

1 Samuel 9:1-25 - Be Careful What You Ask For

We come again to the issue of leadership in our stay through 1 Samuel. Last week looked at the red flags of those who want a leader. We saw in the people of Israel some dangers to avoid. This morning we turn from looking at dangers in the people to dangers in the potential leader. So I want to examine Saul here and see what dangers maybe we can avoid.

One of the tricky parts about OT history is that we're not always told exactly why we are being told the information we're being told. And because we are about 3,000 years removed from the events and because we are not always as familiar with the OT as we could be sometimes the stories seems a little arbitrary.

Why do we need to learn so much about lost donkeys? Why do we need to know the specifics of the feast? Why spend a whole chapter on this stuff? And just at a cursory reading I think we might shrug our shoulders and say "well, that was nice." But I think God is trying to communicate more than that. I think this is a lesson on leadership and God's sovereignty.

If we connect what we've seen so far, Israel has asked for a king like all the other nations. They want to be like the pagans. And chapter 9 is that God gives them exactly that. God gives Israel a pagan king.

A lot of times a pagan ruler - an ungodly leader - isn't obviously ungodly. They don't go around beating their wife, abusing their children, doing drugs while running an underground dogfighting operation.

A lot of times it's very subtle. They appear good. They appear qualified in some sense. They appear godly. But if we dig just a little deeper we realize that there's a massive chasm between them and the Lord.

That's what I think we see here. A quick snapshot of Saul might not raise any big red flags with us, but as we look how he is described I think we'll be a little surprised.

At the same time what we see throughout this chapter is God. God who is sovereignly giving Israel exactly what they asked for. He is giving them their sinful hearts' desire. But at the same time, he still loves his people. He has not abandoned them. And never will.

So whereas last week we saw some of the red flags in people who want a leader. They put off finding a leader, they want someone who looks like the world, they ignore all the warnings, so on. This week I want to look at red flags in the leader himself.

So let's take a look at the red flags in Saul's life and then we'll look at the grace of God in this whole situation.

1 - The first impression is not spiritual, it's material.

We are told 3 things about Saul in the opening few verses. Saul is wealthy, handsome, and tall. He is a man to be reckoned with physically. If there were an ancient GQ magazine or Forbes magazine, Saul would be on the cover. He is the very model of worldly success.

Now, to be fair, there's nothing about that description that is inherently ungodly. It's okay to be attractive and have money. I've even heard it's okay to be tall. These descriptions are not disqualifying in themselves.

The problem is that these things seem to be the **best** things Saul has going for him. And that's the red flag. Imagine someone applying for a ministry position - or even a government position - and on the summary part at the top of the resume their chief qualifications were tall, rich, and handsome? We'd laugh at that, wouldn't we? Why? Because that has nothing to do with the position. But it has everything to do with what the people wanted. He is the spitting image of worldly leadership.

What's interesting is that it seems that Saul's family also has some kind of prominence. We're given a genealogy that goes back quite a few generations. We don't know who all these people are, but usually a genealogy like this would establish a pedigree, and I think to the original readers they would have caught on to these references. And at the end of **Vs. 1** the ESV says he was a man of wealth. The NIV says man of standing;

the NSAB says mighty man of valor/influence. What that term is getting to is that he was from the ruling class in Benjamin. He was part of the aristocracy which would have had influence and money. He was connected politically. Which is why his false modesty later on that his clan is the least in Benjamin laughable.

People are often deceived by good looks and money. People often overlook major flaws because someone is good looking and has wealth. This is true in government, in ministry, true in dating, true in applicants for any job. I've heard pastors over the years talk about some potential applicant for ministry or some young guy they are raising up for ministry and they say something to the effect of "good looking guy, beautiful family, lovely wife...so on." And I just think: this is not going to go well.

Again, I want to be clear that these traits all by themselves are not bad. But they are if this is the basis for someone's qualification for leadership.

2 - A persons' background is important.

Saul is from Benjamin. We know that. But there's something specific about Saul that I think is worth pointing out. **Chapter 10:26** says that Saul went to his home in Gibeah. I think that's at least somewhat important. Gibeah - a town in Benjamin. And I know you're floored by that connection.

What if I told you Saul was from Sodom or Gomorrah? Would that give you any reason for concern? It probably should. Gibeah was the equivalent of Sodom and Gomorrah in Israel. In fact, what happened at Gibeah was worse than what we have recorded in Genesis about Sodom and Gomorrah.

