

INTRO: I hesitate to admit this, but my wife has persuaded me to watch Christmas Hallmark movies with her every so often. They're all the same. I think that's why we like them. Did I say we? I meant she... Usually near the beginning a lonely girl says wishes she could find the right guy, and then the very next scene introduces the viewer to the guy she's going to end up marrying, but in a whole different context, usually showing him as lonely, or hapless, or unsuspecting. That scene—introducing the guy, in a whole different context, IS 1Sam 9, p.231 in the pew Bible. In 1S 8, Israel had asked for a king. 1Sam 9 introduces us to him. So, who is this guy?¹

1S 9:1-2 *There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, the son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. And he had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.* What's repeated there? "A man of Benjamin... a Benjaminite." Saul is from the tribe of Benjamin. What do we know about Benjamin? Gen 49:27 "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil." Israel just asked for a king, and Samuel told them their kind of king would take and take and take... maybe like a ravenous wolf. But in Gen 49 the symbol of royal rule, the scepter, was promised not to Benjamin but to Judah. *The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet...* Kings will come from Judah. Wolves will come from Benjamin.

But maybe Gen 49 is too remote a context for figuring out who Saul will become. Where's the last time we see Benjamin? Judges 19-20. Remember what happened there? That's when the Levite was traveling and is afraid to spend the night in a foreign city, so he stays the night in Gibeah where "The men of the place were Benjaminites" (Jdgs 19:16). And what do the Benjaminites do? Instead of giving the Levite hospitality, they sexually abuse his concubine and leave her for dead. **Gibeah re-enacted Gomorrah** (Judges 19; Gen 19). Benjamin had become as bad as Sodom. The result in Jdgs 20 was civil war among the tribes, and in Judges 20:35 "The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel." Benjamin meant "son of my right hand," authority, favor (Gen 35:18); but the Benjaminites never live up to their name, and this one won't either. He will have the authority, but without the favor. Saul is not only a Benjaminite; guess what city he's from? Gibeah (1S 10:26; so also Firth, AOC 128). **Gibeah became New Gomorrah**, and that's Saul's hometown. Gibeah became an ancient Gotham, IN ISRAEL. You might say, the Benjaminites were just like all the other nations, and worse. And what is it that Israel just asked for in chapter 8? A king "like all the nations" so that we ourselves might be like all the nations." They don't know it yet, but in Saul, God is giving Israel what they asked for²—with a vengeance. God would say hundreds of years later through the prophet Hosea, "I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath."³

¹ My own largely negative approach to the Saul narrative is apparently contradicted by D.R. Davis sunny treatment of ch 9-10 (FOTB), but appears confirmed in von Rad. "At an early time Saul was certainly on everyone's lips, and he also soon became a subject of poetry. But to faith his supreme interest was as the anointed who slipped from Jahweh's hand, the one quitting the stage, and yielding to him who was coming; that is, Saul as the God-forsaken, driven from one delusion to the other, desperate, and in the end swallowed up in miserable darkness... [T]here is at the same time something supra-personal in the way in which he became guilty—it is the fate which overtakes the one from whom God has turned away....He was called to be a special tool of the will of Jahweh in history, for it was through him that Jahweh wanted to give effect to his plan to save Israel (1Smam ix.16). On this task he came to disaster...[T]he portrait of Israel's first anointed has something strangely negative about it; for even the stories which show his vain defiance of the anointed who is to come, and in particular the story of his tragic end, say in every line that this Saul was not the anointed after Jahweh's own heart. So then, the tradition about Saul has no intrinsic independence, for it is never given merely for itself: it always has its eye on the one who is to come. Had they not had this reference to something lying beyond themselves, the scanty traditions concerning Saul would assuredly have vanished without a trace. More and more tradition pushed Saul into the role of the anointed who came to disaster in the eyes of God...[until] the account of the history in Ps. LXXVIII...wiped him utterly out of the saving history" (Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962 trans. D.M.G. Stalker], 1:324-327). So also Eichrodt. "It is a sign of complete failure to assume that the critical attitude toward the monarchy can only be the product of its later failures, and to imagine that the problem can be solved by assigning the source that displays a critical tendency to a date in the late monarchical period...; the difficulties were present from the very first, and were felt to be so... [T]hose who had hitherto been the nation's religious leaders saw another danger arising, that religion might be used as a means to an end, as just one more horse harnessed to the chariot of dynastic and nationalist designs" (Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* [London, SCM 1961] 1:441, 442).

