

Saul – Israel’s First King

1 SAMUEL 9:15-21

15 Now the LORD had told Samuel in his ear the day before Saul came, saying,

16 “Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him commander over My people Israel, that he may save My people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry has come to Me.”

17 So when Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said to him, “There he is, the man of whom I spoke to you. This one shall reign over My people.”

18 Then Saul drew near to Samuel in the gate, and said, “Please tell me, where is the seer’s house?”

19 Samuel answered Saul and said, “I am the seer. Go up before me to the high place, for you shall eat with me today; and tomorrow I will let you go and will tell you all that is in your heart.

20 “But as for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not be anxious about them, for they have been found. And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?”

21 And Saul answered and said, “Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak like this to me?”

1 SAMUEL 9:25-27

25 When they had come down from the high place into the city, Samuel spoke with Saul on the top of the house.

26 They arose early; and it was about the dawning of the day that Samuel called to Saul on the top of the house, saying, “Get up, that I may send you on your way.” And Saul arose, and both of them went outside, he and Samuel.

27 As they were going down to the outskirts of the city, Samuel said to Saul, “Tell the servant to go on ahead of us.” And he went on. “But you stand here awhile, that I may announce to you the word of God.”

1 SAMUEL 10:20-24

20 And when Samuel had caused all the tribes of Israel to come near, the tribe of Benjamin was chosen.

21 When he had caused the tribe of Benjamin to come near by their families, the family of Matri was chosen. And Saul the son of Kish was chosen. But when they sought him, he could not be found.

22 Therefore they inquired of the LORD further, “Has the man come here yet?” And the LORD answered, “There he is, hidden among the equipment.”

23 So they ran and brought him from there; and when he stood among the people,

he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward.

24 And Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen, that there is no one like him among all the people?” So all the people shouted and said, “Long live the king!”

SONG SUGGESTIONS

“To Christ Be Loyal and Be True”; “O God You Are My God” (“Step by Step”)

Introduction

Israel wanted a king. Although not pleased with the demand, the Lord instructed Samuel to help the people find a suitable man to reign over them. The quest takes the reader to the tribe of Benjamin, to a man of impeccable ancestry by the name of Kish. Through five prominent figures, his ancestry went back to Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob, the second offspring of Rachel (1 Samuel 9:1). Kish was a great warrior. He was a man of means, owning livestock and well respected.

Kish had a son, a striking young man, tall and handsome. It was he, Saul son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin, who would occupy center stage as Israel evolved into a great power. The introduction of Saul finds him caring for the family livestock. The donkeys had wandered off. With a servant at his side, Saul went to find them. They searched, but the donkeys were nowhere to be found. Saul’s servant offered a suggestion. In a nearby town there was a prophet. Perhaps they could induce him to conjure up a message from God and help them find their animals. In such a fashion, arrangements were made for the first meeting between Samuel and Israel’s future king.

God’s Choice (1 Samuel 9:15-21)

The choice of Saul to be king was God’s. Samuel was merely God’s instrument. The sacred record makes it clear that God’s authority lay behind Samuel’s actions. The prophet did not act on his own initiative. The subsequent story of Saul’s kingship, tragic as it turned out to be, began with a choice made by God. Did God choose Saul as king because He wanted a failure on the throne? It is hard to believe. God had chosen Israel. He was the deliverer, the redeemer, of the people. There is no reason to think that God chose Saul to be king for any other purpose than the promise and potential He saw in the Benjamite. Through his own choices, Saul was later to turn from a path of obedience, but when God chose him to be king, Saul was the man of the hour. He was the man who could deliver Israel from foreign oppression. He also had the potential to be a king who could lead the nation in faithfulness to God.

Saul was a Benjamite, but when he was introduced there was no mention of his hometown. Later he would be associated with Gibeah (1 Samuel 14:2). In a subsequent century, Isaiah made a passing allusion to “Gibeah of Saul” (Isaiah 10:29). The town came to be defined by its association with Israel’s first king. But Gibeah had a stained reputation. It was where a Levite and his concubine had sought shelter and hospitality (Judges 19). The Levite had barely survived; his concubine was raped and murdered. In the civil war that followed, the tribe

of Benjamin almost perished. For all of Saul's positive attributes, his being from Gibeah was a cloud on the horizon.

When Saul and his servant sought out Samuel, the city where the prophet lived goes unnamed (1 Samuel 9:6), but earlier the elders of Israel had found Samuel in Ramah (8:4). As 1 Samuel unfolds, Ramah will repeatedly be associated with Samuel. The word "Ramah" means "the heights." It was a common name. Samuel's father, Elkanah, had been from Ramathaim Zophim in the hill country of Ephraim (1:1). According to Patrick Arnold, the Ramah of Samuel was likely a town only about five miles removed from Gibeah, in the territory of Benjamin.

Before the appearance of Saul and his servant, God had spoken to Samuel. He told the prophet that a man would present himself in Ramah the next day. He was to be the king of Israel. Samuel would shortly meet the man who would deliver God's people from the Philistines. Saul was God's answer to the cry of His people Israel for deliverance.

