

THE RULER, THE SERPENT, & THE MESSIAH

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1 Samuel 9:1-11:15

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P.C. Edwards

## Introduction

Think of some of the all-time greatest twists in movie history. Spoilers ahead, but you might say *Fight Club* where we find out at the end that the film's protagonist is actually the narrator of the movie. Or *The Prestige* when we find out Christian Bale's character was actually a twin. How about the original *Planet of the Apes* where we discover the futuristic planet of talking apes is actually a post-nuclear earth all along. To me, though, it has to be *The Sixth Sense* where, again spoiler alert, we find out that Bruce Willis has actually been dead the whole movie.

*The Sixth Sense* really brought filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan to fame, notably for big twists and turns in his films. So much so that by his third or fourth film you were going to his movies just to see what the big twist would be, and, unfortunately, I don't think anything quite lived up to what Shyamalan pulled off in *The Sixth Sense*. Nevertheless, there are still a number of his films that were fun and enjoyable. I like *Signs*, even though it's got its critics. You see, the big twist there is essentially everything happens for a reason. Against the backdrop of an alien invasion, we watch this one family who has been struck by tragedy, going through all these random, seemingly unconnected events. There are all sorts of little things throughout the movie that just leave you wondering what's going on or why. But then at the very end we see how all these things were connected, that indeed nothing is random and everything happens for a reason.

It's a message not unique to just the film, but rooted in the teachings of the Bible. The Bible teaches that as Creator and King over all, God is sovereign over all things. The doctrine of providence shows us that God is not uninvolved or aloof in regards to His world, but superintends to bring about His perfect purposes for all things. Not that we're just robots or God is some cosmic puppeteer, but, as Paul wrote, "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," (Romans 8:28).

You see, that's the other aspect we don't want to miss. God's sovereignty and His providential works are also connected to His good character, a character of love and grace. The God of the Bible is not a petty god or spiteful one. He not given to emotional whims like we are. He doesn't hold grudges or use His power to "get back" at humanity when they are disobedient. God's arrangement and direction of the world is not dependent upon us ... which should be of great relief! Because He is good, we know that He has a good purpose for the world. Because He is sovereign we know He is able to bring those good purposes about. And because He is gracious we know that He is quick to forgive and to still bless and love us even when we don't deserve it.

I bring this up because last week we watched Israel reject Yahweh as their king. Even when warned of how human kingship would not bring them the blessing and security they sought, they still declared their preference to be like the other nations rather than a unique people directly under the lordship of God. So God gave the people what they wanted, sending Samuel to identify and anoint Israel's first king. But whereas Samuel warned the people in chapter 8 that human kingship would be a source of God's judgment upon them (in other words that God would allow them to experience the negative effects of kingship), we see this morning in chapters nine through eleven, that God would also use kingship to bless His people, nevertheless.<sup>1</sup>

And so, this morning, we trace God's faithfulness to His covenant with Israel, to provide for them and protect them. We see how He does this by raising up Saul as king of Israel. However, we also see how Saul was not the king Israel ultimately needed, in fact, how no human king would ever be enough. Thus, we see this morning that **In His unfailing love God continually**

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<sup>1</sup> Evans writes, "In contrast to Samuel's statement that kingship in Israel will be a reason that God will *not* answer them (8:18), here the kingship *is* God's answer to Israel's afflictions," (Paul S. Evans, *1-2 Samuel*, SGBC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018], 117).

cares for His people's welfare, ultimately doing so in sending a perfect King to represent them before Him.

**1. Despite the sin of His people God shows immeasurable mercy and grace. 9:1-10:16**

The pace of our story dramatically slows here. Verse 1 of chapter 9 truly feels like the beginning of a whole new story that, again, feels random and unconnected to anything else that we've read thus far. We meet this man, Saul, and there is something noble and right that we feel about him. Here's a man, likely in his 40s, who is still obedient to his father and is a good and faithful son. Moreover, the first time we see him in action is in looking for donkeys. You see, in ancient Hebrew society donkeys were the beasts of kings, suggesting that in searching for donkeys Saul is providentially led to Samuel where he becomes king.<sup>2</sup>

Right, as we watch the search for the donkeys unfold Saul and his servant arrive at a well where they find young women drawing water. This would have been another symbol or scene familiar to the Hebrew reader. You see, early in Israel's history we have quite a pattern of young men meeting women at a well: Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24:10-61), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29:1-10), Moses and Zipporah (Exod. 2:16-21). In each of these cases the patriarchs of Israel meet their wives at a well with a wedding soon following. And so, by recording this scene in this way we're invited to imagine that a wedding is soon to follow. Right, it's like, 'Wait, I've seen this story before!' But that's not what happens. And there are a couple of different ways we could look at this.

