

Saul King of Israel

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn back to that chapter that marks the beginning of a very important time in the history of the children of Israel, because now God was going to establish a king over Israel. And I would like us to look at, over the course of the next few weeks, God willing, the first two kings of Israel, who were, of course, you know, Saul and David, very different individuals altogether. But I'd like us to look at both of these kings over the course of the next two weeks, or two, the next couple of months or so, I should have said.

And it would be the easy thing to do for me to just go straight on to David. David is so much more straightforward. I'm not suggesting that David was a perfect man. He wasn't. We all know the faults which become so evident in him. He made many, many drastic mistakes. But nevertheless, he lived and died as a man of God. We know that. He was a man after God's own heart.

Saul's a different kettle of fish altogether. Saul is much, much more awkward. We don't know where we are with Saul, do we? We think we know where we are with him here in this chapter, where everything looks so promising. And yet, because we know the end of the story, we are troubled. And I'm troubled.

I don't know where I am with Saul at all. There are two questions that always trouble me whenever I read about Saul. And the two questions are, number one, was he truly a believer? Was he truly a man who followed and loved God? It so appeared as if he was at the very beginning? God gave him so many privileges and so many opportunities. No one was in a more privileged position than this man Saul.

And yet, he seems to have spectacularly blown it in later life. And not only so, not in the way in which he could repent and come back to God, but he didn't. He didn't appear to. Things get worse and worse and worse in his reign. And we'll see that as time goes on. I'm not going to spend too much time on Saul. We're going to look at his life. But I think it is important because it's got to be important because it's in God's Word. It's got to be there for a reason. There have to be things that God is teaching us in the life of Saul. Sometimes you get characters in the Bible and we follow their example because their example deserves to be followed. But other characters are there as a warning to us so as not to follow their example. And I believe that Saul is such a man. Therefore, it is important to spend some time looking at him, the kind of person he was, because there are personality traits in Saul that appear in other people as well. And that if we allow ourselves to become engrossed and engulfed by our own temptations, which Saul was, then things get worse and worse and worse. So Saul is put there, I believe, for our... Look at the detail that there is in this chapter. The intricate, almost moment-by-moment detail. And that goes all the way through the next few chapters in 1 Samuel.

[3 : 24] And these details are there not only to give us an interesting account. And I would encourage you to go away. I read that very fast. I'm sure you noticed. Well, I had to in order to stay within the time but it would do us good to go back because 1 Samuel is a fascinating... It's very easy to read.

And in a day when we're told that people have stopped reading as much as they used to, then I would encourage you, please, to go back and to read the Bible. Read passages like this.

And don't be put off by anything you don't understand. But just read passages like this. And which is a narrative passage. It's a history passage. And I believe it is fascinating. It gives us fascinating information about the kind of events that would happen, the kind of feasts that would take place. And the day-to-day comings and goings. But my question that I go back to is this. Was he a true believer? I don't know. I really don't know. If you look at him at the time of his death, he dies a pathetic individual who seems to have wandered so far away from God, he has become unrecognizable as a man of God.

And that really frightens me. After all the privileges that Saul was given. But I say that not to frighten us. Or rather, I should say, perhaps, just to allow us to see the possibilities of what could happen if we turn our eyes away from obedience to God and living as he wants us to live. And I believe that that is the message in this book. And the reason why these are the second question that troubles me is, why then did God raise him up? If he was going to be such a disastrous king, and if God knew what was going to happen in the future, in his future kingship, then why did God make him the king in the first place? That question troubles me as well. Was this not a waste of time on God's part? Is it not strange that God should invest so much? It shows him he made every provision for him. He spoke to him through Samuel. He opened the way for him. He anointed him.

He raised him up to be the king of Israel. And yet, God knew he was going to fail and turn out to have this massive question mark over his head, which is exactly what happened. Why did God persist with him?

