

1 Samuel 9:1-10:16

Introduction

If you're thinking about applying for a job, one of the first things you ask for is a role description.

All job adverts tell you who to contact if you want to be sent one.

The role description tells you what the job involves and what will be expected of you, should you be successful in applying for the post.

Two weeks ago, we read chapter 8 of 1 Samuel, in which the people of Israel asked Samuel to give them a king.

Kingship wasn't described positively, in that chapter. But nonetheless, the idea of kingship has been coming for some time.

In the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, God promised that kings would come from Abraham and Sarah. In his final words to his sons, Jacob indicated that kings would arise from the tribe of Judah. And the book of Deuteronomy contains the role description for the kind of kingship that God had in mind.

It's worth reading that in full before we get into this story of Saul.

It's on the screen. Let me read it for you. Moses is speaking. The Israelites are just about to enter the promised land. And he is reminding them how they are to live in the land, in accordance with God's law. He says this (Deuteronomy 17:14-20):

¹⁴ When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,' ¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. ¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.' ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

¹⁸ When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees ²⁰ and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites

and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

That's the role description. The king was to follow carefully the words of God's law and to extend God's rule to God's people. And now, as we come to 1 Samuel chapter 9, it's about to happen. The king that Israel had asked for is about to be anointed.

It doesn't quite happen as we might have expected, though. It begins with a farmer called Kish and a rather mundane search for his lost donkeys.

A search for lost donkeys

That's the background against which we're introduced to Kish's son, Saul.

We're told in verse 2 that Saul was **as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else.**

Forget Clark Gable or George Clooney or Brad Pitt or whichever heartthrob you might think of. Saul's better looking than all of them. He's tall, dark, and handsome. A fine specimen of a man.

And he's a dutiful son.

When his dad sends him out to find the missing donkeys, he goes, taking a servant with him.

They look high and low, gradually getting further and further from home. But all to no avail.

And Saul is thoughtful. Eventually, he realises they have been away so long that his father will have started worrying about *them* rather than the donkeys. So, he suggests giving up and heading home.

But then his servant suggests a slightly different approach. They happen to be close to a town where there's a man of God. And the servant suggests that they seek him out. Perhaps he can tell them where to look.

So, they head off, careful not to go empty-handed but with a shekel of silver to give him.

As they approach the town, some young women tell them that their timing couldn't have been better. The prophet, or the 'seer' as they call him, had just come to town that very day. There was a special event happening. A feast. And he had come to get it started.

So, they hurry onwards. And as they enter the town, Samuel just happens to be coming towards them.

Then the narrator lets us into some vital information.

Look at 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 ruler over my people Israel; he will deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me.’

Then in the next verse we’re told that... **When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, ‘This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.’**

That’s vital information.

This rather mundane search for some lost donkeys now takes on a completely different complexion.

Now, we realise that God has been at work all along. Through this long, fruitless search for the lost donkeys, he has brought Saul to the precise place he wants him to be. He has brought him to Samuel, exactly as he said he would. Saul’s arrival hasn’t been by chance. What had seemed like a mundane, ordinary affair has been orchestrated by God from the start. Once again, we can see God’s sovereign hand at work, even in the ordinary details of life.

And God has told Samuel what he’s to do. He’s to anoint Saul as ruler over Israel. The word ‘anoint’ lies behind the Hebrew word ‘Messiah’ and the Greek word ‘Christ’. God is raising up an Anointed One... a Messiah... a Christ... who will rescue his people from the Philistines.

And notice what God’s motive has been. **‘I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me.’**

It’s compassion.

God has seen his people’s idolatry in their cry for a king. But he has also seen their distress at the hands of the Philistines and heard their cry for help. He cares about them. And he’s working for their salvation. He’s raising up a deliverer.

As we look back at chapter 8, we mustn’t downplay the magnitude of Israel’s sin in rejecting God as their king. They really had messed up. Their sin was great. But the wonderful truth here is that God’s compassion is greater still. His compassion cannot be exhausted, even by the sin and stupidity of his people.

He is a gracious God.

And he is *our* God.

There’s great encouragement for us here. He loves his people, even when we keep messing up. He cares about us. His compassion cannot be exhausted.

We need to let stories like this one warm our hearts towards him.

So then, Saul arrives in town and asks Samuel if he can point him in the direction of the seer's house. Samuel identifies himself as the seer. And the search for the lost donkeys comes to an end. Samuel tells Saul that he can stop worrying about them because they've been found. All is well with the donkeys.

What follows is the anointing of a king.

The anointing of a king

And it's all a bit bizarre, isn't it!

Samuel tells Saul to come and eat with him at the banquet. And then he says something odd to him at the end of verse 20: **'And to whom is all the desire of Israel turned, if not to you and your whole family line?'**

The desire of Israel is the desire that's just been expressed in chapter 8. It's the desire for a king. Samuel's telling Saul that it's him. He's to be that king.

