

1 Samuel 9:1-10:16. Who is the Big Shot?

The best way to come to grips with what's going on in this passage is to start at the end and work backwards. Look how it finishes in 10:8. Samuel has just anointed Saul as king in a typical ancient manner, by pouring a flask of oil over his head. Now the prophet of God finishes off by commanding the king: *"Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do."*

A while back, when I was working for another organization, I produced an AutoRun CD. I went to our Communications Department and showed them the product. The Marketing Officer contacted me and said she was handing it to another lady to see about improving the graphic design. My boss was on holiday. I could have told our Communications Department to pay someone to do the graphic design and they would have gone ahead and done it. But the reality is that I had no authority to tell our Communications Department to do this. That exceeded my authority. I had to wait for my boss to return from holiday before I could proceed.

Samuel wasn't on holiday for those seven days. But Samuel left Saul in no doubt as to the limits of his authority. When he got to Gilgal he was told he MUST wait for Samuel before doing anything. Samuel promised him, *"I will surely come down to you."* Samuel gave Saul his personal guarantee that he would come. By the time Saul got to Gilgal he would be Israel's freshly chosen and acknowledged king. Now that packs a lot of clout. But does that make Saul the big shot in Israel? No! Important as it is to be Israel's king he is not Number One in Israel but Number Two. Who is the big shot in Israel? Not Saul but Samuel. Even as king Saul MUST wait for Samuel to tell him what to do.

In 1 Samuel 8 God agrees to give his people the king they want. Yes, they can have a king just like all the other nations have a king. Nothing wrong with that. But kingship for God's people operates in a profoundly distinctive way. God's people need to recognise that for them there is someone who carries even greater authority than the king. That person is the prophet. The king does not have a direct relationship with God. He does not have a direct relationship with God when it comes to worship. So Samuel tells Saul, *"I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings."* Samuel, of course, doubles up as a priest. A priest directly relates to God in worship and enables the king to relate indirectly to God in worship.

But in addition to this the king does not have a direct relationship with God when it comes to revelation. So Samuel tells Saul: *"but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do."* Saul is not authorised to directly approach God for guidance and direction. As prophet, Samuel relates to God directly with respect to revelation. Saul as king can only relate to God indirectly through the prophet in seeking to understand the will of God.

I was asking the Director of a major missionary organization in Australia why his mission didn't get serious about multicultural ministry in Australia? He told me he actually wanted his mission to get involved in domestic outreach across cultures. However, the bottom line was that even though he was the boss he didn't have the authority to effect this change. In fact this Mission Director was a personal friend of the Deputy Prime Minister of the time. My friend was chatting to him about a change needed in Australia's refugee policy. The Deputy Prime Minister agreed

with him that this change did need to take place. But he explained that notwithstanding his position he simply did not have the authority to effect that change.

Samuel clearly tells Saul that there is a limit to his authority; that until he the prophet of God comes and tells him what to do his hands are tied. In most ancient nations the king arrogated absolute rule to himself. His will was law. But Israel's king was supposed to be different. In Israel God's will must be law. The king is supposed to defer to the prophet.

But is it realistic to expect the king to defer to the prophet? Well, this is one reason why David comes out as the greatest of Israel's king. Even after his crimes of adultery and murder David defers to the prophet Nathan. God sends Nathan to rebuke David. David certainly had the power to exile, imprison or even kill Nathan because that is precisely what the majority of Israel's kings did to the prophets. But David deferred to the prophet. That is, David was almost unique among Israel's kings as a monarch who truly recognised that God's Word was the supreme authority for the nation of Israel, not his own will.

Our passage ends with Samuel's command to Saul to wait in Gilgal because it is preparing us for what we will be told in Chapter 13. We will learn that Saul is going to act like a typical ancient ruler, not like a king who truly accepts God's ultimate authority.

Having waited an absurdly long time for a waiter to take his order in a French restaurant, the novelist Irwin Shaw was approached at last by the maitre d' - who politely informed Shaw that snails were the specialty of the house. "I know," Shaw replied with a nod, "and you've got them dressed as waiters."