I won't look to the graphic things, but look back in **Judges 20** for a minute. The events that mirror Sodom and Gomorrah in the city of Gibeah are in **Judges 19**. And the wickedness of the tribe of Benjamin was so bad that the entire tribe of Benjamin defends the wicked city of Gibeah against the desire of the rest of Israel to destroy that city. This would be like Las Vegas becoming so bad that the rest of the US wanted to destroy it, but everyone in Nevada coming to their defense. What ensues in Judges 20 is a civil war over this city. Read 12-18.

What ensues is 3 battles. Benjamin actually defeats Israel twice. Judah loses 22,000 men in the first battle. Benjamin also wins the second battle, killing 18,000 men. It isn't until the third battle that the Lord gives victory to the other tribes and Benjamin is utterly routed. **Read 12-17, 35-36, 21:1-4**

So Benjamin is routed. They only had 26,000 men to begin with. 25,100 are killed and the rest flee. These men who are soldiers are considered the men who are of marrying age, childbearing age. Because of this civil war, Benjamin is on the verge of extinction. It seems that they have only 600 men of marrying/child-bearing age. That's not a lot for a society to continue. Added to that, the other tribes have so much hatred for Benjamin they refuse to let their daughters intermarry with them to keep the tribe going.

Eventually the way the tribe goes on is that the men of Benjamin go and kidnap young ladies from another tribe and marry them while the rest of Israel just sort of turns a blind eye to the situation. This is how depraved Israel was by the time we get to Samuel. And center of all of that depravity was Gibeah - Saul's hometown. And not only was this Saul's hometown, but **1 Chronicles 9** tells us that Saul's family was related to the founders of Gibeah.

And this was only a generation or two before where we're at in 1 Samuel. Saul's father or grandfather was likely one of the 600 survivors from this battle. Saul had probably heard stories and was related to people who took part in all of this nonsense. That might be good to know.

Now, just because someone is around a very difficult situation doesn't necessarily disqualify them from anything. But it's at least worth noting that they might have some baggage.

I was out this last week and overheard an interview at a coffee shop. An older man was interviewing a younger man for a ministry position. And the young man was recounting some very severe abuse that he endured as a child. He seemed to be fairly well-grounded now, but part of this older man's task was to make sure that this

young man is able to lead given where he came from and what he endured. There might still be a lot of stuff he needs to work through.

Just to bring this all back around: Saul's background - any potential leaders' background - is important to their ability to lead people. Where they come from, how they've dealt with that, what baggage they might have is critical to know.

Let's look back at 1 Sam. 9.

3 - A person's faithfulness in small things is important.

In **Vss. 3-10** we have this part of the story that's kind of an unusual driver in the story. It's Saul looking for lost donkeys. What a weird thing. But I don't think it's incidental to the whole story. I think there's a bigger connection being made.

Now, we don't know if Saul is responsible for **losing** these donkeys or if it was an accident that they got away. It's interesting that his father sends him to go get them rather than a lowly stablehand or a shepherd. We don't know how many donkeys are lost.

And this part of the story might not seem so significant, unless you contrast with David. What was David's occupation? He was a shepherd. And here's the key - and this seems foreign to us - but: David was faithful with the animals he was entrusted with. He watched over them. If for any reason they did go missing, he went got them back. **Look at 17:31-37.**

This is where David is making the case to Saul - of all people - that he is qualified to go kill Goliath. He's not scared at all. Look at David's resume. **Read 31-37**

You ever been in hand to hand combat with a lion? Or a bear? David was a kid. Maybe early to mid teens. This didn't scare him. Here's the contrast that's being made: David is faithful with the sheep he's entrusted with. Remember when Samuel comes to anoint the next king of Israel and he goes through all of David's brothers and God's saying "None of these are the king." Samuel asks if there are any other brothers. Where's David? He's with the sheep. He is a faithful shepherd.

In contrast Saul never does find the donkeys. Actually he gives up on them. Someone else found them.

And it seems silly until we think of Jesus' statement that he who is faithful with little is what? Faithful with much. David's resume to be king is that he is faithful with sheep. He is faithful with the most menial task, delegated to the lowest person in the house. Saul gives up on his task.

You know what the leaders in Israel were called all throughout the OT? Shepherds. You know what the leaders in the NT church are called? Shepherds. That's what the word pastor means - it means a shepherd. The greek is ποιμήν - sheep herder.

