

1 Samuel 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 10 Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him and said, Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince over his people Israel?

And you shall reign over the people of the Lord, and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over his heritage. When you depart from me today, you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelza, and they will say to you, The donkeys that you went to seek are found, and now your father has ceased to care about the donkeys and is anxious about you, saying, What shall I do about my son?

Then you shall go on from there, father, and come to the oak of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three young goats, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine.

And they will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept from their hand. After that you shall come to Gibeath Elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines. And there, as soon as you come to the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place, with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them prophesying.

Then the Spirit of the Lord will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them, and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you.

[1 : 21] Then go down before me to Gilgal, and behold, I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings, and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.

When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart, and all these signs came to pass that day. When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them.

And when all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets? And a man of the place answered, And who is their father?

Therefore it became a proverb, Is Saul also among the prophets? When he had finished prophesying, he came to the high place. Saul's uncle said to him and to his servant, Where did you go?

And he said, To seek the donkeys, and when we saw they were not to be found, we went to Samuel. And Saul's uncle said, Please tell me what Samuel said to you. And Saul said to his uncle, He told us plainly that the donkeys had been found.

[2 : 28] But about the matter of the kingdom, of which Samuel had spoken, he did not tell him anything. Now Samuel called the people together to the Lord at Mizpah, and he said to the people of Israel, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.

But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses. And you have said to him, Set a king over us. Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and by your thousands.

Then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. He brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its clans, and the clan of the Matrites was taken by lot.

And Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot. But when they sought him, he could not be found. So they inquired again of the Lord, Is there a man still to come? And the Lord said, Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage.

Then they ran and took him from there. And when he stood among the people, he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward. And Samuel said to all the people, Do you see him whom the Lord has chosen?

[3 : 37] There is none like him among all the people. And all the people shouted, Long live the king! Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord.

Then Samuel sent all the people away, each one to his home. Saul also went to his home at Gibeah, and with him went men of valour whose hearts God had touched. But some worthless fellows said, How can this man save us?

And they despised him and brought him no present, but he held his peace. 1 Samuel chapter 10 is the second half of a there and back again narrative. It begins with Saul setting off in search of his father's donkey in chapter 9, and then he returns when he discovers that they have been found.

Of course, rather a lot happens between these two events. In the previous chapter, Saul had met Samuel and had experienced a series of ascensions, going up to the city, going up to the high place, going up to the head of the table, and then going up to the top of the house.

He has been given the priestly portion of the sacrifice, the portion belonging to Samuel himself. Saul has been treated as if Samuel's new son. He is being set apart as the one to judge Israel after Samuel.

[4 : 48] He is taking the place of the unfaithful sons of Samuel, Joel and Abijah. The last chapter ended with Samuel waking Saul up at the break of dawn and sending him on his way.

Saul's servant was then sent on ahead, while Samuel remained with Saul to speak with him in private. That's where we take up the narrative again in this chapter. Samuel now anoints Saul with a flask of oil and kisses him, as he had been instructed to do in chapter 9 verse 16.

Saul is anointed as the prince. This isn't the coronation, it's a designation of Saul as the future king. He is now the prince over the lord's heritage. The land and the people are the lords, and Saul must rule over them under the lord.

In order to assure Saul that he will be the prince, the lord gives him three signs. We might again be reminded of the signs that the lord gave to Gideon before his victory over the Midianites.

The signs take the form of predictions of things that will happen to Saul as he goes along his way. And they show, among other things, God's providential oversight over the actions of men, animals and creation more generally.

[5 : 52] This has been an important and recurring theme in 1 Samuel to this point. We might recall the cows bearing the ark back to Israel from the land of Philistia. This demonstrated God's providential power to the Philistines.

The various chance occurrences leading to Saul and Samuel meeting are another example of this. God is overseeing this entire process, and by giving these signs to Saul, it's a further manifestation that it is God behind this, not just Samuel.

There are three stages to the sign. In the first stage of the sign, there are two men by Rachel's tomb, with news of the donkeys. Rachel had died giving birth to Benjamin. Saul was a Benjaminite.

That had happened back in Genesis chapter 35, and it was there that God had first promised that Israel would have kings. This happened on the road to Bethlehem. The question of where exactly is a matter of some debate.

They were some way from Bethlehem, but it's not entirely clear whether it was just outside Bethlehem, or whether the road was the Bethlehem road, and they were some further distance from their destination.

[6 : 55] If the latter is the case, then maybe it was near Ramah. In Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 15, Rachel is described as weeping in Ramah for her children. In this location, Saul is told about the donkeys.

The donkeys have been found, which confirms the message of Samuel, but also, given the connection between donkeys and rule, maybe suggests something about the kingdom. Hearing about the finding of the donkeys near the tomb of his ancestress is probably a significant event.

From there, he will proceed and see three men going up to God at Bethel, presumably to worship. One carries three young goats, another carries three loaves of bread, and the third carries a skin of wine.

And they will give Saul two loaves of bread. This occurs near the oak of Tabor, which some have speculated is the same oak as the oak beneath which Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, was buried in Genesis chapter 35 verse 8.

That might be important to notice, because the death of Deborah and the death of Rachel sandwiched the first promise of the kings. The gift of the bread to Saul again suggests some sort of priestly status that he will enjoy.

[7 : 59] David enjoyed something similar when he was given the showbread by the priests at Nob. In Numbers chapter 18 verse 11, we're told, Finally, Saul will arrive at Gibeath Elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines.