In 1 Samuel 13 we see what happens when Saul is in Gilgal. He is waiting for God's revelation, his directions as to what to do. But it seems like it's coming by snail mail and Samuel seems to be the snail. Once seven days pass Saul acts like the customer who decides he won't wait any longer and gets up and goes to another restaurant. Saul fails to accept the limits of his authority. When the pressure comes on he panics, fails to keep waiting for Samuel and abuses his delegated authority. In other words, right from the word "Go" we know why kingship in Israel is bound to go pear-shape.

At the beginning of Chapter 10 we discover that the legitimacy of Saul's kingship is grounded in two things: (1) what God does; (2) what Saul does. God is prepared to back Saul as king and he shows this through 3 signs: (1) Saul meeting two men who will tell him the donkeys he's been seeking have now been found; (2) Saul meeting three men who will give him bread; (3) Saul meeting a procession of prophets and prophesying with them. Samuel doesn't pre-arrange these meetings. He displays his prophetic authority by predicting these things so as to strengthen Saul's confidence in the prophetic word and to understand how foundational prophetic revelation is to the rule he will exercise. Indeed the third and climactic sign is that of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him and enabling him to prophesy as well. Later the Spirit of the Lord will come upon him to give him the strength to lead God's people into victorious battle against their enemies. But Saul's first experience of the power of God's Spirit has to do with prophecy. Saul must learn right from the very outset that God treats prophetic authority as primary and military authority as secondary.

What carries supreme authority in your life? Do you behave like Saul when the time

of testing comes? Do you wait on God and search the Scriptures, meditating on them and praying over them until you are able to make a decision grounded in God's written Word or are you impatient about waiting on God and make key decisions in a reckless and irresponsible manner? For example, when it comes to decisions about who'll you date have you let God advise you from his Word as to the kind of girl or boy you should be interested in or do you have the attitude that you'll just do what you want?

In 10:6 Saul was told that when the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, he would be changed into a different person. In 10:9 we read: "As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart." God made Saul into a new person, he gave him a new heart.

Bill was a loudmouth mechanic. One day he was removing the cylinder heads from a car engine when a famous heart surgeon drove into the workshop in his new Beamer. Bill shouted across the garage, "Hey, Doc! Come over here a minute." The famous surgeon, a bit surprised, walked over to where Bill the mechanic was working. Bill straightened up, wiped his oily hands on a rag and asked argumentatively, "So Mr. Fancy Doctor, look at this. I also open hearts, take valves out, grind 'em, put in new parts, and when I finish this baby will purr like a kitten. So how come you get the big money, when you and me is doing basically the same work?"

The heart surgeon leaned over and whispered to Bill, the loudmouth, "Try doing it with the engine running."

God is the ultimate heart surgeon. He changes hearts while the engine is still running. Saul has his heart set on finding his father's donkeys. That is the only reason he came to Samuel, hoping Samuel would tell him where to find them. Even as he speaks to Samuel, it's as though Saul's car is just outside Samuel's door with the engine still running. Before he knows it God does heart surgery on him and gives him the kind of heart he will need to be God's chosen king.

How did Saul's heart change? In what way did he become a different person? Some think that before God changed Saul's heart he did not want to be king, but after this he did. But that is plainly not so. Saul doesn't say anything to his uncle about Samuel anointing him as king and hides himself in the baggage when Samuel singles him out before all Israel as their king. So when God changed Saul's heart he did not give him a heart to be king.

What happens is that God gives Saul a unique experience of himself. In his heart Saul now has a personal knowledge of God. People wondered, "What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" A proverb was coined: "Is Saul among the prophets?" Saul is recognized by people as being a different person - someone who now has a special and unique relationship with God. But, of course, the wheels later fell off for Saul when he failed to learn the lesson of this extraordinary experience, his need to submit to God's prophetic word.

As I said before, Chapter 10 begins by grounding the validity of Saul's kingship in two things: (1) what God does through these three signs; and (2) what Saul does. As we will see in Chapter 13 Samuel's command to Saul to wait seven days in Gilgal is actually God's way of testing Saul to see whether he will shape up as king or not. Saul fails this test miserably and immediately afterwards Samuel tells Saul that his kingship will be taken away from him and given to another who is "a man after

God's own heart", that is, a man who will put God's will first before his own.