² So also R.D. Bergen (NAC, 124), D. Firth (AOC, 121).

³ "The primary sin of the kingship, as demonstrated in Saul, is the self-sufficiency of the holders of political power in the face of the only real power, that of God. All their wickedness is in Gilgal; for there I hated them...all their princes are revolvers....(Hos 9:15-17). All the later defection was, therefore, already Paul Alexander ©2020

But man does Saul look every part the leader! Young...tall...handsome...and rich.⁴ This guy cuts a nice figure, doesn't he? He looks like a senior pastor. Saul is the kind of guy all the church's want as members, and as elders. He'll look good on the stage and on the website. He'll attract the attractive, resonate with the rich, influence the influencers. Head and shoulders over anybody else in Israel. Here's a leader you could look up to, a vision of greatness, and a gentleman, a cultural elite. Saul looks **impressive**. Ah, but appearances can be deceiving. The Anakim were tall, the giants that scared Israel into chicken out on the border of Canaan in Number 13. Goliath will be tall. Height does not make right. And handsome won't ransom. Isaiah teaches us that. Here is Christ by contrast. Isaiah says of the one anointed King of the Jews, Isa 52:14 "*His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind... He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not...*" (Isa 53:2-3). And sure enough, that's why the Jews rejected Jesus in Mark 6:3 "*Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him.*" (cf. John 8:41). We think we know what a leader looks like, until God gives us a man after his own heart, His own Son, a king worthy of the name, Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one. It is true, Jesus doesn't look like much when he comes in the manger and when he walks the earth. But you dare not make the mistake of thinking God's chosen King will conform to your own assumptions.⁵

1S 9:3-10 *Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, were lost. So Kish said to Saul his son, 'Take one of the young men with you, and arise, go and look for the donkeys.' And he passed through the hill country of Ephraim and passed through the land of Shalishah, but they **did not find them**. And they passed through the land of Shaalim, but they **were not there**. Then they passed through the land of Benjamin, but **did not find them**. When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to his servant who was with him, 'Come, let us go back, lest my father cease to care about the donkeys and become anxious about us.' But he said to him, 'Behold, **there is a man of God** in this city, and he is a man who is held in honor; all that he says comes true. So now let us go there. Perhaps he can tell us the way we should go.' Then Saul said to his servant, 'but if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What do we have?' [transactional] The servant **answered Saul again**, 'Here, I have with me a quarter of a shekel of silver, and I will give it to the man of God to tell us our way.' (Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, 'Come, let us go to the seer,' for today's prophet was formerly called a seer). And Saul said to his servant, 'Well said; come, let us go.' So they went to the city where the man of God was.*

Saul is not really much of a shepherd, is he?⁶ He's lost track of dad's donkeys, He's bad at looking for them, he never does find them, and after a while he doesn't really seem to care—quick to quit. And donkey's weren't pets. They were business assets. They were like tractors to till ground or trailers to haul freight. They were worth looking for; you didn't want to lose those. But Saul's servant is a harder worker

contained in Saul's act of disobedience in Gilgal (1Sam 15)... This insolent self-sufficiency in the face of God's claim to absolute lordship has changed the monarchy from a blessing into a curse on the nation, for it has seduced Israel into turning away from Yahweh, its only helper, and caused it to put its trust in the king... This is why God, who can tolerate no rivals, has made the monarchy into a scourge of his wrath against the nations (Hos 13:11)" (Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* [London, SCM 1961] 1:449-450). Eichrodt goes so far as to say the Saul narrative anticipates the genre of Greek tragedy.

⁴ This is why I totally disagree with D.R. Davis' cheery assessment of the purportedly positive reaction of Saul's family to his prophesying: "Yahweh frequently defies human expectations and gives the most unlikely people all they need to serve him effectively. So he equips Saul. No matter how unlikely in men's eyes, Yahweh is able to make him able" (FOTB, 100). Generally true, but not in Saul's case. The whole point of introducing Saul as young, tall, handsome, and rich was actually to portray him as the most *likely* person from a human standpoint to become a king. You can't have it both ways just for the sake of an ironic application: Saul can't be both the most likely and the most unlikely to rule. Saul personifies the kind of king every nation wants...and the kind of kingdom Israel herself wants to be—self-reliant.