And Saul objects.

Verse 21.

Saul answered, 'But am I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?'

He's not the obvious choice! A seemingly insignificant man. Saul's effectively saying, 'Why me? I'm a Nobody?'

Yet, throughout the Bible we see that God delights to work through the weak and insignificant things of this world.

So, Samuel brings Saul into the feast, where he discovers that he's the guest of honour. He's seated at the head of the table and is served a special piece of meat as the meal begins.

Afterwards, Saul and Samuel have a private conversation on the roof of Samuel's house. And the next day, Samuel asks Saul to send his servant on ahead so that he can deliver a message from God in secret.

And we're told in chapter 10: **Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, 'Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?'**

Saul had thought he was just going on a search for some lost donkeys! His head must have been spinning. Imagine you had gone looking for your lost dog and bumped into a slightly eccentric old man, who treated you like royalty and told you that you were to be the next King or Queen of England. What would you think?

It's all a bit much to take in.

So, Samuel promises Saul three signs to prove that God is with him.

First, he will meet two men, who will confirm that the donkeys have been found. All is well.

Then, he'll meet three more men who will give him some food... which is good news because we were told in verse 7 that his own food had run out and he's still got a long journey home.

Then, he'll meet a group of prophets, the Spirit of the Lord will come upon him, and he'll start prophesying with them.

And we're told in verse 9 that, **As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day.**

Saul's doubts are answered. And the change in him is obvious to everyone.

Verse 11.

When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, 'What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?'

A man who lived there answered, 'And who is their father?' So it became a saying: 'Is Saul among the prophets?'

This whole thing has completely baffled everyone. Has Saul now been adopted by Samuel? Has God claimed him? They don't know what to make of it.

But we need to notice the change that's taken place in Saul.

At the start of the story, he's an obedient son following the instructions of his father. By the end of the story, he's an anointed ruler, who must live under the direction of God. He's a different person now. He's to live under the authority of God's word, which comes to him through the prophet Samuel.

And that explains the careful language that's been used in this passage.

In chapter 9, verse 16, God had told Samuel to anoint him **'ruler over my people Israel'**. Notice that he's very deliberately described as a ruler, not as a king.

It's the same in the first verse of chapter 10. **Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, 'Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?'**

Ruler not king.

Saul *is* to be king. But in these verses, he's not given that title.

The only time kingship gets mentioned is in verse 16, at the very end of the passage.

And that's because Saul's rule over the people is a delegated rule.

Israel had asked for a king like all the other nations. But God hasn't given them quite what they asked for.

They do have a ruler who will rescue them from their enemies. But he's not a free agent. His kingship is under the authority of God. God is Israel's king. The fact that they don't recognise him as such makes no difference: God is their king. They are his people. And Saul is to be a ruler *under* God's rule not in competition with it.

His kingship is to be like that described in Deuteronomy 17, that we read earlier.

Yet these verses may also contain hints of Saul's coming failure.

In verse 5 of chapter 10, Samuel had sent Saul to Gibeah, with the added note that it was a Philistine outpost. In verse 7, he was told that after the Spirit had come upon him, he was to do whatever his hands found for him to do. That's a way of saying, 'Get down to work'. The implication seems to be that he was to get on with the work of delivering God's people by striking against the Philistine outpost.

Yet he doesn't do that. All we're told is that he goes home. Why is that?

Well, I don't want to push this point too hard, but it may well be an early indication of his coming failure.

Certainly, as we read on, his failure as king will become all too apparent.

And that failure will continue down through the history of all Israel's kings.

None of them are up to the job description. Even Israel's greatest king, David, has his failings.

As we set out on the story of Israel's monarchy, it sends us on a search of our own, for a true king for God's people, who's story won't be characterised by failure.

And that search won't end until it leads us, eventually, to Jesus.

He's the king we're waiting for.

He too was sent by God, in his love and compassion, to deliver undeserving people.

He is the Anointed One, who was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism and empowered for the work he was given to do.

He lived a life of perfect submission to the authority of his heavenly Father, in complete obedience to his word.

And the outcome of his life of perfect obedience was the greatest work of deliverance this world has ever known. Not from Philistines. He has rescued us from our greatest enemy, from sin and death, and opened the way to eternal life in heaven.

He is the true Christ, or Messiah, who perfectly extends God's loving and compassionate rule to his people. This story of Saul is pointing us to him. As we read it, we should marvel at the way in which God was laying the groundwork for the coming of Son. We should be filled with thankfulness that his true King has now come, and that we can know him today. And it should strengthen our resolve to live each day in obedient submission to his rule, as members of his eternal kingdom.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for sending your Son, to be our King and Saviour. Thank you for his perfect life, lived in perfect obedience to you. Thank you for his great work of salvation at the cross. Please help us to love and trust him more each day. And to submit our lives increasingly to his loving rule. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.