In God's estimation - which is the only one that matters - how a man would tend sheep is infinitely more telling of whether or not he would be a good leader than his education, his business skills, his political connections, or his income. How does he care for animals. Kids, seriously listen up: How you treat your dog - or the lowest of tasks that your parents give you is a good indication of what kind of leader you might be later in life. Young men, young ladies, moms, dads, all of us: how we treat the most menial tasks is often what qualifies us or disqualifies us for service.

And the only time we see Saul with animals - entrusted with something little - he's failing. He gives up, makes excuses, takes the easy way out.

I think the connection is clear: if someone is not able to be faithful with something small, there's no way they will be faithful with something bigger. I've heard people in leadership say "Well, So and So isn't doing a good job here, so let's give them more responsibility over there." That's a disaster.

By the way, because I'll touch on this in a minute: Who does David credit for the victory over the lion and bear? The Lord. David, even as he was a lowly shepherd recognized God's hand in all that he did.

Look back at chapter 9.

4 - Saul shows no leadership. Read 5-6

I won't take a lot of time on this point except to point out that it wasn't Saul who sought the man of God, Samuel. We'll learn in a little bit that Saul has no idea who Samuel even is. But it is Saul's servant who not only presses to keep looking for the donkeys, but suggests consulting with the man of God because everything he says comes true. The servant is optimistic, and mindful of the mission they are on.

In contrast to Saul who never met a problem he didn't want to run away from and make excuses for. Saul can't find the sheep: "Let's go home." "Let's go ask the man of God." "How are we going to pay for his services." "I've got some money."

Saul is all about the problems, the servant is all about solutions. We'll see that the rest of Saul's life. There's no problem that won't discourage him from doing the right thing. There is no problem that he won't blame for disobedience. There's no mole hill that isn't photoshopped to look like Mt Everest.

Again, compare that to David. Kill Goliath? I've killed all kinds of beasts, he's no different. He had to kill 100 Philistines to marry the king's daughter? He killed 200. David never took the easy way out. He could have killed Saul twice and no one would have blamed him. But he waited on the Lord's timing.

We should never put someone in leadership - in any capacity - who has forfeited leadership at every opportunity.

5 - Saul is spiritually shallow.

And that's being generous. You would think that the person who would be charged with leading the people of God would have some sort of spiritual compass. But that wasn't the case. There really isn't anything at all in this section that gives us the impression that Saul had any sort of spiritual life. That he had any idea of who God was or that there was anything of true worship about him.

Common sense. Good advice. Business ethics. Appearance of success. All these often outweigh someone who simply pursues the Lord with a pure heart. When we add up things here we realize there really is no spiritual component to Saul at all. Let me point out three things that frankly seem to show just the opposite.

So a few things. It's not just that Saul doesn't lead, he doesn't even seem to know that Samuel - the prophet/Judge lives in this city. The servant does, but it seems as though he has to explain to Saul who Samuel is.

You might think: "Well, Saul is out looking for donkeys maybe he's far from home, he doesn't know where he's at. He doesn't know people." But the geography here is important to understand. Gibeah and Zuph were only a couple of miles apart. And remember Samuel is essentially the spiritual and political leader of all of Israel. This would be like President Trump living in Riverside and him not knowing about it.

And it's not like Saul didn't have opportunity. Remember we read back in **7:15-17** that Samuel went on a circuit year by year judging different cities. You know what the circuit was? It was all within a 10 mile radius of where Saul lived. It'd be like going on a circuit to Elk and Riverside and Clayton and Colbert. You'd have to come through Deer Park at some point. And Samuel isn't just the national judge - the national leader - more importantly he is the prophet of God who speaks the words of God to the people. And Saul seems to be oblivious that this is where he lives and that it's even an option.

There's another question mark here, too. His desire to offer Samuel a gift is fairly common. People often brought gifts to prophets and religious leaders in the OT as an act of kindness. But there are some who think what Saul is really getting at here is that he cannot **buy** Samuel's services. Sure, it's customary and kind to

bring the prophet a gift, but it's not mandatory. No one has to do it and Samuel would certainly not demand such a gift. It seems as though what Saul understands here is that someone buys the services of the man of God. That is never the case.

And, third, Saul doesn't recognize Samuel. Maybe we could think he just didn't know where Samuel lived. Or maybe he misunderstood giving a prophet a gift. But we find out Saul really has no idea who Samuel is. **Read 18-19**

He doesn't have any idea who he is. No clue. For someone who is to lead the people of God, it's pretty sad that he doesn't seem to have any connection at all to God.

Last red, flag, then we'll look at God's faithfulness.

