

1 Samuel 9.1–11.15

Introduction

God is the all-sufficient ruler and rescuer of His people (chapters 1-7) but Israel think that they know better. They have angered their prophet and their God by rejecting God's rule and demanding a king of their own (chapter 8) so that they can be 'like the nations' (8.20). God has acquiesced to their demand (made first by the elders (8.4-5) but then repeated by all the people (8.19-20)) and will give them a king (8.22) but He has warned them that the king of *their* choosing will first 'take' from them and ultimately enslave them (8.10-18). We might have expected Samuel to appoint the king at the end of chapter 8, but instead he sends the people home (8.22) and we are left wondering how the story will develop.

Structure of passage

This is another fairly long passage but it holds together as the account of how the Lord worked to grant the people their request for a king (8.5, 19-20). It is wonderful to see God acting in this way: His people have rejected Him, and yet He graciously works to provide them with a king who will save them from their adversaries.

9.1-27	The Sovereign Lord provides Saul as the leader of His people
v 1-14	Narrative begins: Saul's meanderings
v 15-17	Theological insertion: the Lord's plan revealed
v 18-27	Narrative continues: Saul honoured by Samuel
10.1-27	The Sovereign Lord reveals Saul as the leader of His people
v. 1	The word made known to Saul
v 2-16	The word confirmed to Saul
v 17-27	The word revealed to Israel
11.1-15	The Sovereign Lord empowers Saul as the leader of His people
v 1-13	The LORD works salvation for Israel
v 14-15	The kingdom is renewed by Israel

Text notes

1. The Sovereign LORD provides Saul as the leader of Israel, 9.1-27

Chapter 9 begins with a puzzle – the reader expects to find Samuel appointing a king over Israel (8.22) but instead we are introduced to another nobody. Kish's introduction deliberately echoes the story of Elkanah from 1.1 – it begins in Hebrew with the same phrase, 'a certain man'; we are told of four generations of ancestry but there is nothing significant about his breeding; the focus soon shifts from father to son. The point of comparison is that as Samuel was the answer to Hannah's prayers, so Saul is the answer to Israel's request in chapter 8 (Saul's name literally means 'asked for').

Saul himself is a very impressive young man – literally head and shoulders above all others in Israel and very handsome... on the outside at least, he is everything you could want in a leader. But for now he is on a simple errand for his father, trying to find some lost donkeys. Several of the details of the narrative

are perplexing: (1) Is there any significance to Saul finding himself in Zuph (v5 – this is the land of Samuel’s great-great-great grandfather; cf.1.1)? (2) How does Saul’s servant know where the man of God lives if he doesn’t (v6)? (3) Why does his servant have some money when Saul has none (v7-8)? (4) Who is this ‘seer’ anyway (v11 – Samuel is not named until v14)? (5) Is there anything significant about the women out to draw water (v12; cf. Genesis 24.1-61; 29.1-20; Exodus 2.15-21)? (6) Is it not a bit convenient that Samuel happens to be in town and just around the corner (v12-13)? (7) Is something important about to happen (notice the urgency conveyed by the women’s phrases ‘just ahead’, ‘hurry’, ‘just now’, ‘today’, ‘as soon as’, ‘now’ and ‘immediately’ in verses 12-13)? But for now, as readers, our big question is ‘What on earth is going on and what does it have to do with anything?’ Certainly, things seem to be a bit all over the place, but we are about to learn that in God’s economy that is never the case!

Verses 15-17 break the flow of the narrative which is picked up at verse 18. They are a deliberate theological insertion into the narrative that serve to interpret the events on either side. They begin in Hebrew with an emphatic ‘Now Yahweh’ because they will tell us what *God* is doing in the midst of the apparent irrelevance and mystery of verses 1-13. God has already informed Samuel that Saul is to be the leader over God’s people Israel. But notice why God is providing a leader – not because of the request of the people in chapter 8 but because He has heard the cry of His people (cf. Exodus 2.23; 3.7). Saul will ‘save’ (note the word) God’s people from the hand of the Philistines (v16). All of the detail of verses 1-13 and of 18-27 (Saul must have been very confused by the treatment he received in 18-27; even he did not have the ‘word of God’ revealed to him until 10.1) is to be understood through this grid. Notice the double reference to God as the covenant-keeping ‘LORD’ in verses 15 and 17 and God’s own triple reference to Israel as ‘My people’ in verse 16: God is providing a leader for His people in order that they might be saved.

