

1 SAMUEL 9 - 15

9-10 - Saul is made King

Who is Saul? His family and lineage is given us. He is also described as a very tall and handsome man, a real leader type personality. But who is he inside? In these chapters, he is converted from a dutiful son helping run his father's business, to a mighty king of Israel.

The process of Saul becoming king is a two-step one. First, there is a personal, intimate meeting between Samuel and Saul. Samuel anoints him and gives him signs by which Saul will know himself to be the one. The last sign is especially fascinating. Saul is taken up in 'prophetic frenzy' with other wandering prophets, and at the very least, this indicates to us a man who is highly spiritual, even if somewhat imbalanced (as we will see further on). Second, Samuel summons all the people of Israel together, and he anoints Saul before all of Israel, publicly, as King. Samuel reminds the people again that their request for a king is not God's will. Nevertheless, God will acquiesce to the will of the people and support them under two conditions: 1) that the king, and 2) that the people remain faithful to God as the ultimate sovereign. The fact that this has already been a challenge for the people throughout their history (as evidenced in their eclectic blend of religious beliefs and practices) and will be a challenge to someone who is given great status, power and means (the king) will make faithfulness to God's sovereignty a questionable thing on numerous occasions.

11-12 - Saul's ascendancy and Samuel's farewell

Saul has some amazing successes in battle. The material here is bloody, and God is part of it. Leniency and forgiveness are not part of the theology here. Israel is called to secure its borders and fight off its enemy neighbours all around. Saul is able to bring the tribes together and strengthen the unity of the people as one. It seems he is indeed God's choice, and it also seems that the peoples' insistence on a king has paid off.

But then there is Samuel's speech. Again, he calls the people to account for having disobeyed God's will in asking for a king. They were better served by having judges appointed to them than kings. Judges were clearly subservient to God, and the role of prophets in relation to judges was more critical. With a king in the picture, there is a threat to the religious, prophetic authority in Israel, which is God's human representative voice for recognizing God's supreme rule and authority. In the end, however, Samuel also gives the people some hope. If the people and the king follow the ways of God and remain faithful to God above all else, God will support them and give them success as a nation.

13-15 - Things begin to unravel

Samuel and Saul begin to come into conflict. The problem is that the line of command is disobeyed. Even though Saul is King, he must depend on God's word and will, which is communicated through Samuel. Saul, however, commits several actions on his own,

without depending on Samuel or heeding the command of God as Samuel has delivered it. The result is that Saul is now cursed as a failed king. He will not receive God's blessing and support, and therefore, his kingship will fall.

In the first case of disobedience, Saul is impatient, and he takes on the priestly role of Samuel in offering the necessary religious sacrifice before the men go out to battle. On the surface it seems to make good sense that he does this. The men are growing restless and the mood for war is fading. Saul can't wait any longer. On the other hand, waiting for Samuel is a sign that only God and God's appointed representative can give the go ahead. By taking matters into his own hand, Saul has taken upon himself ultimate sovereignty, an affront to God.

In the second case, God is demanding a sacrifice of the Amalekites, every living thing associated with them (a complete annihilation!). If we set aside for a moment the horror of such a command, what is it that grieves God and Samuel in Saul keeping some of the livestock and the enemy king alive? Again, it is a question of obedience and authority. Saul has made his own, contrary decisions above the explicit command of God through God's representative - Samuel. Samuel once again tells Saul the consequences of his disobedience: the kingship has been taken away from him.

Another side of Saul's character also comes into view in these chapters - his impetuosity. He makes arbitrary and senseless vows (i.e. none of the men are to eat until they have completed their pursuit of the Philistines). On the other hand, in the midst of these ominous signs of an unbalanced leader, there is the radiant and courageous character of Saul's son Jonathan. Jonathan is brave, powerful and a naturally loved leader. The people of Israel stand behind him, even against his father. Jonathan will be an important personality in the life of David also.

2 larger issues

1) The religion of Israel continues to be a fascinating theme to ponder. The official religion of Israel is that which God gave to Moses in the 10 commandments and developed in ritual and sacrificial form. But this is also combined with a lot of local superstitious and idolatrous practices of the people. People believe in signs. They cast lots (luck of the draw which they interpret as God's will). There is sorcery and divination (as we will see throughout the stories). And there are lots of deities that people convert into wood and stone figurines. As things grow from bad to worse and the people come back to God for help, there is a purging and purifying that goes on. But then, these alternative practices creep back in and continue to be a staple of the religious diet of the people. How true is this eclecticism for us Christians today in our practices and beliefs? Think about it. We don't worship figurines, but we worship other things that interfere and undermine our singular worship and submission to God.

2) Does God ever will the annihilation of life? And is God's will motivated by vengeance and retaliation? The stories in Samuel present us with such views. Can a prophet of God really be inspired to hack into pieces another human being, even though he be a ruthless king of Israel's enemies? The gospels would have a different view on all this

wouldn't they? Jesus: You have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5). This is an alternative voice of God from the supreme human authority, the Christ of God.

Is there a gospel in these stories, then? First, God continues to be invested in the welfare of Israel. Even when they rebel against God's will, even when their religion is mixed up with idolatrous practices, even when they follow their king and fail to give God God's due, God will not abandon them. This is the love of a parent with their child. No matter how badly the failures, no matter how cruelly the rebelliousness and lack of gratitude, the parent will never abandon their child. For only the ongoing, committed love of the parent will help anchor the child as she grows into adulthood. The tragedy is when there is not this stable and consistent parental love in a child's life. Israel is fortunate to have God. Sadly, the relationship will know more strain than celebration over the course of its history.