⁵ David was handsome too (16:12), but in a diminutive, unimpressive, boyish (17:56), rosy-cheeked ("ruddy") way. Goliath disdained him as soft (17:42).

⁶ D. Firth, AOC 122.

than he is...and wiser, too. Saul would rather quit early and fail than try to consult a prophet—something that will come to characterize him as king. In fact, he didn't even know there was a prophet nearby. How does Saul not know about Samuel, when all Israel from Dan to Beersheeba had known about Samuel for decades (2:20)? Saul isn't just irresponsible. He's oblivious. Saul's ready to call it quits. His servant suggests visiting Samuel. Saul again objects—what are we gonna give him for his trouble? Sounds like he thinks Samuel is no different than Eli. But look at the narrative. “*The servant answered Saul again,*” it highlights Saul's stubbornness. The servant has to overcome a second objection from Saul. He comes up with a quarter shekel, from out of nowhere it seems,⁷ and says, ‘look what I just found in my pocket! This'll do, right?’ Saul's fresh out of excuses. He says “*Well said,*” but the way he's acting makes you wonder if he means it.⁸ Is Saul leading the servant, or is the servant leading Saul? Whatever the case, off they go after the prophet, probably to Ramah, Samuel's home in the hills.⁹

1S 9:11-14 “*As they went up the hill to the city, they met young women coming out to draw water and said to them, ‘Is the seer here?’ They answered, ‘He is; behold, he is just ahead of you. Hurry. He has come just now to the city, because the people have a sacrifice today on the high place. As soon as you enter the city you will find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat. **For the people will not eat till he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice;** afterward those who are invited will eat. Now go up, for you will meet him immediately.’ So they went up to the city. As they were entering the city, they saw Samuel coming out toward them on his way up to the high place.” Well! Here comes Samuel now, while the people wait for him to bless the sacrifice! And if we know what's coming in chapter 13, that is an ominous note. Saul hears that the people have to wait for Samuel.... But whatever. What a coincidence, right! Serendipity. But of course, this is God's providence, His sovereignty guiding all situations for his glory. God had planned this “chance” meeting ahead of time, as we discover in v.15.*

1S 9:15-17 *Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel: ‘Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and **you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have seen my people, because their cry has come to me.**’ When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, ‘Here is the man of whom I spoke to you! He it is who shall **restrain my people.**’* Now look at that. Israel had just rejected God as king in chapter 8, by asking for another king. Yet who does God say will Saul reign over? “*My people.*” Four times in vv.16-17: “*Prince over my people...He shall save my people, because I have seen my people...He shall restrain my people.*” They rejected God, but God does not reject them. God is faithful, even when we are faithless. So God is giving Israel a king like the nations, a bad-boy from Benjamin. Their request was clearly sinful, as the text makes abundantly clear in chapter 12. But what will God use Saul to do? Save my people, and restrain my people. Why? *For I have seen my people, because their cry has come to me.* That savors strongly of Exodus 2:24 “*Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.*” But there's a pretty big difference here. Israel still had a certain innocence to them, at least a victim status, in Ex 2. Not here. Israel's guilty as sin now. They just rejected God! But God raises up Saul, at least in part, to save them. Why? It's not because Israel is righteous. It's because God is faithful. He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger. Another exodus is coming, even though Israel has done everything NOT to deserve it.¹⁰

⁷ D. Tsumura, NICOT 269.

⁸ Brueggemann says “The narrative...has no real interest in the story of the asses. That story is only a convenient entry point into the real story concerning the monarchy” (*Interp.*, 71); but clearly Saul's introduction has important negative overtones and reveals character flaws that become important for the monarchy.

⁹ D. Tsumura, NICOT 268.