6 - Saul is marked by false modesty. Read 20-21

This is an unusual exchange. Basically Samuel is dropping the news to Saul that he will be king. What Samuel says is confusing. He's basically saying that the thing that everyone in Israel would want - kingship - is yours. Saul has just won the political jackpot.

And what he does is basically say: Well, I'm an absolute nobody. Why would I be chosen? It's false on a couple of levels. First, Benjamin - though small - was not the least of the tribes in the sense of geographic prominence. Usually we think Jerusalem belongs to what tribe? Judah. But actually Jerusalem belongs to Benjamin. God's holy city in the OT - Mt. Zion - resided in Benjamin.

And although Benjamin would have been small - they were pretty fierce warriors. They took out quite a few of their countrymen before being defeated. Saul's family is not the least of all the tribes - they were a prominent family; a ruling family.

There's a line in the movie Ratatouille where the main character is downplaying his abilities and the lady he's talking to say: "I hate false modesty; it's just another way to lie."

And some of the commentators were saying, this was the appropriate thing to do. Moses did it when God told him from the burning bush to go to Pharaoh. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (**Ex 3:11**) Gideon said the same thing: "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." (**Jdg 6:15**) The problem is that they shouldn't have questioned God's calling on their lives. Moses was a whiner and so was Gideon - both got rebuked.

Here's a little life tip for you: If someone bestows you a compliment or an honor or tells you how you've blessed them. You know what you say? Thank you. Thank you for the encouragement. False modesty is a lie. It's undermining the work of God in your life. And it undermines the work of God through you in other peoples' lives.

These are not the only things that could ever disqualify a person from leading the people of God. But they are huge red flags. Things we would do well to pay attention to.

What about God? Where is God in all of this?

1 - God is sovereign over all things. Read 15-16

Who directed Saul to Samuel? God did. Wait, so was God responsible for Saul, the failed king? No. Look back at **8:19-22**.

So did the people make Saul king or did God make Saul king? Yes. God sovereignly gave the people exactly what they wanted. They wanted a king like all the nations around them, and that's exactly who they got. If

somehow Israel were left all to their own, and they could vote in a person of their own choosing to be king, it would have been Saul.

But we get this little tidbit here that this isn't by popular vote. This isn't just by chance. As much as Saul was a failed ruler God had never abandoned his people.

Rom. 8:28: We know that God works all things for good to those who love him and are called according to his purposes.

That verse exists because on the one hand not all things are naturally good. Some things that happen are very bad. God isn't saying bad things are good things. He's saying that he works bad things and good things so that ultimately they are good in the end.

But there's a catch. He does that for those that love him and are called according to his purpose. Only the people of God who are chosen who love God, can see the bigger, eternal scheme of things where God is doing all things for his own glory and our good.

That plan includes failed leadership, like Saul. God didn't forget to vet Saul more thoroughly. He didn't misunderstand what was going on. No. God knew. And God gave Israel the tragedy they wanted.

2 - When kings fail, God is still the true king. Read 16

There's a small jab that occurs here. It's what God calls Saul. He calls him prince. Or some of you might have leader. That doesn't seem like a big deal, except that he doesn't call Saul what he is going to be: a king. When Samuel is told to go anoint the son of Jesse - David - God says "go anoint me a king." Here, Saul is prince. He's junior.

And as much as it might be a slight toward Saul, I think it's also a comfort to his people: Saul is going to be a train wreck but God is still on the throne.

You've no doubt heard or seen a lot of the political zoo that has taken place over this last week. Whatever anyone's politics are I think we can all agree that it is an utter disgrace to democracy and decency and the rule of law.

But you know what we remember? Jesus is our true king. He is reigning on high. The nonsense we see has been going on for millennia. And will continue to go on. How bad it is ebbs and flows and changes from culture to culture. But our God reigns.

3 - Despite their selfishness and worldliness, God has not given up on his people. Look at how he talks about Israel in **Vs. 16. Read**

Three times he calls them "my people." He is giving **his** people a leader. He is providing salvation for **his** people. He has heard the cry of **his** people. God isn't just throwing his hands in the air in exasperation at Israel. He's not saying "Fine, do it your way" - although they will feel the effects of their decision.

God loves his people. There's no cynicism here. There's no hatred here. There is concern and salvation and love. These are his people. He has chosen them and covenanted - promised - to protect them and use them and bless them. And he is faithful to do that.

Just because God allows his people to place unqualified leaders over themselves doesn't mean he stops loving them. It doesn't mean he doesn't hear them or care for them. It might mean there's discipline. But he will never remove his love from his people.

In Christ, he'll never remove his love from us. And for that we give him praise.

Pray