may be kind of talking about things in ways that only they could do if those things had been revealed to them by the Lord and so you can't miss them they're the prophets there they are don't look now but but when Saul comes alongside them Samuel says to him then the spirit of the Lord will possess you and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them this is different for a man of good standing tall handsome AFL football player style but he is now going to be possessed by the spirit of the Lord in a prophetic frenzy and it says turned into a different person now that might seem a little bit scary I guess when we think about what that might look like but it doesn't mean that you will become crazy or that you won't recognise yourself in that way you will be turned into the person that God would have you be as a leader God's spirit will be resting upon you we see later that that happens to David as well the spirit of God comes in power on him so this is an important part of God's calling to leadership the

spirit of God will be on you you'll be turned into a different person you'll be transformed you'll be put in a place that will help you do what you need to do you will embrace your call now when these signs meet you

Samuel says do whatever you see fit to do for God is with you and you shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being seven days you shall wait until I come to you and show you what you shall do if you notice there this is kind of the balance of what leadership under God is supposed to be you're empowered by the spirit and so you do whatever you see fit to do he is trusted by God in that sense you'll be in that situation do whatever your hand finds to do do what's appropriate at that time under God but also you must be in a relationship with God's man Samuel wait for him and have him show you what you shall do so there is the confidence that

God is with you and you can act and make choices but there is also the listening to God the hearing his guidance the submitting to him in the authority that he has put over you in the prophet and so it says in verse 9 as he turned away to leave Samuel God gave him another heart and all these signs were fulfilled that day when they were going from there to Gibeah a band of prophets met him and the spirit of God possessed him and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them octave and his is now to the other chapter of way to prevent him and the brothers are

[37 : 58] They just knew, is Saul among the prophets, what it meant. But there's kind of two schools of thought on what it could mean. One, is Saul among the prophets like, wow, he is among the prophets and it's a big surprise.

Wonders never cease. Is Saul among the prophets? Something that they could say to each other that, oh, that's, wow, that was unexpected. Well, is Saul among the prophets?

Or perhaps there's a bit of a negative sense in it. And I kind of lean a little bit more towards this because the people probably thought, oh, wow, this is pretty odd.

And Saul's probably looking pretty crazy here. And what has come over him? Is he also among the prophets? And this man of the place answered, who is their father?

Kind of, you know, where do these guys come from? What's their lineage, if you like? I'm questioning it. They're not so good quality. And so maybe this, it became a proverb, is Saul among the prophets saying, oh, he doesn't really think he's among the prophets, does he?

[39 : 15] This is all very odd. Maybe when he started to oppose Samuel later on that they said, well, is Saul actually among the prophets too? Does he think he can come up against Samuel?

So it could be, I don't know. They knew. Anyway, they used that proverb a lot. But anyway, when his prophetic frenzy had ended, he goes home.

And it's this kind of really humbling final scene in this story, isn't it? Because his uncle's there. He's like, where did you go? He said, I went to seek the donkeys and we couldn't find them.

And so he went to Samuel. Samuel, oh, Samuel, I've heard of him. Tell me what he said to you. Well, he told us that the donkeys had been found. But about the matter of the kingship of which Samuel had spoken, he did not tell him anything.

Now, perhaps he was still all taking it in. But we do know that he'd been asked by Samuel to wait. And so there's a sense in which he's obeying here.

[40 : 25] Now, it's God's time. He knows. He's been changed. He's been given a new heart. But he's waiting so that God, who has everything in control, will keep doing his thing.

And next week we see when it does become public, still a bit of tension as to whether he's kind of ready to let it out. But did you see with me in the story so far how the details actually speak to us of a God who is not just teaching people a lesson by giving them a king, letting them go their own way, saying, Eh, fine, do what you want, get yourselves into trouble.

No. No. We have a God who in the mess is working to save, who is in control, even if the choice is not what he would have wanted, who is working out his plan of salvation through every circumstance, every contingency.

Nothing is outside of his sovereign power. And in the midst of it all, he remains so good.

I didn't explain it well to you how much this revelation means to me. But I know that God is a good God who works in our mess to save his people, who always gives us option after option after option to be with him, to obey him, to be his person under his rule.

[42 : 23] And he did that with Saul.