

The Weight of the Crown

Complicated Beginnings

1 Samuel 10-11

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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? 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 valor 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 Sam. 10:17-27).

Think with me about the last time you made the following statement: "It's complicated."

What was the subject that you were talking about? Perhaps someone asked you about a friendship or how work was going. Maybe you responded that way when someone asked your advice about parenting or grandparenting. Maybe "It's complicated" was a good and accurate way to describe a situation between friends, a church issue, or a political issue.

"It's complicated" is usually applied to situations or scenarios that are both important and multi-faceted. In other words, the answers or solutions are not straightforward. It just means that life isn't as simple as it seems. The older I get, the more I've come to realize that life is often complicated.

In my leisure reading, I love to explore historical figures and biographies. I recently read a biography of Andrew Jackson, our seventh president, who many consider to be the first populist president and whose face we see on every \$20 bill. His presidency was complicated. I also read a book about the relationship between President Kennedy and Martin Luther King. It was complicated.

It shouldn't surprise us that most of life is complicated, but sometimes it's easy to look back through the lens of history and oversimplify the issues and challenges. Life and history are often complicated.

The same is true for 1 Samuel: It's complicated. The transition between the time of judges to the time of the monarchy is a bit of a bumpy ride. The crown has a weightiness to it that is sometimes life-giving and at other times is soul-crushing.

When we left our study a couple weeks ago in 1 Samuel, we left with the people of Israel demanding a king. Saul was searching for lost donkeys. And Samuel privately anointed Saul's head, telling him that the Lord had chosen him as king.

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 (1 Sam. 10:1).

Our text today, chapters 10-11, detail what happens next. And, as you might expect, it's complicated. There are details and layers in this text that help us to see that God is at work in and through the complicated. I'm thankful that God works in and through the complicated. I'm complicated. Life is complicated. Church is complicated. And none of that hinders the work or the plan of God.

Let's take a look at this and see what we can learn together.

Empowered and Cautious (10:1-16)

Chapter 10 begins with the private anointing of Saul by Samuel, and the communication of three signs to Saul. It would seem that Samuel desires to provide confirmation to Saul of the legitimacy of what he's saying. The three signs are connected to three locations: Rachel's Tomb, the Oak of Tabor, and Gibeath-Elohim.

- **Rachel's Tomb (v. 2)** – Saul will meet two men who will inform him that the missing donkeys have been found and his father is worried about him.
- **Oak of Tabor (vv. 3-4)** – Three men will be on their way to worship at Bethel, and one of them will give Saul two loaves of bread. This gift will not only meet his physical needs as they are out of bread (1 Sam. 9:7), but it is also a sign of his "holy calling" since this is bread intended for worship.
- **Gibeath-Elohim (vv. 5-6)** – This city houses a Philistine garrison, and Saul will meet a group of prophets who are returning from worship with musical instruments (a traveling band!?). But something profound will happen to Saul.

Verse 6 is really important: "Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man." Saul will not only be anointed with oil, but he'll be filled with the Spirit of the Lord. He'll receive divine empowerment for the task at hand.

As often happens when God does a new work, signs and wonders follow. We see this in the New Testament at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17) and with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with the tongues of fire and speaking in tongues (Acts 2). It also happens when the Gentiles believe the gospel at Cornelius's house (Acts 10:44-48). God often authenticated the public ministry of key leaders through signs and wonders. We see this pattern as the monarchy begins. Saul will be divinely empowered.

Samuel then gives Saul some instruction (vv. 7-8). Since these signs mean that "God is with you," Saul should do "what your hand finds to do." Saul is to take the necessary action in light of his empowerment by God. Some commentators suggest that Samuel is referring to the Philistine garrison or maybe simply to keeping his eye out for the right opportunity. We're not entirely sure.

What is clear, however, is that Saul is to then travel to Gilgal and wait for Samuel to arrive. The city of Gilgal was significant and had historical connotations. John Woodhouse writes:

"Gilgal was the place where the wilderness wanderings ended for Israel, and life in the land began (see Joshua 5:11, 12). Circumcision (the mark of God's promise to Abraham) and the Passover (the memorial of the redemption from Egypt) were celebrated at Gilgal as the nation began its new life in the land God was giving them (Joshua 5:1-10). Gilgal's name provided a wordplay with the Hebrew verb "to roll": there the Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you" (Joshua 5:9)."¹

But what's also significant is the relationship between Samuel and Saul. The prophet Samuel was going to provide instruction to Saul. The king was called upon to listen to the word of the Lord and the spiritual leaders.

Verse 9 is critical: "When he {Saul} turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart. And all these signs came to pass that day" (10:9). In chapter 15 there will be another turning, but then it will be Samuel who turns from Saul as a part of his robe is torn off when Saul is rejected as king. This may be a foreshadowing of what's to come. However, at this moment Saul is the approved and anointed king.

In fact, word spread about Saul's prophesying. The people who knew Saul were surprised at what was happening, and they even created a proverb "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (vv. 10-13).

But notice Saul's demeanor with his uncle (vv. 14-16). When Saul is asked about his travels, he reveals nothing about what Samuel told him regarding his being anointed as king. The text says, "about the matter of the kingdom . . . he did not tell him anything" (v. 16). Without making too much of this, it seems that Saul is a bit of a reluctant and cautious leader. At one level, we might understand this because Saul was simply looking for some lost donkeys when Samuel anoints him as the first king. But at

¹ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 174.

another level, it seems also to point to an inconsistent and maybe a disobedient king. We begin to see some early signs of concern with Saul. He's empowered by the Lord but cautious.