¹⁰ Tsumura, NICOT 275, recognizes a different allusion to Ex 3:9, but doesn't develop the new exodus theme present here in 1S 9. Brueggemann affirms the allusion to Ex 2:23-25, but doesn't mention second exodus motif (INT, 72). Firth is probably closest to the mark: “That Yahweh is responding to the cry of the people indicates that a parallel to the events of the exodus is intended, something that generates irony from the fact that the exodus motif featured most
Paul Alexander ©2020

God Judges and Saves through the same man.¹¹ But Saul is a Bad-boy Benjaminite. And wasn't Israel wrong to ask for a king? And isn't God giving them just the kind of bad king they want? All true. Then is Saul a judgment or a salvation for Israel? YES. He is both. And that is why this historical narrative is so baffling to us. God is moving in, for both judgment and salvation, of the same national people, through the same individual leader. That is why the whole text feels like it's toggling between judgment and salvation—because Saul is both a judgment on Israel's rejecting of God, and a deliverer, one who will save Israel from their enemies the Ammonites and the Philistines. God is faithful both to His threats and to His promises, and He is so sovereign that he will use one in the same Saul to express both kinds of faithfulness. You want a king like all the nations? I'll give you a Bad-boy Benjaminite. And then I'll use him to save you from your own sin and stupidity, even from your enemies, because God is faithful to His word even when we are not faithful to Him. Think about it. God judges and saves through the same man. Sound familiar? This is just what he does in the perfect, sinless Son of God, Christ Jesus, King of Kings. "He will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel." "The stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone," but "the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces." (Mt 21:42, 44). The difference is, Jesus will both have God's Spirit and obey God's word. Saul will have God's Spirit, but he will not obey God's word.

1Sam 9:18-21. *Then Saul approached Samuel in the gate and said, 'Tell me where is the house of the seer?' Samuel answered Saul, 'I am the seer. Saul can't recognize a prophet even when he's staring him in the face--oblivious! Go up before me to the high place, for today you shall eat with me, and in the morning I will let you go and will tell you all that is on your mind. As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not set your mind on them, for they have been found. And for whom is **all that is desirable** in Israel? Is it not **for you** and for all your father's house?' Saul answered, 'Am I not a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me this way?'" Forget about your donkeys. You've got a shot at a dynasty. Saul gets it. What Samuel said would go to the king in chapter 8, Samuel says is coming Saul's way here in chapter 9—all that's desirable in Israel. But wouldn't the king have to come from Judah? (cf. Gen 49:10; 2Kgs 8:8; 1S 8:10-17; 9:1?). Meanwhile, the donkeys are found in spite of Saul's incompetence, just like God's people will be led to green pastures in spite of Saul's intransigence.*

1S 9:22-26 "Then Samuel took Saul and his young man and brought them into the hall and gave them a place at the **head** of those who had been invited, who were about thirty persons. And Samuel said to the cook, 'Bring the portion I gave you, of which I said to you, "Put it aside." So the cook took up the **leg** and what was on it and set them before Saul. And Samuel said, 'See, what was kept is set before you. Eat, because it was kept for you until the hour appointed, that you might eat with the guests.' So Saul ate with Samuel that day. And when they came down from the high place into the city, a bed was spread for Saul **on the roof**, and he lay down to sleep. Then at the break of dawn Samuel called to Saul on the roof, 'Up, that I may send you on your way.' So Saul arose, and both he and Samuel went out into the street." Remember, they're eating at a ritual sacrifice officiated by Samuel, Saul is seated at the head of the table, and he is served the leg. That piece was the privilege of the priests.¹² A prophet gives Saul the portion reserved for priests. And he eats it. Then Saul gets to sleep in the coolest room of the house, the rooftop

prominently in 4:1-7:1, where the theme of the exodus is more of a warning to Israel than one of hope" (AOC, 123). Firth is also right to see warning/judgment motifs just under the surface of Saul's call in the present passage, *contra* D.R. Davis.

¹¹ This is *contra* D.R. Davis' exclusively sunny exposition of Saul in this passage as only a deliverer in FOTB.

¹² Ex 29:22, 27; Lev 7:32-33; Baldwin, *TOTC* (1988, repr. 2008), 96-97.

porch.¹³ But Samuel still hasn't told Saul what all this means. Samuel is showing, but not yet telling. So Saul's thinking, "I'm getting the royal treatment. Why you being so nice?"