2. The Sovereign LORD reveals Saul as the leader of Israel, 10.1-27

Chapter 9 ended with Samuel instructing Saul to allow his servant to pass ahead in order that Samuel might ‘make known to [Saul] the word of God’ (9.27). Chapter 10 reveals how God’s word is first made known to Saul (verse 1), then confirmed to him (verses 2-16) before finally being disclosed to the whole of Israel (verses 17-27).

a. The word made known to Saul, verse 1

The chapter starts with Samuel and Saul alone and the LORD anointing Saul as leader over His heritage, Israel, in order that he might save them from their enemies (v1). In the light of chapter 8, we should notice that as in 9.16 Saul is not referred to as ‘king’ but as ‘prince’ or perhaps better ‘leader’ (the word has no royal connotation in Hebrew). For now at least God wants us to remember that Saul is not *His choice* as the ruler over Israel but rather a symbol of the people’s rejection of Him.

b. The word confirmed to Saul, verses 2-16

Three signs will confirm to Saul the reality of his appointment (verses 2, 3-4 and 5-6). Each sign echoes a detail from earlier in the narrative: ‘anxious’ in 10.2 echoes 9.5; ‘bread’ in 10.3-4 echoes 9.7, and he will meet the prophets ‘as soon as [he] enters the city’ which echoes the explicit language of 9.13 – all of this is further confirmation that the LORD has been superintending every detail of the events thus far. There are echoes too of Genesis in the references to Rachel’s tomb and Bethel, both of which call to mind God’s promises to Abraham. Even though Saul has been ‘asked for’ by the people, the faithful LORD is still working to fulfil His promises – a staggering revelation of His graciousness in the light of their rejection of Him in chapter 8.

Everything happens just as Samuel promised – only the Sovereign LORD could have known this level of detail even before the events occurred. Most space is given to the fulfilment of the third sign – Saul's encounter with the prophets. But even though we as readers now know the significant role that Saul will take on within Israel, others are still confused. Indeed, so great is the confusion about Saul's behaviour that a new proverb is coined: 'Is Saul also among the prophets?' is another way of saying, 'We have no idea what is happening here' (verses 11-12)! Even Saul's uncle is left in the dark about Saul's new role in God's kingdom (verses 13-16).

c. The word revealed to Israel, verses 17-27

Everything changes in another grand assembly at Mizpah (cf. 7.5-12). The episode begins with another reminder from Samuel of the people's gross sin in rejecting God as their king. The LORD, the God of Israel had saved His people repeatedly, most notably from slavery in Egypt (v18), but Israel had rejected their 'saving' God, ironically, for the sake of gaining a king who might lead them in battle (v19; cf. 8.20). Normal practice would be for such an accusation from God's prophet to be followed by a statement of judgement, a fear confirmed by a process of lot-drawing that closely resembles events after Achan's sin in Joshua 7.14, 16.

But in the event, the detail of the lot-drawing, along with the LORD's revelation of Saul's hiding place (v22), serve to highlight that the sovereign LORD has again been at work, overruling the lottery in order that His 'chosen' one might lead His people (v24). But notice that it is the people, and not the LORD or Samuel, who proclaim Saul to be king (end of v24) – there is still some ambiguity about Israel's new leader. What is clear, however, is that Saul is to be a man under authority; that is why Samuel announces and writes up 'the rights and duties of the kingship' – probably very similar in content to Deuteronomy 17.14-20. The phrase 'rights and duties of the kingship' is literally 'the *justice* of the kingship'. Samuel had already warned the people of the sort of 'justice' or 'ways' that *their chosen king* would give them (8.11). Now he reasserts the 'justice' with which any leader of God's kingdom *should* conduct himself. Notice too that the assembly ends not upon Saul's say-so but Samuel's, as he sends each one back to their home (v25) – for now at least Saul is a man under God's word.

3. The Sovereign LORD empowers Saul as the leader of Israel, 11.1-15

Reaction to Saul at the end of chapter 10 was mixed: some 'mighty men' had their hearts touched by God and supported him while others, 'worthless fellows' (like Hophni and Phinehas in 2.12), questioned his ability to save. 'How can this man save us?' they had asked, and their question is about to be answered!

