

Finding a King **1 Samuel 9-10**

Serendipity. What does it mean? I looked in a couple of dictionaries we have at home and couldn't find the word. So, I thought I'd do the modern thing and try the web. I typed the word into Google and it came up with over 2 million hits. I tried a few of the sites that looked more promising and wasn't exactly sure why they'd turned up as hits. Then I tried a site called *Convicts to Australia*. It had this definition at the top of the page that google sent me to.

The faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for.

It said it was from the WWWebster Dictionary. I had a quick glance through the rest of the page, but couldn't work out what it had to do with anything else on the page and so gave up. I had my definition. I guess the rest of my search was not serendipitous!

The first site I went to, however, was about a 2001 film called *Serendipity*. It had a brief description of the plot – something about a couple reuniting years after they first met, fell in love and separated – convinced that one day they'd end up together. That captured something of my understanding of the word – a fortuitous moment coming unexpectedly which seems to change a person's life in a very significant, positive way. It's something the film-makers can present to us very graphically.

- They can have their film revolve around that particular moment.
- They can have the background music reach that climactic crescendo that indicates this is the moment not to fall asleep.

- They can make time stand still as they examine that moment from every possible camera angle they can think of.
- They can keep having flashbacks to that moment throughout the rest of the film.

For some, today's story in 1 Samuel exemplifies what serendipity's about:

The faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for.

We'll come back to that matter when we've looked at the story.

Now to Introduce the ...

As we come to this next story in Samuel, we have the disadvantage of already thinking we know what it's about. To some extent, that was shared also by the original readers for two reasons.

- First, they also came to chapter 9 after chapter 8 – and chapter 8 finished with God telling Samuel to give Israel a king. That creates the expectation that we'll get a story about Samuel giving them a king.
- Secondly, this is a story about Saul – and everyone knows that Saul was king.

So, we read this story expecting it to tell us about God giving Israel a king – a king like all the other nations.

But think about the surprises in the way the narrator tells the story – surprises coming from how the events themselves take place. The story starts with Kish – someone who's not high on the list of Biblical names remembered by most Christians. Kish, we're told, is a *man of standing*. It could mean that he was a wealthy man or that he was a man of valour. It may be meant to imply both.

We're given quite a list of his ancestors. And so, the natural thing to think is: Maybe this guy is potential king material. He's already made some sort of a name for himself. Here's a guy who just might be able to be the king like all the other nations have.

Then we're quickly introduced to his son – Saul. Saul's physically impressive – tall, dark and handsome may be an apt phrase, although nothing's said about him being dark. Here's the sort of guy who'd make a good king like the nations. He's head and shoulders above the rest. He's got the build of a strong leader – the sort of man others follow. As one commentator quips: It's a shame Gibeah didn't have a professional basketball team.¹ It looks like we're given a choice of two candidates – father and son – both impressive in their own right.

Yet, both these men come from the tribe of Benjamin. At the end of Judges, the tribe of Benjamin doesn't win too many votes in the popularity stakes in Israel. There we find some men of Benjamin who are also *men of valour* who fight against the rest of Israel and plunge the country into civil war. The result is that the tribe of Benjamin's nearly wiped out. The only reason they survive's because of some rather questionable marriage practices described in Judges 21. So we're also left asking: Is either of these two guys really suitable king material? Is Israel ready to have a king from the tribe of Benjamin?

Then, when we turn to verse 3, we're introduced to a bunch of donkeys – except we can't be introduced to them because they're missing! What have a bunch of donkeys got to do with getting a king for Israel? We're

¹ Dale Davis, *1 Samuel* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003) 74.

left wondering: Is this a story about a king? Or is this another interruption to that issue? Remember, the king issue's been on the agenda for a while now:

- There were hints at the end of Judges that there wasn't much law and order in the land because it's before the time of kings.
- Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 mentions God's king.

We're talking about decades here – time enough for Samuel to have been born and grown old. The overall story's already been teased out for a while – maybe it'll be still a while longer before a king's appointed. Perhaps this story about some missing donkeys will have a different focus altogether.