1Sam 9:27-10:8 *"As they were going down to the outskirts of the city, Samuel said to Saul, 'Tell the servant to pass on before us, and when he has passed on, stop here yourself for a while, that I may make known to you the word of God.' 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 prince¹⁴ 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. Saul is going to be a savior for God's people. Here again, God keeps owning his people, even as they've just disowned Him. "If we are faithless, he is faithful, for he cannot deny Himself." But the whole thing still makes you wonder: what kind of savior can Saul be, when he's not even that interested in saving his dad's donkeys? And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over his heritage.¹⁵ When you depart from me today, you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah, 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?'" That's exactly what Saul said to his servant privately the day before. So to hear it from a couple strangers will be the sign that Samuel's anointing is God's will. But that question is also full of irony in Saul's case. That is not just a question about what Kish should do about Saul. It's ultimately a question of what God the Father should do about Saul; and not just about Saul, but about God's disobedient son Israel, who Saul personifies in his own self-seeking stubbornness—Hos 6:4 "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?" What am I going to do about my son? That question hangs over Saul's whole life, like a dark cloud.*

Then you shall go on from there farther 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. That's just what they didn't have before they met Samuel—no bread in their sacks. 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. 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."

All the signs happen in v.9, but only the last one is recorded. But obedience for Saul will require him to go to Gilgal and wait seven days until Samuel comes with further instructions. Wait. Near a Philistine garrison. Seven Days. Until I come. The Spirit rushing on Saul will be God's empowerment for Saul's work. Waiting seven days for Samuel to arrive will be the test of Saul's obedience to God's word through

¹³ R.D. Bergen, NAC 125.

¹⁴ "The title *nāgid* is suitably vague—it means a leader, but the details are not defined. By avoiding 'king' or any word associated with the judges, Saul's role is still limited. He will not act with a king's authority, and neither is he another judge; he has a leadership role that will be determined and shaped by Yahweh, one not to be exercised under Yahweh, but Saul has not yet been given specific content. Indeed, a striking omission from Samuel's speech is any reference to Saul's role in saving the people from the Philistines" (Firth, AOC 125).

¹⁵ "The primary meaning of the term [*nahalāh*] is 'inalienable, hereditary property... Even though Israel has become a monarchy, it still is the Lord's 'estate,' and so Saul will be king only under God" (Tsumura, NICOT 282).

the prophet. God is faithful to His commitment; but will Saul pass the test?¹⁶ Will Saul trust God's word enough to obey it? Will Saul fear God, or fear the Philistines?

1S 10:9-16 *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.' But about the matter of the kingdom, of which Samuel had spoken, he did not tell him anything.*

This is not Saul experiencing regeneration like in John 3. This is more like Prov 21:1 “*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.*” All the signs come to pass. God's Spirit overcomes Saul like it did Samson. And apparently this was way out of character for Saul. His friends and family see him prophesy and they're like, “What has gotten into him?” Nobody ever saw a charismatic side coming out of Saul. Saul!?!—is a prophet? Wonders never cease.¹⁷ But there's a skepticism about this around town. Another man answered “Who is their father?” Who are these people, prophesying like this, and where did they get this power in the first place? Who do they think they are? Who's their leader? Who gave them authority to speak and act like that? **Who's in charge here?**

Saul's experience is raising a lot of unanswered questions, not least of which is, What do these wonders mean in Saul's own life? It's not clear yet, is it? Is he a prophet like Samuel and Moses? Is he a judge like Samson? Is he more like Eldad and Medad in Numbers 11? Does Saul have a special relationship with God? What will Saul's experience mean? Is Saul a Christian now—did he just get saved? What is God doing with Saul...or to him? ...For now it's a mystery. All we know from the text is that God is going to use Saul to save Israel. In fact, it's unclear whether Saul himself even knows what's going on in his own life. Saul doesn't even know what to tell his uncle. Saul comes and stands by his uncle at the high place, and his uncle is like, “hey where you been last couple days?” Saul's like, “Dad sent me looking for the donkeys, and we ran into Samuel.” And Saul's uncle's like, “You talked with Samuel? He's a prophet! Dish, man! What'd he tell you!” “Nothin' really, just that somebody found the donkeys, it's all good.” And as readers we're like, really?! You're gonna keep that whole ‘anointing thing’, ‘you-shall-reign-over-the-people’ conversation to yourself? What's up with that?¹⁸ And we don't know. For now, Saul is a tough nut to crack. It's uncomfortable.¹⁹