The situation is bleak. The Ammonites are perennial enemies of Israel (cf. Deuteronomy 23.3-6; Judges 3.13; 11.1-33) and Nahash (whose name means 'serpent', cf. Genesis 3) is determined to bring disgrace upon 'all Israel' (11.2; God had rolled the 'disgrace' of Israel away in Joshua 5.9 – Nahash wants to roll it back into place). Strangely, even though 'all the people' had proclaimed Saul king in 10.24, no-one now thinks to request his help; nevertheless, as he hears of Jabesh's plight he is angered. Again, the detail emphasises the LORD's sovereign control of events. It is the 'Spirit of the LORD' who 'rushes' on Saul to empower him to 'save' God's people. From this moment on, Saul operates like something of a 'super-judge' – the Spirit 'rushes' on him (for the third time, v6 cf. 10.6, 10) as He had 'rushed' upon Samson three times in Judges (14.6, 19; 15.14); he cuts a yoke of oxen to pieces to summon an army (v7 is reminiscent of Judges 19.29 although the details are very different); when the army is assembled, Saul divides it into three companies (v11, cf. Judges 7.16); finally Saul is described implicitly as a 'saviour'

(verses 3, 9, 13; cf. Othniel and Ehud in Judges 3.9, 15). The result is 'salvation' for the people of Jabesh but all are clear that it is the LORD's doing (v13) for He is the one who empowered His servant Saul (v6).

The chapter ends with a trip to Gilgal (verses 13-14) – the location must be significant because Gilgal is named explicitly three times and referenced as 'there' four more times in the space of two verses. That is because it was at Gilgal that the people of Israel first encamped in the Promised Land and where Joshua circumcised the wilderness generation and celebrated the first Passover in the land (Joshua 5.1-12). Clearly the 'renewal of the kingdom' that happens in verses 14 and 15 with many offerings and much celebration is to be understood as another significant 'renewal' of Israel's relationship with her covenant LORD.

Application

These three chapters consist of much detail and not a little intrigue but there is only one key player at work – the LORD God Himself. The chapters were written to teach Israel about her God and to call her to renew her commitment to Him.

1. Behold your God – awesome in sovereign power

Two particular aspects of the LORD's sovereign power are demonstrated in the chapters:

a. His Sovereign power controls human history

When you think of the level of detailed planning and control of events that was necessary for the LORD to engineer the 'chance' encounter between Samuel and Saul in 9.18, it is somewhat bewildering. The donkeys had to go missing; Saul had to pursue them in Zuph; the servant had to know where Samuel lived; the boy had to have a quarter of a shekel of silver in his pocket; Saul had to agree to his servant's suggestion; Samuel had to be in town for a sacrifice on that exact day; Saul had to bump into the women who 'happened' to know where Samuel was at that precise moment; God had to speak to Samuel directly to reveal His purposes to him – and so the list goes on. The events in and of themselves looked mundane, irrelevant and coincidental but all the while the Sovereign LORD was quietly orchestrating them in order to achieve His purposes. The same could be said of Nahash's behaviour in chapter 11 – what on earth made Nahash willing to wait a week before attacking the city? But God sovereignly controls every decision of every man's heart (Proverbs 16.9; 20.24) and works them all out in accordance with His purposes.

This realisation produces in God's people neither a resigned fatalism nor a despondent passivity but quiet confidence – whatever our trial, the LORD will work all things out for our good in order that we might be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Romans 8.28).

b. His Sovereign power and grace achieve His salvation

The people of Israel were sinful and stupid in chapter 8 – first they rejected their God, then they rejected His gracious warning about their actions. But because He is a gracious God, they remained His people (9.16); He still heard their cry and He still worked to provide them with a 'Saviour' (9.16; 10.1; 11.3, 9, 13) – we are reminded that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (Romans 5.8), and that God continues to assure us of salvation not because of us but despite us (Romans 7.24-25).

Such is God's power that no enemy can stand against Him as Nahash discovered to his cost – His Spirit rushed on Saul; His dread fell on the people and His wrath dispersed His enemies (note the contrast between Israel's army that assembles 'as one man' in 11.7 and Nahash's army that are scattered 'so that no two of them were left together' in 11.11).

Nothing and no-one can derail God's plan to save His people – praise God for that (e.g. Acts 2.24; Romans 8.29-39, especially verses 38 and 39)!

2. Renew our commitment to the kingdom

There can only be one right response to the God who works in sovereign power to save His people and achieve His purposes and that is to renew our commitment to His kingdom (11.14). When we consider His sovereign power, it seems strange that we live so often with very little regard to Him. When we consider His sovereign grace, it seems strange that we are so reluctant to entrust every detail of our lives to Him. These chapters therefore humble us and motivate us to renew our allegiance to our sovereign, gracious Lord. We do that by praying for God's kingdom to come and seeking it 'first' in our life (Matthew 6.10, 33). Of course, that is much easier said than done so it is worth considering: What else am I seeking in life at the moment? What have I forgotten about God that makes me pursue something other than Him and His kingdom? How does this priority shape my prayers for other Christians and for my family?

As you study this passage God wants you to...

Marvel at the LORD's sovereign control of human history for the salvation of His people and renew your commitment to His kingdom.