As the story progresses, we're not given a shining picture of Saul. Perhaps in the past he's learnt to rely on his good looks rather than his intelligence. He takes a sizeable journey searching for these donkeys without any success. The donkeys manage to turn up without any help from Saul – although we (like Saul) don't find that out till later in the story. Moreover, Saul's servant seems to show more initiative than Saul himself.

- It's Saul's servant who's not quite ready to give up the search when Saul wants to head for home.
- It's Saul's servant who knows the man of God's in the nearby town.
- It's Saul's servant who has some silver stored away – and Saul's more than happy to let him use it for him (a hint of someone who takes, maybe?).

Is Saul really the sort of guy we want to be king? Can he help Israel compete on the international scene?

And so the story proceeds – building up this question of whether or not this story's going to be about finding a

king or whether it's simply a nice story about donkeys – until we get to verse 15:

Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed this to Samuel: "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him leader over my people Israel; he will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked upon My people, for their cry has reached Me."

Now it looks like we're getting somewhere. God's acting. All this stuff about some lost donkeys is merely God's way of getting Saul to Samuel. God sends this young man from Benjamin to Samuel. Samuel's job's to anoint him as king. That's what we expect the text to say – but it doesn't. Instead it says: anoint him as *leader*. It doesn't use the word *king* at all. And the description that follows – while it wouldn't be out of place in talking about kings – is the sort of description that's been used of judges. So again, we're left with the question: Is this a story about a king? Or is this another interruption to that issue? Maybe God's gone back to the judge model of leadership after all.

Even when Samuel actually gets round to anointing Saul, he still doesn't use the word *king*. Look at 10:1

Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance?"

Still it's the much more vague word that's used. The word *king* is avoided.

The only time in this story there's any direct reference to the idea of kings is in the last verse – verse 16. That's where this particular story finishes – even if the NIV

hasn't invented a heading before verse 17:

Saul replied, "He assured us that the donkeys had been found." But he did not tell his uncle what Samuel had said about the kingship.

Even then, we're still left wondering. After all, in what we've been told, Samuel hasn't said anything about kings at all. What does this comment mean?

- Is it the narrator's way of saying that Samuel said a lot more to Saul than what we've been told?
- Is it the narrator saying that, even though the word hasn't been used, we all know this is what we're talking about because this is what Saul was?
- Is it a hint as to what was happening in Saul's mind – Saul had been told he would be leader but he was interpreting it in terms of being king?

We don't know. The matter's left up in the air.

Why's this story so vague in this regard? Why all these hints that things may not be as smooth as they seem to be on the surface? God hasn't given up on His people. They've asked for a king like the nations. As we saw last week, their request expressed their rebellion against God and God's rule over them. Samuel warned them of this. Samuel also warned them what a king like the nations would be like – someone who'd take and take and take. Yet, they persisted in their request for such a king and God told Samuel to grant their request.

However, God – in His grace and mercy – still provides opportunity for their request to work out for their good. As we saw last week, God wasn't against kings in themselves. There are plenty of earlier indications that kings were part of His plan for Israel. The right sort of king would be a positive step for them. What God objected to

was the rebellious and idolatrous way in which Israel asked for a king. Kings could still work for Israel's good – if they paid attention to God. God had already provided the blueprint for kings in Deuteronomy 17. They could have a king – but their king was to be different.

And so we have these hints in the story as to the sort of leader Saul should be. Some of those hints come by the ambiguity in the story – by it not being clear whether this is a story about a leader or a king. Saul is a king, but he's not to be a king like those of the other nations; he's to be a leader under God.

Some of those hints come through more directly. For example, look at 10:5. Samuel tells Saul some signs that will confirm his word to Saul.

After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.

Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do.

While Saul's been anointed as leader, it's not a licence to do whatever he likes. He's not just to go ahead and do his own thing. He's to be a leader under God's authority.