A miraculous experience of God's Spirit does not guarantee salvation. God does not answer Saul's prayers, reward Saul's efforts, or bless his reign. God rejects Saul in the end, and the end doesn't take long to arrive. Yet Saul has an experience here of God's Spirit that few if any of us in this room have ever enjoyed. Saul is changed into another man...but not for long. The Spirit rushes on him...yet later leaves

¹⁶ So also Firth, “The task is an important test, a means of proving his openness to Yahweh's leading and willingness to work under the prophet in matters concerned with the Spirit. Saul will be authorized by his encounter with the Spirit, but remain under prophetic authority and be required to remain faithful to the prophetic message” (AOC, 126).

¹⁷ I thought of this phrase on my own, though D.R. Davis used it 32 years before me (FOTB, 100).

¹⁸ “Saul's silence raises questions about his future role...; already there is a point at which Saul appears to be setting himself at cross-purposes with Yahweh, though at this stage he has not acted upon it” (Firth, Apollos 127).

¹⁹ “This narrative asserts that Israel's world is not closed and settled. The personal world of Saul and the public world of Israel are both available to Yahweh, for shattering and for starting again, the very shattering and starting anticipated by Hannah (2:1-10)” (Brueggemann, INT 78).

him. And sadly, Saul's experience is not unique. This happens to many people in the NT and still today. Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one came back to thank him. Jesus said "*On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'Depart from me, I never knew you, you workers of lawlessness'*" (Mt 7:22-23). Maybe that's why the writer to the Hebrews warns us in **Heb 6:4** that there will be those "*who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, [and yet] they have fallen away.*" Yet the writer is convinced of better things about the congregation he's writing to, things that belong to salvation. So those other experiences of the Spirit, real and powerful though they are, are not necessarily the things that belong to salvation. Faith and repentance belong to salvation. Power? Power God can give to anyone, whether they're saved or not.

Modern Pentecostals and many charismatics say we should seek just these kinds of experiences based on the model they see in Acts—power, miracle, feeling, experience. To them, that is the answer to the evangelistic powerlessness and cultural irrelevance of the churches. Churches in Elgin will tell you to seek this kind of experience because it is the secret to both personal assurance of salvation and personal power in ministry. Now that's a tempting message to trust—who doesn't want assurance and power? And it seems like a wonderfully spiritual answer to the rationalism and naturalism of our day—Spiritual with a capital S, spiritual in ALL caps! As Frederick Bruner puts it, such experience "is seen as a real necessity if a Christian is to have an unshakeable certainty that the Spirit has truly and fully come to him... [Such experience] heightens...the tangibility...of [what they call] baptism in the Holy Spirit. And especially in the form of tongues, "it transforms the coming of the Holy Spirit into a knowable, clear, and datable experience, manifest in time and space, [and therefore] removing the vagaries of faith."²⁰ Beware of that stuff. Saul trusted in his own very real, very tangible, even transformative experience of the Holy Spirit of the Living God. *He became another man*. Saul had an impressive resume of spiritual experience; yet where did that lead him, untethered from obedience to the word that this same Spirit breathes out? Experience, feeling, encounter even, is severely misleading as a measure of spiritual maturity or even an assurance of spiritual life. It is not the experience or power of the Spirit that tells you whether you are in Christ, but the fruit of the Spirit—the character of Christ reproduced in you, obedience to Christ's commands—whether you ever do or feel anything that temporarily suspends the ordinary laws of nature or not. Christian character IS the miracle fruit. Is God free to suspend ordinary laws of nature today? Absolutely. Should you seek that experience as assurance of your own salvation or favor with God? No, you should not, and Jesus tells you as much in Matthew 7.

