

# 1 Samuel 10:17-11:13

## Introduction

On Tuesday, last week, King Charles delivered his first King's Speech as part of the State Opening of Parliament.

This time last year, we were wondering what kind of king he would be.

We knew he would *be* King when Queen Elizabeth died. But we didn't know what *kind* of king he would be.

A year on, we have more of an idea.

We've seen him hosting numerous royal receptions, harnessing their 'soft power' as it's called.

He's appeared on the international stage, addressing the German Bundestag, at points in German, as well as hosting the US president and the South African president.

We've seen him maintaining an interest in environmental issues. And we've seen how he's gone about handling the fractured relationships in the royal family.

A recent YouGov poll found that 59% of respondents think that King Charles is doing well. And most commentators seem to agree that he's got off to a good start.

Well, as we come to our Bible reading this morning, the people of Israel are in a similar position to the one we were in this time last year.

They were about to get a new king.

Unlike us, they had no idea who this new king would be.

And they also had no idea what he would be like.

That's what we're going to start to find out as we read through the passage.

And we find, first of all, that he is a divisive king.

That's our first heading: A divisive king.

## A divisive king

In verse 17, Samuel gathers the people at Mizpah. This is a historic moment. Everyone's there. Samuel has brought them together to find out who will be king.

Yet, he doesn't seem to be full of smiles and pleasantries for this special occasion. In fact, he begins by rebuking them.

Verse 18.

**‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: “I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.” But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, “No, appoint a king over us.” So now present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and clans.’**

And that’s what they do.

This procession of tribes and clans establishes that the choice of king isn’t Samuel’s personal choice. This is God’s choice. This will be the man he chooses from all the tribes and clans of Israel. Everyone will get their chance to present themselves before the Lord.

So, they come forward, tribe by tribe and lots are cast.

That might seem a bit like making decisions through potluck. A kind of Lucky Dip approach to selecting a king. But that’s not what’s going on here. The casting of lots reflects confidence in the sovereignty of God.

Proverbs 16, verse 33, says: **The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.**

That’s not how we make decisions today. God has given *us* his word and his indwelling Spirit. We make decisions by searching the scriptures and praying. And that’s sufficient. Of course, it might be easier if we could just throw some dice whenever we need to make decisions. That might sound attractive. ‘Should I buy a new sports car? Odd numbers, yes. Even numbers, no.’ It would certainly be simple! It wouldn’t, however, help us grow in godly character and maturity. And we all know that a roll of the dice turns into ‘the best of three’ and ‘the best of five’, until we get the decision we want.

In former times, however, God allowed his people to cast lots. And he guided them as they did.

So, first the tribe of Benjamin is selected. Then the clan of Matri. And then, finally, Saul the son of Kish is chosen.

There’s just one problem. He can’t be found. Saul is nowhere to be seen. It turns out the people have lost their king already! Saul’s story started with a search for some lost donkeys. Now there’s a search for a lost king.

So, they enquire of the Lord again.

“Is he here?” they ask.

And the Lord tells them that he is here. He’s hiding among the supplies.

It's a ridiculous start to Saul's kingship.

But notice the irony.

The people have rejected God in favour of a human king. But that can't even *find* that king without God's help. They are still wholly dependent on the God they have rejected.

And that reveals the folly of our rejection of God.

By nature, we all reject God. We try to live our lives apart from him. We want him to stay out of the way.

And yet we are all wholly dependent on God for our very lives. He is our Creator. Everything we have comes from him. Even the very next breath you and I breathe is a gift from him. How foolish we are to think that we *can* live without him.

We're meant to see how ironic this whole situation is.

Eventually, Saul is found and brought out. And he's a head taller than anyone else. There's no one else like him. He's just the kind of person the Israelites are looking for. And they gladly proclaim, '**Long live the king!**'

Samuel then explains the rights and duties of kingship, perhaps in line with Deuteronomy 17, that we read last week. And he writes what he says on a scroll, to be preserved for the future. That scroll outlined how kingship was to function going forward. It was part of God's law. And it was given by God not to ruin kingship but to enable it to be lived and exercised properly. That's how God's law works for all of us. He gives us his law, contained in his word, the Bible, not to ruin our lives but to enable us to live them properly. His law frees us to live as he made us to live. Rather than being suspicious of God's commands, we can embrace them gladly, knowing that everything he says – about not lying, not gossiping, not holding grudges, about loving one another and forgiving one another, about sex and marriage and so on – is for our good and blessing, if only we'll listen to him. I imagine that we all need to keep reminding ourselves of that.

So, Samuel explains the law concerning kingship. And then he sends the people home.

Saul goes home with a band of valiant warriors by his side.

But then the chapter ends on a sour note. We're told that there are some among the people who aren't happy with the choice of king.

Verse 27.

**But some scoundrels said, 'How can this fellow save us?' They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent.**

What we need to see here is that, right from the very beginning, God's king suffers rejection and causes division. Some people welcome him gladly. Others despise him. He has a mixed reception. It was that way from the very beginning.

So, it should come as no surprise then, when we find the same to be true of *the* king, Jesus.

Jesus himself said, in Luke 12, verse 51, that he had come to bring not peace but division.

Many people *did* welcome him gladly.

Think of the sinful woman who wet his feet with her tears. And wiped them clean with her hair. (Luke 7:38)

Think of the tax collector, Zacchaeus, who gladly welcomed Jesus to his house. (Luke 19:6)

Think of the crowds who waved palm branches and shouted, '**Blessed is the king of Israel!**' (John 12:12)

Others despised him.