[6 : 04] Why did he leave him on the throne for so many years when all he seemed to do was to pursue David and try to kill him? We'll see that as well. As to how obsession can take over a person's mind and how frightening it is when obsession, that's the way that sin works very often in a person's heart. It sort of draws you into an unhealthy preoccupation with one or two or three different things so that you become so taken up with them that you fail to see the big world outside and you fail even more to see God speaking to you or hear God speaking to you. He hated David. He came to hate David and he spent his whole time pursuing him. So why did God leave him on the throne for so many years in the face of such outrage?

Well, I can't answer that question either. All I know is that God is wise and nothing happens outside of his control and God knows the end from the beginning. I believe that there are some aspects to the story that actually become clear as to why he left. For example, when Saul was pursuing David, this was a very important time for David to be trained the hard way in order to rule the kingdom wisely. And David had to go through much trouble and pain in order to be prepared for the work that God had for him to do. And Saul, Saul was the means. That didn't mean that God was responsible for Saul's sinfulness, but Saul providentially was there when David was being prepared for the kingdom. Well, we'll come back to these questions, I guess, from time to time. But for the meantime, I'm going to say this, that God raised Saul with a genuine purpose that he should rule his kingdom in righteousness. So if Saul is going to fail, then Saul has only himself to blame. You cannot blame God when things go wrong and when it's our fault or someone's fault. You cannot say that God is responsible for the misdemeanors of people, even if, see, some people put two and two together. They say, well, God knew that that was going to happen. Why did he let it happen?

People use that for a whole list of different events. You might get people saying to you when an atrocity happens, like the recent attack in the shopping center in Kenya, why did God allow that to happen? Or why did God allow that boat to turn over that was taking all these refugees into Europe the other day? But you can't hold God accountable for the deeds of humankind. These incidents happen because people choose. They make their own choices. And if God is going to put his hand out and stop us, he would restrict our freedom. Nobody would want that. These incidents that happen because of the choices that we make. And if people choose to shoot one another and shoot other people, that is not God's fault. That is because that choice has been made.

And where Saul went wrong was his choice. It wasn't God's fault. It was Saul's fault that so much went wrong in his rule. When God raised up Saul, he genuinely had the gifts and the abilities for a good leader and a king. These come across so much. In fact, if anything, this chapter proves to us that God is not to blame. Saul was so promising. He had the genuine qualities to be a leader. He was head and shoulders. Literally, head and shoulders above everyone else. He was obviously an impressive guy.

He was obviously, as we'll see next time, a good military leader. And that was required in a king. A king had to be able to lead an army against the enemies of Israel. He had these qualities.

[10:27] He also had genuine humility. That's why when Saul, he couldn't believe, when Samuel invited him to the feast at the middle of this chapter, he said, am I not a Benjaminite from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is this not my clan, the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why have you spoken to me in this way? He couldn't figure out why all of a sudden he had been transported from looking after his father's donkeys to this important feast that was conducted by this very important man, Samuel. He felt he was like a fish out of water. He didn't know what he was doing there. Why am I here? I believe that that was genuine humility. Well, it may have been that that humility disappeared after he became king and after he successfully won the victory over one or two of the battles which he fought. And maybe it went to his head and he became complacent. I don't know. We'll see that in a few in some time to come. But we're jumping the gun, maybe. Let's take a step back and ask more about the background to the story. All I want this evening is just to give you just some thoughts about the background to the story, to set the context as to where we are in the history of Israel. Now, history is a fascinating subject, by the way. That's why you get whole TV channels that are devoted to history. That's why some of the most successful BBC programs are history programs in which the history of Scotland, for example. There's a recent one in the history of Rome and the history of the

Jews. And all these are presented to us in such fascinating ways. And people watch them, quite rightly. So we want to know where we've come from. We want to know what happened thousands, hundreds, thousands of years ago in different cultures. And so it's good for us, particularly those who are followers of Jesus, to know where our roots lie. This is where our roots lie. You can't just forget the Old Testament, pretend it didn't exist. And neither can you say the Old Testament has got nothing to tell us. It has loads to tell us. So that's why it's important tonight. And it's important for each one of us as individuals to read all the way back from Genesis all the way to Malachi, to get the background. Well, you remember that now that the children of Israel, God's people, were now the nation of Israel. And they were living in the promised land, the land of Canaan. They had been living there for 400 years. 400 years previous, or thereabouts. 400 years previous, Joshua had led the people of