Trusting to God's word, Samuel was waiting the next day in the gate of the city. When Saul arrived, he inquired of Samuel where the prophet lived. Samuel identified himself as "the seer," an early word for a prophet (1 Samuel 9:9). Saul accompanied Samuel to "the high place," where the prophet had arranged for them to feast together. Israel's neighbors used high places for the worship of idols (1 Kings 11:7), but for Samuel the high place of Ramah was for the worship of God. Immediately Samuel honored Saul by asking him to "go before," to take first place. He reassured the future king that the donkeys he had been seeking were found. Then he turned Saul's mind to more important matters. Saul was to receive the honor of being king in Israel.

Saul's response to Samuel's words is revealing. He had no inclination to exalt himself in the early days. Saul knew himself to be from the smallest of Israel's tribes. He counted himself to be from a small family of the tribe and thought himself to be of little importance to the family. He had trouble understanding the words and the honor Samuel handed him.

Samuel's Confirmation (1 Samuel 9:25-27)

Not only did Samuel defer to Saul by asking him to go first (1 Samuel 9:19), but when the meal commenced, in the company of some 30 men, the seer also had the best portion of meat set before Saul (v. 24). Saul's uneasiness and confusion grew. At the conclusion of the meal, the king designate and the prophet went down from the high place into the town. Saul and his servant were to spend the night with Samuel.

Houses in ancient Israel were small, stuffy affairs. The weather can be hot. For a social visit, ancient and modern people often seek out a rooftop and a breeze. On the morning of the following day, Samuel would anoint Saul to be king (1 Samuel 10:1), but we can only guess at the evening conversation between the two of them on the rooftop. It would have been in character for Samuel to remind Saul of the sorry straits into which Israel had fallen. Idolatry was rampant; political direction was haphazard. The Philistines ravaged their towns. The military response of Israel was disorganized. No clear leader had stepped forward. The people wanted a king.

Samuel and his servant slept on the rooftop. Early the next day it was time for them to leave. Samuel told Saul to send his servant on ahead. The prophet had a message from God for the ears of Saul alone. Samuel took a flask of oil, anointed the head of Saul and asked, “Is it not because the LORD has anointed you commander over His inheritance?” (1 Samuel 10:1). Saul seems to have been overwhelmed by the announcement. Doubt filled his mind. For that reason Samuel told him of events that would transpire that day. God would confirm the mission Samuel had set before Saul. Before the day was finished, Saul would have much to consider.

Saul’s Presentation (1 Samuel 10:20-24)

Saul’s kingship came to fruition in three stages. First there was a private anointing (1 Samuel 10:1). Second, he was formally presented to Israel (v. 24). Third, he effectively became king (11:14-15). First Samuel 10:20-24 describes the formal presentation. Samuel gathered all Israel before him at Mizpah. Before he introduced their king, he offered a final reminder. Their existence as a nation depended on their faithfulness to God. Israel had been faithless. The people had served idols, but they had only one God. Their God had led them from Egypt and delivered them from oppression. They had rejected God as king; nevertheless, at His direction Samuel told the people to present themselves before him by tribes.

When the lots were cast, the tribe of Benjamin was taken. After that, the family of Saul, then Saul himself. The casting of lots ensured that the selection was a matter of God’s choice. No one, not even Samuel, could have rigged the outcome. God chose Saul, but the king was nowhere to be found. Perhaps, the people thought, he had not arrived. Further inquiry found him hiding. No doubt, Saul knew what the outcome of the lots would be. He had already been anointed by God’s prophet. Saul was present, but he had stolen away, leery of the responsibility God was to give him. When the people found him, Saul was presented to the assembly. He was a big man, strong and powerful, handy attributes for one who would lead in battle.

The people of Israel embraced Saul with enthusiasm. He looked the part. The assembled throng shouted, “Long live the king!” (1 Samuel 10:24). Israel had taken one step closer to having a king, one step closer to being like the nations around them.

Conclusion

Terrible as the Philistine threat had been for Israel, the nation was to discover that the king they appointed would be no simple solution to their woes. People tend to look for a quick fix to a problem. It is often too painful to look at root causes. Had the Israelites looked inward, had they assessed their idolatry and faithlessness to the covenant, they would have seen that repentance and godliness were the path to national survival, even national prosperity. The temptation of nations and churches is to put bandages on wounds when radical surgery is the only cure. Had the people of Israel followed a path of repentance, it would have served them better than reliance on a king.

Questions

1. To which of the tribes of Israel did Kish and his son Saul belong?
2. What had Saul and his servant been doing when they decided to consult Samuel?

3. What was Samuel's hometown? Locate it on a map.
4. In Israel's early days, before the appointment of Saul as king, what term was used to designate a prophet?
5. What nation threatened Israel during the period when Samuel was a judge?
6. Where was Samuel going to worship on the day he met Saul?
7. What message did Samuel give Saul about the livestock he was seeking?
8. What was Saul's reaction when Samuel showed deference toward him?
9. When Saul and Samuel came down into the city, where did they go for conversation?
10. What physical characteristics did Saul have that would be an asset for a warrior king?

Discussion Questions

1. What had happened at Gibeah of Benjamin that gave an unsavory air to its reputation?
2. When Samuel and Saul talked after their first meeting, what might their conversation have been about?
3. If God knew that Saul would eventually prove himself to be unfaithful, why would He have chosen him to be king?
4. What lessons might the modern church learn from Israel's inclination to find a quick fix to problems?