First, perhaps instead of becoming married to a woman, we could think of this scene as Saul becoming wed to Israel as a nation through this cute-meet. But, spoiler alert, Saul will be an unfit husband for Israel. He will not be the bridegroom and king she needs. You see, second, we

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<sup>2</sup> Leithart, *A Son to Me*, 77.

could also look at this scene as the opposite of its predecessors. The fact that a sacrificial service follows and not a wedding service indicates that Saul will not be a lasting king for Israel. These are little tidbits that may seem boring or insignificant, but they are the ways the author is telling us that not all is going to permanently work out.

This becomes especially clear the next day after Saul's feast with Samuel. In chapter 10 we read, "Samuel took the flask of oil, poured it out on Saul's head, kissed him, and said, 'Hasn't the Lord anointed you ruler over his inheritance?'" (1 Samuel 10:1), and note that word "Ruler." The Hebrew word is נָגִיד (*nagid*) – ruler, governor, commander. And so, look at this: Saul is anointed to leadership and he will rule in Israel; He is Israel's first king. But He is not God's lasting king. Saul is a ruler, a *nagid*, not a מֶלֶךְ (*melek*) – king. You see, Saul is an immediate answer to the desires of Israel, but not a permanent one.

And this is reinforced by his journey to Rachel's Grave at Zelzah. Rachel, you recall from the book of Genesis, was the mother of Benjamin, the tribe to which Saul belonged. But in Genesis 49 we know that Israel's true king would come from the tribe of Judah, so, again, Saul is clearly not the permanent solution. My reason for point all this stuff out is so that we'd see that despite how promising this entire episode is we're warned that things won't turn out in the way that we expect.

So, what do we take away from the first half of our passage?

1. *God provides a king for the blessing of Israel* – despite the seeming randomness of the passage and its lackadaisical narrative, God brings His precise purpose about
2. *Israel's king is to listen to God (via the prophet)* – Samuel and Saul are initially portrayed in a father-son relationship that reflected how kings were to look to prophets as fathers; kings were to listen to the voice of Father Yahweh by heeding the guidance of the father-prophet
3. *God is ordaining our affairs and we should lean entirely on Him* – your life seems random and lackadaisical where God may not seem intimately involved. Don't check

out on worshiping and obeying Him just because you don't see what is doing right now

4. *We must trust and obey God, even when we disagree or don't feel like it* – Samuel was angry and frustrated with Israel's request for a king. But God calls him to anoint a king anyway and he obeys

## 2. **God ultimately requires complete obedience from His king and the people** **10:17-11:15**

Alright, so having anointed Saul as king Samuel assembles Israel at Mizpah, the site of Israel's great victory over Philistia at the beginning of Samuel's reign as judge, back in chapter 7. He's come to establish Saul as king, but note how he begins,

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "I brought Israel out of Egypt, and I rescued you from the power of the Egyptians and all the kingdoms that were oppressing you." But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your troubles and afflictions. You said to him, "You must set a king over us." Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and clans, (1 Samuel 10:18-19).

Samuel begins with a reinforcement of the warning of a king and how this request for a king is actually an abandonment and rejection of Yahweh. In other words, this is Samuel's last plea with Israel to repent. 'Listen, a king like those of the nations won't bring you the security that you think you need. He won't make you any wealthier or safe. But the Lord your God can and wants to do all of that for you! Seek Him, please!'