- First, God's Spirit will come upon Saul and change his heart. Just exactly what's involved in this isn't totally clear. For example, exactly what's involved in prophesying in this context? Did Saul continue to prophesy on other occasions? We don't know. We do know, however, that this was something God did and that it had an impact on others. Others came up with the saying we have in verse 11 – *Is Saul also among the prophets?*
- Secondly, even as Israel's leader, he's still to be subject to God's word. Samuel, God's proven prophet, gives Saul instructions. *Do what your hand finds to do. Go down to Gilgal and wait for me there.* The Spirit and the Word don't oppose each other. The Spirit-led person remains subject to the Word of God.

The whole way in which Saul's leadership's established indicates that God remains King of His people. It's still God who rules. Israel's kings need to recognise that – and Israel herself needs to recognise that.

It's a simple lesson – and perhaps one we think's obvious – yet it's important to be reminded of it. After all, Saul failed to learn the lesson. In a few chapters, we find that Saul places himself above the word of God. The prophet gives him God's instructions and Saul fails to carry them out. Saul's been equipped by God.

- He's anointed by God's prophet.
- He's given three signs of confirmation.
- God's Spirit comes on him and he prophesies.
- God's word's given to him through Samuel.

Yet, still he fails to obey God's word. He thinks he can take matters into his own hands and make a decision different from what God's told him. And when that happens,

God rejects Saul as king.

Even in this story, there are hints that the rot's already set in. What's Samuel tell Saul to do? Two things:

- When these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do. There's a fairly strong implication that the *whatever* would involve some attack on the Philistine outpost that was close at hand.
- Secondly, he was told to go to Gilgal and wait there seven days until Samuel came and told him what to do.

What's Saul actually do? When he finishes prophesying, he goes up to the high place. Then he goes home and deals with curly questions from his uncle. Now, it may be that he also headed off to Gilgal and we're just not told about it. That's possible in relation to the second of Samuel's instructions. But in relation to the first of the instructions, we'd expect to be told if something had happened. The whole story's been building up to that point. God's announcement to Samuel that the man he sends to be anointed will deliver Israel from the Philistines gives us the expectation that's how the story will finish. But it doesn't. It merely finishes with Saul going back home. It's a bit of an anti-climax. It's a departure from the pattern that was part of the Judges period.

People calling themselves Christians still place themselves above God's word today.

- Individuals do it when they complain that God's standards are too tough and they take the fun out of life and they stop me doing all the things the pagans around me are doing. They take matters into their own hands. They make their own decisions about what they decide should be acceptable

behaviour for God and they overrule what God's told them in His word. They come up with their own rules about when they're entitled to indulge themselves with special treats and what's acceptable sexual behaviour in the modern world. They come up with their own rules about permitting certain levels of pride and greed within their lives. They make their own decisions about what they think are acceptable levels of truthfulness.

- Churches do it when they complain that God's ideas are out-of-date in our modern western world and we need to update things so that they're more acceptable to our culture.
 - God can't have really meant what the Bible says about homosexuality – it must be OK to ordain them as our leaders because that's what the world thinks should happen.
 - God can't really have meant that greed's a sin because He wants to bless us abundantly and make us rich so we can live like King's Kids.

The point is that, even if you're the Archbishop of the Anglican Church or the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, still you're not above God. You're not above being subject to God's word. You're still called to acknowledge the truth that God rules over you and your leadership's subject to His will. It doesn't change if you're not in one of those exalted positions.

God's Providence

Let's come back to this matter of serendipity. Is that what this story's about? Is it all about

The faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for.

After all, Saul went off looking for donkeys – a fairly

mundane and ordinary task. You could imagine the filmmakers having dull, grey skies on the day Saul sets out from home. But while he's bumbling around the countryside looking for donkey tracks, he actually stumbles across a kingdom. It's valuable. It's not what he's looking for. It has that serendipity feel to it, doesn't it?

Except that's not really the right word. This is God's providence – God's rule of His people. It may have that serendipitous look to it, but God's directing this show. Before Saul comes wandering into town, God's told Samuel He's going to send him someone tomorrow. This isn't some chance encounter with a full orchestra playing in the background – even though it may look like that to Saul. This is God bringing His purposes into history. It's part of the way in which God expresses His rule.