This gives us a sense of the way in which the Philistines were an occupying force in many respects at this time. At that point, he will meet prophets playing musical instruments as they come down from the high place.

A connection between prophecy and music can also be seen in such places as 2 Kings chapter 3 verse 15, where Elisha instructs a musician to be brought so that he will prophesy with the music, the spirit of the Lord coming upon him as the music plays.

While the spirit does come upon Saul suddenly, it's not necessarily ecstatic or trance-like. This seems to occur at Gibeah. These locations seem to be significant.

They were important places in the life of Israel and particularly of the tribe of Benjamin. The tomb of Rachel was associated with the death of the ancestress. The oak of Tabor was possibly associated with the death of Deborah, the nurse of Rebekah, which with the death of Rachel sandwiched the promise of kings.

[9 : 19] And Gibeah, of course, was the site of the tragic events of Judges chapter 19, events that almost led to the complete destruction of Benjamin. Benjamin's mother, Rachel, had died in childbirth, giving birth to Benjamin.

And then Benjamin himself had almost been extinguished because of the sin concerning the concubine at Gibeah. Perhaps in the background of these three locations, we're supposed to see three women.

We're supposed to see Rachel, Deborah, and the unnamed concubine of the Levite. In making the sites of the deaths of these three women, sites where the signs of the promised kingdom are given, something of God's gracious redemption of Israel's history is being shown.

Where sin and death abounded, God's grace will abound much more. We have a reminder of these three signs in 1 Samuel chapter 16, verses 19 to 23, when David is sent to Saul, with elements of these three signs bound up with him.

Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, Send me David your son, who is with the sheep. And Jesse took a donkey, laden with bread, and a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent them by David his son to Saul.

[10 : 27] And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armour bearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, Let David remain in my service, for he has found favour in my sight.

And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

A donkey, bread, wine, a goat, a musical instrument, and changing the spirit of the king. David comes with all the signs of the kingdom that Saul receives in this chapter.

We might also think of the New Testament, where in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives three sets of instructions to his disciples, telling them things that will befall them as they follow them. First of all, they will find the colt, and bring it to him.

The donkeys have been found. Then they will go into the city, and see a man with a water pitcher going up to the upper room, and he will show them where they will eat the meal, the meal where they will be given bread by Christ.

[11 : 24] Then they are told to wait in Jerusalem, and they will be clothed with power from on high. They will become new people, just as Saul became a new person. Once these things happen, Saul is told that he should do what his hand finds to do.

He should confidently undertake his calling, knowing that God is with him. Samuel instructs Saul to go to Gilgal and wait there for seven days. This is a perplexing detail, especially given the events of chapter 13 that seem to reference just such an instruction, an instruction that Saul fails to keep.

Yet this is many years beforehand. The kingdom is renewed at Gilgal in chapter 11 verses 14 to 15. Perhaps what is in view here is that Saul was expected to prepare himself for entry into kingly office, as the priests had to wait for seven days before their installation into priestly office.

And then, on the eighth day, Samuel would officially install him into his new position. Saul receives a new heart. The spirit rushes upon Saul, as he came upon the judges in the book of Judges.

And he rushed upon Samson in particular. Saul begins to prophesy, and people who know him, he's in Gibeah, which is his hometown, start to question, is Saul also among the prophets?

[12 : 33] And who is their father? Saul doesn't seem to have any prophetic pedigree. But yet, as he has been adopted, as it were, by Samuel, he is now among the prophets. He's now also one who enjoys some priestly status.

Arriving back, Saul is questioned by his uncle, possibly Abner, as we see in chapter 14 verse 50. Abner, the son of Ner, was Saul's uncle. Saul tells him about the message that he had received from Samuel concerning the donkeys, but does not divulge the secret of the kingdom.

For the rest of the nation, all of the other events since chapter 8 are unknown to them. Samuel declares the indictment of the Lord upon their choice, that they have rejected the Lord who delivered them, and chosen a human king in his place.

[13 : 46] The tribes are presented before the Lord, and they are chosen by lot. The Lord selecting the tribe of Benjamin, and then the clan of the Matrites, and then finally Saul, the son of Kish.

People who are hungry for power are usually not the best people to trust with it. When the people see Saul, they recognise he is head and shoulders above everyone else, he is someone who has the fitting appearance of a king, he is not someone who is hungry for power, he seems a gracious man as well.

When people oppose him, he does not seek vengeance over them. The people generally recognise and welcome him as king. God has given them a good king, a king that is far better than they ever deserved, a king who will rule under him.

Despite the people's idolatrous intent, God gives them a king that will not be an idol, protecting them from the full force of their decision. At this point, Samuel also writes out a document with the rights and duties of the kingship and the relationship between the people and the king.

[14 : 56] The kingdom of Israel is a constitutional one, it is governed by the law. In addition to Samuel's document, the constitution for the kingdom, Saul would probably also have had to write out the document of Deuteronomy 17, verses 18-20.

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law approved by the Levitical priests, and it shall be with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers and that he may not turn aside from the commandment either to the right hand or to the left so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel.

A question to consider. In this chapter and the one preceding, Saul enjoys some priestly privileges. He is also given the sign of some prophetic gift.

How can we understand the relationship between the king and the offices of priest and prophet? What sort of overlap or analogy is there between the roles and what differences exist?

