

“A King Will Solve All Our Problems”
(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 74)

1 Samuel 8 – 11

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The Iowa caucus is over; the New Hampshire primary is just around the corner; we'll spend the next nine months narrowing down the field of candidates as we determine who our next leader will be. The various candidates and their political parties are likely to spend a total of about *three billion dollars* over the course of this campaign season. There's a *lot* of money invested in this decision; clearly, many Americans believe that there's a lot at stake, that it *matters* who our leader is going to be.

Three thousand years ago, in ancient Israel, a similar search for a new leader was underway. Samuel, the wise and renowned spiritual leader of Israel, has grown old. He has two adult sons, but nobody trusts them; the biblical writer says, “Samuel's sons didn't follow in his footsteps. They tried to turn a profit, they accepted bribes, and they perverted justice.” (1 Samuel 8.3) The Israelites have learned: a hereditary form of leadership, in which the mantle is passed from father to son, doesn't seem to be working. Samuel has the same problem that Eli before him had: his sons aren't trustworthy. The elders among the Israelites know: they need a strong leader. There are multiple threats: there are the Philistines in the southwest – who had recently invaded Israelite territory and captured the Ark of the Covenant, on which the very presence of God resided (or so they believed). There are Ammonites on the east – who are now wreaking havoc on the tribes of Gad and Reuben, and gouging out the eyes of every Israelite they can get their hands on (see 1 Samuel 10.27). And then there is the Israelites' own tendency to sin, to stray from God's path, to worship other gods. The Israelites have done best when they've had a strong leader at the helm, someone like Moses or Joshua, who can keep Israel following God's path and who can deliver Israel from its enemies. Not that everything was perfect during the days of Moses and Joshua – there was disobedience and open rebellion even under their leadership – but, on the whole, it was a lot better than the quasi-leadership Israel had from time to time under the judges, and *much* better than what happened during those turbulent, leaderless years that are described at the end of the book of Judges, when Israel descended into wanton sin, brutal atrocities, and civil war. The Israelite elders know: we have *got* to find a good leader. It's *imperative* that we find a good leader. If they could have spent three billion dollars to find a good leader, they might have just done it. There were threats from without and threats from within – not unlike the situation we face today.

So they summon old Samuel and say to him: “Listen. You are old now, and your sons don't

follow in your footsteps. So appoint us a king to judge us like all the other nations have.” (1 Samuel 8.5) That was their solution. They wanted a king. They believed that a *king* would solve all their problems.

We get this notion in our head, don't we? We think *one person* is going to solve *all* the problems facing our nation. That's why so much money is being spent on this election. That's why there's so much mudslinging, so many character attacks, so many political rants on Facebook. I long for a day when we can elect our leaders in a more *civil* manner, a more *mature* manner. I am weary of all the negative campaigning we've seen in recent elections – coming from *both* sides of the aisle – and I wish we spent more time and energy talking about the *qualities* we need in our elected leaders.

But ancient Israel wasn't having an election. The top leaders were having a private little meeting. They'd already made their decision: they want a king. And they want Samuel – the only person in the country whose voice carries any weight – to choose one. Had they asked *God* about this? God has a way of revealing who has leadership gifts, and who doesn't. It's often the case that the people who would make the best leaders are the ones who think they're *not* the right person for the job – because they're painfully aware of their own shortcomings and their own capacity for sin. In other words, they've got *self-awareness*, and they've got *high standards*, and they've got *humility*. Aren't those qualities you want in your leaders?

The Israelite elders weren't thinking about *leadership qualities*. They just wanted a *king*. All the other nations around Israel had kings. All the other nations keep causing problems for Israel. So if Israel is going to be a strong country, it needs a king. That's their logic.