France's king Henry IV was once passing through a small town when a deputation of local burgesses, government officials, appeared at the gates to receive him. As the group's leader was about to make his welcoming speech, a donkey in the vicinity began to bray. The king turned to the offending animal with immense gravity: "Gentlemen," he said, "one at a time, please!"

This example is closer to 1 Samuel 9 than you might think. Saul is introduced to us as a man who is looking for his father's donkeys. King Henry IV made a joke which implied those local government officials were donkeys. 1 Samuel 9 is making a similar kind of joke. Yes, in the providence of God Saul really was trying to find his father's donkeys. But we can't miss the significance of the preceding context. The people have asked for a king in the wrong way. It was alright to ask for a king, but their request was evil because they were looking for a king who would be an impressive human being and would inspire them with confidence in his ability to protect them from his enemies. That's why, of course, we are told in 9:2 that Kish *"had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites - a head taller than any of the others."* If you judge by outward appearances, which is what the Israelites were doing, then Saul was the man for the job. Samuel told them that they were wrong to ask for the kind of king they wanted. But like a pack of stubborn donkeys they dug in their heels and refused to budge an inch.

When we were in Pakistan we sometimes holidayed in the Interserve beach hut on Karachi beach. There were a number of camel drivers operating on the beach supplying water to beach huts like ours which did not have tap water. Camels can be as stubborn as donkeys. I remember one camel which refused to move. Its own became furious, kicking it, belting it. On and on he went trying to make that camel move. The joke of 1 Samuel 9 is that Saul is going to be the king of donkeys, of a stubborn people who have wandered away from their Father by insisting on having precisely the kind of king Saul will turn out to be - a king who exceeds proper limits and treats himself as the ultimate authority; a king who becomes a despot and a murderer of innocent people.

The whole of 1 Samuel 9 is concerned with the initial relationship between Samuel and Saul. It labours the point that Saul is completely dependent on Samuel. It is very, very important for the readers of this book to understand that the authority of God's prophet far exceeds the authority of the king. There are four ways in which this relationship between Samuel and Saul is portrayed:

1. Saul cannot find his donkeys but Samuel is able to tell Saul that his donkeys are found.
2. Saul does not know who Samuel is but Samuel knows who Saul is even before he meets him. Saul, coming from a more obscure part of Israel, only knows Samuel as a local seer and does not realise he is the prophet of God for the whole of Israel. By contrast, God reveals to Samuel before Saul even arrives who he is.
3. Samuel is the host and Saul is the guest. Saul wants to give Samuel food to secure his services as a seer but has no food to give him. It is Samuel who invites Saul to be his guest and provides him with food. This foreshadows the relationship between the prophet and the king. The king needs the prophet and depends on him. The prophet does not need the king and is completely independent of him.
4. Samuel gives the orders and Saul is expected to obey them.

One evening, at the launch party for a film in which she was starring, Tallulah Bankhead found herself engaged in a heated argument with the writer Dashiell Hammett (who wrote the Sam Spade detective novels, some of which became movies starring Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade). Dashiell Hammett declared that that he had no time for people who used drugs.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Tallulah retorted, "I tell you cocaine isn't habit-forming - and I know because I've been taking it for years."

1 Samuel 9 is saying that Saul needed to understand that just as he needed the revelation of God's will through the prophetic word to recover his donkeys so later, as king, he still needed to depend on the prophetic word in order to rule these stubborn, donkey-like people. There is a kind of dependency we all need. Otherwise we get too big for our boots.

In the Old Testament the offices of prophet and king are separate and there is perpetual conflict and tension. This has now been resolved because the supreme holder of authority, the Lord Jesus, combines both of these roles in himself. Indeed, he is our Prophet, Priest and King. Our great need, therefore, is to defer to Jesus in all things and wait on him.

Also, let us not forget that God has provided us with his prophetic word in written form. May none of our fears or concerns or selfish interests or over-confidence in our own judgment prevent us from submitting ourselves to God's Word. Let us make sure that before making major decisions we ensure we understand how God's Word relates to the situation confronting us.