Israel across the Jordan into the promised land. That was just after Moses died. And as long as Joshua was alive, everything was fine. Everything was stable. And the people of Israel, they were secure and they were near to God. And God blessed them and gave them more and more of the land. But when things started going wrong after Joshua died, and the book of Judges, which comes after the book of Joshua, tells of the next period, the next 400 years or so, three, 400 years in the history of Israel, which was an utter shambles. It was disastrous.

Because after Joshua died, the people of Israel started wandering away from God, started worshipping other gods. And with the worship of other gods comes all kinds of devious practices, deviant practices, and a way of life that it was not pleasing to God. And so when that happened, enemies would come in and take over the land and oppress them and make slaves of the people. So that the people would cry out to God at last when things became so difficult for them, that they would cry out to God in their slavery. And God then would answer their prayer. And he did so by raising up a judge. Somebody who would rule the people and who would rule them and lead them against their enemies. So they would defeat the enemies. People like Gideon. People like Samson. They were, they all lived in that time, that period of time. And the judges weren't all men, by the way. There was a woman judge as well called Deborah. It's fascinating. It's also not very nice reading, by the way. It's very ugly. Yet it's there for us in God's word, in the Bible, to show us the kind of people that Israel were, and the kind of people Israel were, and the kind of people we are at heart. Given the same circumstances, I would have done the same thing,

I'm sure. We live in a time of grace, a time when Jesus has come into the world to give us a new heart and a new beginning and a new life. Now this went on for three, four hundred years. Time after time. When the judge died, when the ruler died, then the people would wander away again, and they would serve other gods. They would adopt a lifestyle that was totally at variance with what God wanted them to do. And then an enemy would come in. They would oppress them. They'd make slaves of them, take over the land. And then the people would cry to God again. And then God would raise up, in mercy and in grace, he would raise up another leader who would drive out the enemy. This went on time after time, but the more it went on, the worse it became. So that by the end of the book of Judges, you have mayhem, civil war amongst the Israelites, where they're not fighting against the enemies of Israel, they're fighting each other, they're killing each other, and thousands and thousands thousands and thousands of people are dying. It was awful. And so you get to the book of Judges, if you read it, and you think, what in the world is going to happen here? There's no hope for these people. They're destined to be wiped off the face of the earth. And that was, in a sense, what would have happened if God hadn't intervened? And he did so by raising up a very special man. From the time he was a boy, this man, I believe that this man is one of the most, the greatest heroes in the Bible.

[16 : 54] He's one of the most underrated figures in the Bible. His name was Samuel. And for decades, Samuel, from the time he was young, Samuel ruled over Israel as a judge. But Samuel was different, because he was consistent. And because he was true to the Lord all the way through his life.

And through Samuel, things began to really change for the better in Israel. So by the time that Samuel became an old man, that things had really reformed in Israel. And they were no longer loggerheads with each other, no longer warring against each other. But they had returned largely, I'm not saying they were perfect, largely to the Lord. The problem was that Samuel had appointed his own two sons to be rulers after him. And the sons were most unlike their father, because instead of being men of God, they were selfish individuals who were on the take. They were corrupt. A big disappointment to Samuel. And so, as a result of the people's murmuring against this, complaining against this, they all came together on one occasion in chapter 8 of 1 Samuel, to demand something of Samuel. Something they had never had before. And this was to be the beginning of a new era in the history of Israel. They demanded a king. We want a king, they said. But it wasn't because they had sought the mind of God over this. They hadn't asked God to lead them and to guide them. They wanted a king because the nations that surrounded them, they all had kings. And it appeared to be the better way to govern, to have a king. And so, Samuel, in bitter disappointment, turned to the Lord and the

Lord said, it's not you they've rejected, it's me they've rejected. Give them a king. Give them one. And so, Samuel told them all to go away at the end of chapter 8. And chapter 9 begins a new era in the whole history of Israel where now God was going to set a king over them.