That's important from Israel's perspective. When you get to the end of chapter 8 – when you see God warning the people about their request for a king and the people still stubbornly insisting on their own way – you wonder what God will do about this situation. Sure, God's said they can have a king – He's given in to them – but will He also send them a good dose of judgment? Or even worse, will He abandon them altogether – will He simply give them up to their own stubbornness and let them reap the consequences? There are two parts to the answer.

- At one level, the answer is that God's not abandoned them. In His mercy, He still works for them. Yes, they deserve judgment for the way they've treated God, but that's not what they get. God works to provide them with an appropriate king and he gives that king a touch of His Spirit to equip him for the task.

- But at another level, the answer's not as clear-cut – for we don't yet know what sort of king Saul will turn out to be. If he's a king who's willing to submit to God's word, then things will be well. But if he's not – if he ignores God's word and does his own thing – then he'll lead the nation away from God and into judgment

So, God hasn't abandoned them altogether – He's still provided a leader for Israel – but the final outcome of this whole episode's still left hanging in the air.

That shouldn't be seen as an excuse for rebellion against God. It's not that some Israelite can read this story and say: Look, it doesn't matter whether or not I pay attention to God. These guys got their own way. They demanded a king. They ignored God's warnings. They thumbed their collective noses at God. And God didn't do a thing against them. God even helped them get their own way. Yes, on this occasion, God was very gracious to them. He didn't treat them the way they deserved. But it's never right to presume on God's mercy in that way. In Romans 6, Paul asks: *Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?* He answers it with a very strong negative. Such an attitude misses the whole point of who God is and the sort of work He's doing in our lives.

Part of God's providence in this passage is the way He deals with Saul. Did you notice how God guides Saul here? Most of the modern books on guidance, if they included a reference to this passage at all, would point to God's specific word to Samuel in verse 16 – a word that Samuel passed on to Saul as the story unfolds. Or they would point to Samuel's words to Saul in the first eight verses of chapter 10. Or they may point to Saul's servant

and his knowledge of the man of God and his willingness to consult with the man of God in order to get God's word about the donkeys. They consult with Samuel and they get a message from God about the donkeys. That's all true.

Yet, the implications of this passage in relation to guidance are much bigger than that – it's just that the implications don't always fit into what people want to say about guidance and about how God should guide Christians.

- For example, Saul – or perhaps Saul's servant – goes to Samuel to get some word of God about some donkeys. He does get that – but he gets much more than that. The real matter of guidance in this chapter has to do with the kingship rather than donkeys – but that's not what Saul's asking about. That hadn't even crossed Saul's mind. And, as the story goes on to suggest, he may not have been overly interested in it.
- More than that, the story's presented in such a way as to show God's active right from the beginning. God doesn't wait for Saul to ask Him for guidance about either donkeys or kings. God's hand's in the whole situation that orchestrates events so that Saul meets Samuel and gets anointed. God does that without Saul's permission and without Saul asking for God's help on the matter.

This story shows God taking the initiative in guidance. When God wants something to happen, He's quite capable of arranging for it to happen – with or without the permission of those involved. When God wants to say something, He's quite capable of saying it – whether or not there's someone pleading for God to speak.

It's not that God can't guide us in other ways as well. There's evidence of that in this passage too.

- God gives specific words to Samuel – although we're not told exactly how He does that.
- God gives Saul some specific words through the prophet Samuel – although it appears that Saul fails to act on those words.

Those things are also in this passage, but there's a lot more to God's guidance and God's providence than that.

Conclusion

Overall, this is a story about God. God's sovereignty's so great that He can even take our rebellion – our working against Him – and weave it into His plans for our good. Israel didn't listen to God. God warned them about the king they were asking for. They stubbornly refused to listen to the warning. Yet, in the provision of Saul, God works that into His plans for their good. That doesn't excuse their rebellion. Even the fact that God answers their prayer and gives them a king doesn't excuse their rebellion. Even the fact that God blesses them with His good plans doesn't excuse their rebellion. Yet, God's so great that even their rebellion doesn't defeat His purposes and plans.

The ultimate expression of that is the cross. There wicked men express their rebellion against God by hanging the Son of God up to die. There God uses that rebellion to achieve the greatest salvation of His people.