It's not very good logic ... and Samuel knows it. He grieves. He does what the elders *should* have done; he prays about it. God tells him to go ahead and comply with their request. “They haven't rejected *you*,” God says. “They've rejected me as king over them. They are doing to you only what they've been doing to me from the day I brought them out of Egypt to this very minute, abandoning me and worshiping other gods. So comply with their request, but give them a clear warning, telling them how the king will rule over them.” (1 Samuel 8.9) So Samuel goes back to the elders. “This is how the king will rule over you.” (1 Samuel 8.11) He will take your sons away from you and enlist them in his army, or raise crops for him, or make weapons for him. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, or bakers. He will take your best fields, vineyards, and olive groves and give them to his own servants. He will tax you. He will take your servants and your livestock away from you. “You yourselves will become his slaves! When that day comes, you will cry out because of the king you chose for yourselves, but on that day the LORD won't answer you.” (1 Samuel 8.18) But the elders don't listen to Samuel's counsel. They have it in their heads that a king will solve all their problems ... and Samuel is unable to persuade them otherwise. Samuel goes back to the Lord, his heart in anguish. God tells him: “Go ahead.” It's their choice. God gives us free will. Sometimes, God lets us learn lessons the hard way.

So in chapter 9 we meet Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. He's a young man, tending donkeys for his father. Saul has two distinguishing characteristics. First, he's tall. *Really* tall. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else. (Andrew, I think he has you beat!) Secondly, he's physically attractive. He's good looking. The writer says, “No one in Israel was more handsome than Saul.” (1 Samuel 9.2)

When you're choosing a leader, what's the most important characteristic you're looking for? Their *appearance*? What about their *heart*? What about their *faith*? What about *wisdom*, or *knowledge*, or *integrity*, or *courage*, or *spiritual and emotional health*? Of Saul – we hear nothing about *any* of that.

There's a sequence of events involving some lost donkeys that leads Saul to the town where Samuel lived. Samuel, meanwhile, had received a message from God: "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the Benjaminite territory. You will anoint him as leader of my people Israel. He will save my people from the Philistines' power because I have seen the suffering of my people, and their cry for help has reached me." (1 Samuel 9.16) The next day, when Samuel sees Saul, God reveals to him: "That's the man I told you about. That's the one who will rule my people." (1 Samuel 9.17) Samuel invites Saul to a banquet and offers him lodging for the night, then early the next morning Samuel anoints him with oil, kisses him, and declares, "The LORD hereby anoints you leader of his people Israel." (1 Samuel 10.1) God provides Saul several signs that confirm Samuel's word, and Saul returns home, undoubtedly bewildered by everything that has happened. He wasn't *looking* to become Israel's next leader – but it is often the case God calls people to tasks that they never envisioned for themselves, never thought they would be doing. Hey, it happened to me – twenty years ago I was saying to God, "I'll do anything you want, except I will *not* become a pastor" – and you can see where that got me!

Soon afterward, Samuel gathers all Israel at a town called Mizpah, where Samuel publicly proclaims Saul as Israel's new king. Trouble is, Saul is nowhere to be found: he's hiding among the supplies. Is he afraid? Hardly an auspicious beginning for this new king. Some people mutter, "How can this man save us?" (1 Samuel 10.27) Yet Samuel proclaims, "Can you see the one the LORD has chosen? He has no equal among the people," and the Israelites respond, "Long live the king!" (1 Samuel 10.24)

So Saul becomes the first king of all Israel. This is somewhere around the year 1040 BC. His first test: to deal with those Ammonites who are gouging out peoples' eyes. Saul conscripts an army of 33,000 men from all over Israel and heads to the aid of the beleaguered tribes. The Israelite army is successful, the Ammonite threat is defeated, there's a huge celebration, and a public coronation. The people are wildly enthusiastic: they think they've got a king that will save them from all their problems.

On election night, every four years, there's a typical sequence of events: a concession speech by the losing candidate; the victor emerges triumphant; the winning party holds a huge celebration; they think they've got themselves a leader who will save them from all their problems ... though things *rarely* go as smoothly for the leader as he or she would like. And it's easy, *oh* so easy, for the leader to try to lead on their *own* strength, and not rely on the strength that comes from God. The surest way for a leader to lead poorly is to stop listening for the wisdom that comes from *God*. Saul starts off well: after the defeat of the Ammonites, he says to his people, "Today the LORD has saved Israel." (1 Samuel 11.13) He recognizes that it was *God's* strength, not his, that won the day. If only he can remember to keep his eyes and heart fixed on God as time goes on, things will go well for him, and for the country he loves.

Isn't that true for *every* person in a position of leadership? Keep your eyes and heart fixed on God ... and things will go well ... not only for them ... but for the country we *all* love.

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