But you know, God in his mercy had a greater plan for his people. They were asking for a king out of selfishness. But God was going to use the kingship to be the structure by which he would rule over his people. And God was going to use the kingship as a pointer to the Lord Jesus Christ who was going to come one day as our king, as the king, to rule in grace and in mercy his people, to give them the guidance that they needed to have that true authority, that perfect authority over his people by which he would lead them, the shepherd king. And so, the kingship in Israel is a pointer or should have been a pointer to them. It's certainly a pointer to us about what God was going to do one day. But it didn't start very easily at all because this was the man who God was going to appoint to be the first king of Israel. It takes us up to our chapter here. What I find fascinating here is not so much what is ultimately going to happen. We know what's going to happen. And that kind of puts us at an advantage, isn't it? When you know that this man, Saul, is going to be, you know what God is doing in this. But if you didn't know, if you were just to read chapter 8 and then go straight on to chapter 9, not knowing what God was doing, you'd be wondering what's happening. Because all of a sudden, the scene changes from this massive crowd and they're talking to Samuel. They want a king and

God says, give them a king. And then all of a sudden, the spotlight shifts and shines on this man, an ordinary man called Kish. He was a Benjaminite, son of Abiel, son of Zeror, just to give him his proper pedigree. That was very important in the Old Testament, to give it credibility. It's an ordinary man called Kish. And you don't know what's happening. Why? What's so important about Kish? What's so important about this ordinary man? And then you read through it and then you realize what's happening.

[21 : 55] And the question is, well, why did God simply not say to Samuel, there's this man called Kish, here's where he lives, go to his house, there's his son called Saul, there's the man I want to be a king. Why go through this whole complicated process of Saul losing his donkeys, going out after them, spending days and days going through town and village looking for his donkeys, and then, well, the rest is history. We know the chapter, we've read it. Why the complicated process?

Well, I love this complicated process. Not because it's complicated, but because it is so ordinary. Here is this man, he's Kish, and he's got this son called Saul, and he gets up on this this morning, he has no clue what's going to happen. He gets up the morning, he discovers that his donkeys have wandered away. The gate's been left open, the donkeys have wandered away, they're nowhere to be seen.

And Saul, his son, goes out with his servant, and their task, of course, in those days, if you lost your donkeys, you lost your livelihood, or you lost a good part of it, it was very important. So off he went, to look for the donkeys. And it was in the process, and I'm quite sure, that his thoughts were, how frustrating this all is. I didn't need this to happen. Why did this happen to me? The same kind of thoughts as you or I would thought, if something similar happened to ourselves.

And yet, it is through the frustration of ordinary life, the accidents that happen, the things that come upon us that cause us pain, and hardship, and difficulty, and waste of time, as far as we're concerned, God is working in it. And that gives me so much encouragement today.

Because it's not just Saul that that happens to. It's all of God's people. God is not going to make you or I a king. But it's not just to kings, or future kings, that God works in his providence.

[24 : 10] But it's all of his people. This chapter is full of what we call the providence of God. Have you ever thought about the providence of God? As soon as you begin to think about it, it's mind-blowing. It really is.

Because what God's providence is, is the connection that there is between every single event that happens in this world. The catechism puts it like this. God has foreordained. That doesn't mean he's responsible for the sinfulness of this world. I said that before. But God has foreordained.

He rules in a way in which is way beyond our understanding. You see, the problem is that when we start thinking of providence, we think we can be one step ahead of God.

God. And that's when it becomes really dangerous. When we talk about guidance, for example, and we're seeking God's guidance, and we're looking around us to see signs.