Remember what happened to him in his hometown.

In Luke 4, verse 29, we're told that: **They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.**

Eventually, they nailed him to a cross. That's rejection.

And people still reject him today.

'How can this fellow save us?' we too might say. What has he got to do with my marriage, or my job, or the things I'm so anxious about? How can a Jew executed 2000 years ago and 2000 miles away, have anything to do with my life today?

How can this fellow save us?

That's the question that we take with us into the next chapter.

And in these next verses, Saul's kingship is endorsed.

He is a divisive king. But through the events of the next few verses, he also emerges as a proven king.

That's our second heading: A proven king.

### A proven king

The situation is introduced in verse 1.

**Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, 'Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you.'**

Nahash responds with an ultimatum.

**'I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel.'**

It's gruesome.

Most of the Israelites would have been right-handed. So, when they went out to fight, they would carry their shield in their left hand and look around it with their right eye. Someone who couldn't use their right eye would not therefore be fit for battle.

So, at one level, Nahash is saying that he will accept their surrender as long as he can ensure that they are no longer able to fight. He wants to disarm them.

But actually, he wants to do more than that. He wants to humiliate them and bring disgrace on Israel.

And he's so confident of his superiority over the Israelites that he agrees to wait seven days to give them the opportunity to call for help.

It's almost as though he's enjoying himself watching them squirm. He's supremely confident. And it doesn't look good for the people of Jabesh. They send out messengers. And when those messengers reach Gibeah, the people there just start weeping. Clearly, they don't hold out much hope either.

Meanwhile, Saul has been in the fields with his oxen. And when he returns, he asks what all the fuss is about. Why is everyone crying?

They pass on the message. And Saul's response couldn't be more different.

The Spirit of God comes upon him, and he burns with anger. Then he takes a pair of oxen, cuts them into pieces and sends them throughout Israel in a very visual call to arms. The people come together in a united show of strength and assemble at Bezek. In all, there are three hundred and thirty thousand men of Israel gathered and ready for war. And they send messengers back to Jabesh Gilead telling them that help is on its way. By midday tomorrow, they would be saved.

The people of Jabesh Gilead are elated.

And then they come up with a little ruse of their own. They let the Ammonites think that they're going to surrender. Just wait one more day, they say, and then we'll come out to you.

But in the early hours of the morning, Saul arrives, separates his men into three divisions and smashes into the Ammonite camp. The Ammonites are taken by surprise. And by midday they've been totally destroyed.

Saul has won a crushing victory.

He's being portrayed, here, as a kind of old-style judge of Israel. If anything, a super-judge.

In the *book* of Judges, which comes immediately before Samuel in the Hebrew Bible, the judges were leaders whom God raised up to rescue his people. Each time the Israelites were oppressed by their enemies, and cried out to God, he raised up a judge to rescue them.

Perhaps the most famous of the judges is Samson with his long hair and rippling muscles. And there's a hint of Samson's story here with Saul. In verse 6 we're told that the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him and that he burned with anger. And that's what we're told about Samson in Judges 14. We're told that the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him and that he went down to Ashkelon, burning with anger.

And there are other similarities with the old-style judges.

Saul is described as a saviour or a rescuer, using exactly the same word that was used to describe Othniel and Ehud, two more of the men God raised up as judges.

Saul divides his troops into three divisions. It's exactly what Gideon did when he went out to fight the Midianites.

And we could go on.

All these echoes of the great heroes of the book of Judges, serve to present Saul as a kind of super-judge.

Why's that important?

Well, the Israelites had asked for a king like all the nations around them to lead them into battle. But he's not a king like all the other nations have. He's like an old-style judge, who rules God's people under God's rule and in God's power.

This is the man God has raised up to lead and rescue his people. And the proof of that was his victory over the Ammonites.

All doubts have now been answered.

So, in verse 12, we're told: **The people then said to Samuel, 'Who was it that asked, "Shall Saul reign over us?" Turn these men over to us so that we may put them to death'**

But then in verse 13, Saul responds with grace. **But Saul said, 'No one will be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel.'**

And that answers the question of the doubters.

How can this fellow save us?

It's because the power of God was working in him and through him to save his people.

And the resurrection of Jesus answers that same question for us.

How can this fellow, Jesus, save us?

It's because the power of God is working in him and through him to save his people.

His resurrection declares his victory over the grave.

He has saved us from our greatest enemy, from sin and death.

He has opened the way to eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

And if we can trust him to bring us safely through the grave, then we can trust him to bring us safely through every trouble that we might face.

We can trust him to bring us through the pain and heartbreak of a troubled marriage, or a bereavement, or of rejection and humiliation at work.

We can trust him to bring us safely through all the things we most fear and which cause us stress and anxiety.

We can trust him to bring us safely through all that we might face in this world, until we are safely home with him in heaven.

Once again, this story of Saul is pointing us to Jesus, our one true king, who we can trust to lead and care for us in every area of life.

Saul's kingship got off to a good start. As we'll see, it doesn't carry on that way.

But we can thank God that with Jesus as King, we are in safe hands.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for Jesus, our King and Saviour. Though he is still a divisive king today, we thank you that his kingship has been proven through his death and resurrection. Please help us to trust in his work of salvation and to live in wholehearted devotion to him. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.