But Israel insists on their own ways, just like we insist on our own ways. And it's not that we openly reject God. I think it's that we convince ourselves that we can have our cake and eat it too. We don't see our quest for earthly "kings" as disobedience or not trusting God. We justify these things. Like we discussed last time, we rarely have the humility and self-awareness to examine our motivations and desires, naïve to just how self-idolatrous we really are. In Israel's mind having Yahweh is great, but a little more is needed just in case. In our minds having Yahweh is great, but a little more is still needed.

Saul is, thus, chosen by lot to be king of Israel. But he can't be found! And the search for him invokes the same verb, **שָׁקַח** (*baqash*), in verse 21 that was used to describe Saul's search for the donkeys back in chapter 9, and here's why that's important. You remember that donkeys were a sign of royalty and that Saul's search for them was setting us up to see Saul as the eventual king. Well now Israel is searching for a king and yet cannot find him. It's a subtle irony, on the part of the author, to show that **In Israel's demand for a king that they do not find the King they were looking for.**

This is made all the more apparent to us the reader in verse 25 when **"Samuel proclaimed to the people the rights of kingship. He wrote them on a scroll, which he placed *in the presence of the Lord,*" (1 Samuel 10:25, *italics mine*).** You see, while these rights are not detailed for us here, what they would have entailed were the duties of a king before Yahweh. In other words, in contrast to the ways that Samuel warned an earthly king would exploit his position for his own gain, the rights of the king in the presence of the Lord was a description of how the kingship *should* function in Israel. *This* is Yahweh's design and rule for kings, or as Abernathy and Goswell describe them, these are **"The jagged edges of human kingship in order to clarify Yahweh's desires for the monarchy," (Andrew T. Abernathy & Gregory Goswell).<sup>3</sup>**

This is significant for many reasons. For one, these rights outline God's expectation for Israel's earthly kings. In other words, these words would govern the men who would preside as king over Israel. God's king was to **"act in unison with God's expectations, living under the rule of God's himself as he leads the nation," (Andrew T. Abernathy & Gregory Goswell).<sup>4</sup>** These

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew T. Abernathy & Gregory Goswell, *God's Messiah in the Old Testament: Expectations of a Coming King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

rights make clear to Saul what Yahweh expects of him and, thus, the judgment he will face if he neglects his duties.

You see, what God requires is complete obedience from His king and His people. But it's vital, dear friends, that we see this requirement of obedience within the context of God's kingship in our lives. Right? Throughout this whole series, including here this morning, we've been talking about the "kings" we seek in our own lives, those things that give us a sense of safety and fulfillment. And we've been searching our lives for what those false kings may be in contrast to the true kingship of Yahweh. That God is King means He is our security, He is our prosperity, He is all we need.

So, when we are called, then, to obey to God, what we need to see then is that obedience is *not* just rote compliance with the demands of some distant, mean God. No, **Obedience means living in light of the perfect design God has for our flourishing.** You following me? In obedience to God there is actual freedom and flourishing. I know it almost seems illogical or counter-intuitive, but following God in obedience, surrendering my desires and ambitions to Him, prioritizing His Word and commands each day rather than my own, this is what actually brings joy and life and prosperity. (Think about tangible examples: using my money, time). The message is clear: True freedom and true joy is found only in surrender and obedience to God.

Of course, complete obedience is impossible. Every day we come up short in devoting everything to God. I come up short every day. Because of sin there is no way that any of us can perfectly fulfill God's law. As much as we may even want to, we are incapable of taking a heart that is dead in sin, blind to light, consumed and indulged by only self and giving that heart to God. Saul will fail because he's a sinner. David will fail because he's a sinner. You and I fail

because we are sinners. The rights of kingship remind us that we are helpless on our own and need someone to stand in our place.