Proclaimed and Resisted (10:17-27)

The next scene is the coronation of Saul, but it's also a complicated situation. First, Samuel calls all the people to Mizpah. This is where Samuel gathered the people in chapter 7 with the threat of the Philistines and invited them to turn to the Lord. When they embraced repentance and God delivered them, they set up the Ebenezer stone. Samuel calls them to assemble again.

His invitation to Mizpah is a bit ominous:

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" (1 Sam. 10:18-19).

Samuel then proceeds to cast lots for the selection of the king. The tribe of Benjamin was selected (v. 20). Then the Matrites clan. And the lot fell on Saul. But no one can find him (v. 21). You can imagine the awkwardness of the moment, maybe even for Samuel. "Saul, son of Kish," followed by an awkward silence. After they inquire of the Lord, Samuel receives a word from the Lord that Saul is hiding (v. 22).

Once they find Saul, they bring him before the people. Verses 23-24 record the commentary about him and the moment:

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? There is none like him among all the people." And all the people shouted, "Long live the king!" (1 Sam. 10:23-24).

This is complicated. The first king of Israel came reluctantly after trying to evade the throne. He's praised for his physical appearance—"there's none like him . . ."—and they hail him as king. You can almost feel the Scriptures cringing.

From there, Samuel identified the "rights and duties of kingship" and put it all in a book (v. 25). Samuel wrote a manual for the king. This is probably a recitation of some kind related to Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order

to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You shall never return that way again." And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. 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 (Deut. 17:14-20).

With this instruction, the people are sent home. And Saul heads home with a group of soldiers, "men of valor whose hearts God had touched" (v. 26). And yet not all is well in the kingdom because there were some "worthless fellows" who protested Saul's coronation as king who asked, "How can this man save us?" (v. 27).

And yet despite being dishonored, Saul held his peace and did nothing about it.

Bold and Gracious (11:1-12)

Chapter 11 is the first real crisis that Saul faces as king. While the threat of the Philistines is still very real, another issue emerges. Across the Jordan River, to the east, was Jabesh-Gilead. They were besieged by the Amorites under the leadership of Nahash (v. 1). When the city appeals for terms of peace, Nahash requires the entire city to gouge out their right eyes. Nahash intended to bring disgrace upon the entire nation. Imagine if every person in a city only had his or her left eye!

The elders of the city ask for seven days to consider the offer. They intend to inquire as to whether there is someone to help them among the tribes of Israel. It's noteworthy that Nahash grants them this request. He must be quite confident in the weakness of Israel. And it's intriguing that the elders appeal to the tribes and not to their new king.

When news of this crisis reaches Gibeah, the Spirit of the Lord rushes on Saul and he is outraged (v. 6). He cuts up two oxen and sends the pieces to the tribes. It's instructive that the command to rally together involves an invitation from "Saul and Samuel" (v. 7). The tribes rallied to the call, and they attacked Nahash.

And the next day Saul put the people in three companies. And they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. And those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together (1 Sam. 11:11).

It was a great victory for the people of Israel and the new king! In their enthusiasm, they wanted to punish the people who were not supportive of Saul (v. 12). But Saul wisely restrained the people's impulses: "But Saul said, 'Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has worked salvation in Israel'" (1 Sam. 11:13).

Instead, Samuel calls the people to travel to Gilgal for a covenant renewal ceremony (v. 14). With sacrifices to the Lord, the people rejoiced. They “made Saul king before the Lord” (v. 15) which means that they recognized the connection between Saul’s reign and the Lord’s kindness to them. This was a day of celebration and gratitude. And it sets up Samuel’s farewell address in the next chapter.

Life in Israel is changing.

Applications

We’ve covered a lot of ground in the text today. Let’s consider two applications from these chapters.

1. God graciously works in a complicated world with complicated people.

As I study 1 Samuel, I’m struck by the layers of complexity and challenges that we see in the text, and I’m comforted by the reminder that God works in the real world. The Bible presents people as they are, and yet God is working in the messiness of life.

I’m grateful for this because our world is still complicated, people are complicated, and I’m complicated. There’s not a lot of scenarios in life that are completely straightforward. At a personal level and with relationships, churches, workplace, or a nation, life is often unclear and messy. Yet, God is at work.

This helps me to be thankful when life is complicated, to be more gracious with complicated people, and to have hope knowing that there is mercy and grace available for every complicated day.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him” (Lam. 3:22-24).

2. We need a faithful, perfect King named Jesus.

Eli refused to restrain his sons. Samuel’s sons were wicked. The nation of Israel wanted protection. Samuel feels rejected. Saul seems timid. The people are fickle. There are no perfect people or leaders, except for one—Jesus. 1 Samuel is showing us that the weight of the crown can only be borne by one King. We long for the fulfillment of the hopeful words in Isaiah 9:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this (Isa. 9:6-7).

Look to Jesus today! In a complicated world, set your heart to trust in him.

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus
Just to take Him at His Word

Just to rest upon His promise
Just to know, "Thus saith the Lord"

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus
Oh, for grace to trust Him more

I'm so glad I learned to trust Him
Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend
And I know that He is with me
Will be with me to the end

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