Very often, the signs that we're looking for are the signs we want to see, rather than the signs that truly are showing us what God wants us to do, or where God wants us to be. And we think we can read into things God's providence. Well, we can't. Because we don't know what God is doing. Kish didn't know what God was doing. Saul didn't know what God was doing. Not even Samuel. Until that moment that God spoke to him. And like God did with the prophet, he spoke to him and he showed him and he said to him, about this time tomorrow, a man's going to come to you. And he's going to be looking for donkeys. Here's the man that I want you to anoint as king. And that's the way it works.

[26 : 07] God doesn't speak to people directly nowadays like he did to Samuel. He speaks to us through his word, the Bible. And the Bible is as powerful as any. And I'm not saying God can't do strange and unusual things. Don't get me wrong. But I'm saying that we're not to expect God to be speaking. I've never heard God's voice in my entire 40 year history as a Christian. Never heard God's voice. But what's important about here is that in the Old Testament, that's the way God used to speak to people. Through the prophet. The prophet was, that was his job.

To listen to the voice of God and to go and to tell the message of God to other people. But the important thing here is that God is bringing everything to pass through ordinary means. Even these two girls, for example, these two young women, verse 11, when Saul and his servant are going up to try and find Samuel, they went up the hill to the city. They met young women coming out to draw water and said to them, is the seer here? They said, he is.

Behold, he's just ahead of you. Now, why include a little tiny detail like that? Because that's important. Every detail is important to God. I was thinking about this yesterday. I was driving through Sky. I was coming back from Inverness. It was at a wedding. And I was just thinking about the providence of God. I was trying to allow myself to try and get my head around the providence of God. It all of a sudden came to me that, you know, I was on the road and cars would pass you and be another car behind you. And you're going at a certain speed, a certain precise moment in the road. Every single detail is all put there by God.

It's all, it's all ordained by God. This is all in the providence of God. He knew, he knows how many cars are going to be on the road, exactly what time they're all going to pass each other, exactly what speed they're going to be doing, exactly what moment they left the house, where they're going, the weather, the wind conditions, the fading light, the rain, everything.

It's the same with you. Every single detail. The reason why you're here tonight, the reason why you're here listening to God's word this evening, God's providence. And that's how God's will is done. And God in his goodness and in his mercy has provided for us, not only the knowledge that we have of God, but also a way to know God himself. The more you think about God, I was thinking about that again yesterday, I was thinking of an old teacher, I've told you about this person before, a teacher that we had in school who said to, said to us that if there was a God, he said, I couldn't, I wouldn't possibly think that I could speak to that God, because why would he want to speak to me? Speck in the universe. Tiny little minuscule speck in the universe. Why would the God who created all of this be so small that he would want to know me? And that's the wonder of the gospel. He does. That's why he sent Jesus into the world all the way down into that tiny little place in Bethlehem at exactly the right moment, in exactly the right place, because that was the only way that our sin could be taken away, by Jesus dying on the cross and rising again as our substitute, as our sacrifice and our savior, so that we could be saved. You see, people think of God's providence, they think, well, what's for you won't go past you. That's the way people talk, isn't it? And that's, that's, that's, that can be a way, well, it's a, it's a way of, it's a form of expression, I guess, what's for you won't go past you. I've heard a lot of people saying that. And that can also be an excuse. And I believe a lot of people are using that as an excuse. They kind of believe in the controlling rule of God. But go no further. I don't want to know any more about God.

[30 : 49] Well, I put it to you tonight that if you are aware of God's rule, then surely you want to know that God yourself. Surely you want to be right with that God yourself. Surely you want to love him as he loved the world, like you, I think you were thinking about this morning. And he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we pray that your word will speak to us. We pray, Lord, that we will step back and in wonder at your complexity and your awesomeness. But Lord, not so much as to drive us away from you, but to draw us towards you in your son, Jesus. Thank you, Lord, so much that he came into the world to save us from our sins. We pray, Lord, that as we think about the events that took place so long ago when you led your people, the great events and the awful events, we pray that we will learn from them and that you will challenge us by them and draw us to run to Jesus in his name. Amen.

Amen.