You see, second, these rights outline what God's anointed king, or, more properly speaking, His Messiah, must be. It's an outline of the holiness and justice that Israel's king must embody. As Rolf Knierim explains, "As Yahweh's Messiah he stood under the commandment of absolute obedience. The messiah, even more than a prophet, must be perfect, if his work is to succeed and if he is to represent Yahweh exclusively," (Rolf P. Knierim).<sup>5</sup>

You see here in 1 Samuel 10, as the foundations of the doctrine of Messiah are laid out, we must see clearly God's intentions to always send His own Son, to be the perfect Son, true Israel, on behalf of the people.<sup>6</sup> The Messiah would represent the people before God and would represent God before the people. My point is that just as the text this morning is pointing us beyond Saul to David, the text is pointing us beyond David, beyond any earthly king, pointing us ultimately to Jesus, how Jesus fulfills God's requirements on our behalf. In other words, often when we talk about Christ and our salvation we speak in terms of Jesus' death for our sin. He bore the penalty that I deserved. And praise God, that's true! But that's just one side of the coin. He also perfectly lived out these rights of kingship and He did so on behalf of the people of God. Jesus was the perfect Son, the true and better Israel, the last Adam. Yes, He died the death that I deserved, but He also lived the life I could have never lived.

And how we see that play out in chapter 11. Get this, we read of an Ammonite king who comes to attack an Israelite city. It's clear that he is a ferocious military leader and his forces

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<sup>5</sup> Rolf P. Knierim, "The Messianic Concept in the First Book of Samuel," in *Jesus and the Historian: Written in Honor of Ernest Cadman Colwell*, ed. F. Thomas Trotter (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 38.

<sup>6</sup> What this means, in part, is that as we think throughout the Old Testament of the expectations for the Messiah we must be clear to define messiah as God's defines it, and, moreover, to see how no earthly king would ever be able to fulfill the role. We know, especially from the gospels, how there was great misunderstanding concerning the messiah in Jesus' day, which is why most did not recognize Him as such.

significantly outweigh those in Jabesh-gilead by the fact that the people immediately try to make peace. But mere surrender isn't enough for this foreign king; he wants to shame the people. He says, "I'll make one with you on this condition: that I gouge out everyone's right eye and humiliate all Israel," (1 Samuel 11:2). And so, the city calls for help; they call for salvation as their death and shame seem sure.

But before we go further don't miss this little awesome nugget. The name of the Ammonite? Nahash, which literally means 'Serpent.' The serpent comes to bring death and shame against the people; they are helpless and cry out for a savior. (Is this story starting to sound familiar?) Verse 6, "When Saul heard these words, the Spirit of God suddenly came powerfully on him, and his anger burned furiously," (1 Samuel 11:6). Saul draws 330,000 soldiers together to march to Jabesh and slaughter the Ammonites.<sup>7</sup>

And so, yes, here we see the tall and handsome military leader, Saul, leap into action and unite Israel against her enemies, but it's the Spirit of God who comes powerfully to the aid of the people. Dale Ralph David writes, "Salvation came not because Israel had a king but because the king had Yahweh's Spirit; it is not the institution of kingship but the power of the Spirit that brings deliverance," (Dale Ralph Davis).<sup>8</sup> As Jesus said to His disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me," (John 15:5).

## Conclusion

We'll see this play out in Saul's life. The moment he abandons God and begins to abide in his own wisdom is the moment his reign as king begins to come to an end. Right, we don't

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<sup>7</sup> Of note, the number 330,000 and then dividing the troops into 3 for a sneak attack reminds us of Gideon (Judges 6:15-23).

<sup>8</sup> Davis, *1 Samuel*, 119.

want to miss the primary meaning of the text this morning. It's important we see Saul in this favorable light, this obedient son, this humble man who initially resists power, who refuses to enact revenge, who gives credit to God for the victory. It's important we see this promising start to his career and the potential he had to lead Israel in the worship and obedience of God. But we've also seen numerous clues and hints that all won't stay so good, that Saul will abandon God and so will Israel.

But neither can we miss the bigger point this passage makes about the course of history and God's sovereign plans for it. Yes, Israel's ruler, their *nagid*, defeats the serpent at Jabesh. But Saul is just a *nagid*, not a king. There is a true and greater One, a messiah, a Christ, a King, who will defeat not just His people's earthly enemies, but will crush the head of the ultimate serpent. What was promised in Genesis 3 was accomplished on Calvary. True salvation from death and shame has been accomplished. And so, as you examine your hearts this morning, who is the King you're searching for? Is it one of your own imagination? Is it one sold to you by social media or the people around you? Or is it for a King who lived the life you never could live and died the death you deserved to die?