Experience of God's Spirit must be accompanied by obedience to God's word. Saul is empowered by God's Spirit, and commanded by God's word. He needs both—the Spirit and the word; but he only pays attention to the Spirit, while he neglects the command of God's word. Saul likes having the Spirit's power, He just doesn't want to obey the Spirit's authority in God's word spoken by God's prophet. Jesus said "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Even if you dream dreams, cast out demons, work miracles, feel

²⁰ F.D. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 82, 84. "The only experience guaranteeing that we have received the very Spirit received by the apostles, urge Pentecostals, is the very experience of the apostles. 'I want to know that I have received the fullness of the Spirit with the same accompanying signs that were manifest at the initial outpouring' (Bruner, 82, quoting G. Duffield, *Pentecostal Preaching* [New York: Vantage Press, 1957]). "'When I asked Pentecostals what tongues did for them,' reports John L. Sherrill, 'the first answer was always, "Assure me that I have been baptized in the Holy Ghost,"' to which Sherrill remarks sympathetically, 'of course it would be a priceless asset in a believer's life: to know without question that God's own Spirit was manifested from within one'" (Bruner, 84). "By no other means [than tongues] can the observing church be assured of the experience's authenticity...To preserve the church from deception and to provide it with a clear criterion of inward membership, God has provided the church both biblically and experientially with an unequivocal sign," even though "it must be accompanied by the other Christian graces to be completed" (Bruner, 85).

the Holy Spirit's power, all for real—it doesn't mean your saved. Jesus Himself specifically tells you NOT to put stock in those experiences. You put stock in Jesus Himself, and in the evidence of your faith not in your power, but in your repentant obedience to Jesus and to God's revealed word in Scripture, especially the Ten Commandments. It doesn't matter how strong and even true an experience of the Spirit you have. If you don't obey God's word, that experience will mislead you all the way to Hell. We just heard Jesus saying the same thing outright in Mt 7. For all of Saul's mystifying, real, powerful, providential experiences of God's Spirit, he will not end up obeying the one clear command of Samuel to wait at Gilgal. Just wait. That's it. Just don't do anything till I get there.²¹ Wait; but the one thing Saul just can't do is nothing. So in the end, he sacrifices both Spirit and word on the altar of his own stubbornness and ambition. And it ends up driving him crazy.²²

God's sovereignty over our ambiguities. This whole narrative has been a long, meandering trek. We meet Saul as the rich young Benjaminite, tall and handsome, an ideal figure for leadership. We've wandered with him over the hills and dales looking in vain for his dad's donkeys. We watched him try to make sense of Samuel's prophetic message to him, and then we watch Saul himself prophesy, yet by the end of it not even Saul knows what to say to his own uncle about the whole episode. What exactly is going on here? Saul is chosen, but for what role? He is privileged, but does he deserve it? He prophesies, but what exactly does that mean for his relationship with God? He's anointed as some kind of ruler, but he tells no one what happened? God is with Saul, but for what?²³ What is going on here? We don't know yet...and we don't have to.

God knows. God is in control. This is one of the most mystifying parts of Israel's history...but not to God. It is still God's word, spoken through God's prophet, that's moving the narrative along, even through all the uncertainties and obscurities of Saul's experience and actions, just as it was God's word moving history along in the clarity of Hannah's experience in chapter 1 and her song in chapter 2. God is the judge of all the earth, and he will always do right (Gen 18:25). And the way Saul's story is told does not just reflect Saul's internal inconsistencies and contradictions. It reveals our own ignorance of God's ways, even when God knows exactly what He's doing. Saul's story is unsettling to us, precisely because it makes us feel uncertain. We're not sure what to make of Saul. What's even more unsettling, we're not sure what to make, of what God is making of Saul. This part of the biblical story emphasizes that humanity is very clearly not in control of history. God is in control here. And God is doing things we are not able to do, things that we cannot even fully understand. Israel asked for a king like the nations, and God gives them Saul, against his own moral standards.

²¹ "It is noteworthy that LXX translates the verb *tôhēl* here as *dialeipseis* ("to stop, cease"...) which would mean 'to stop doing something' or to do nothing" (Tsumura, NICOT 290-291). Tsumura wonders if this "has something to do with the observance of the Sabbath." Perhaps, but it seems rather a simple test of faith in the face of exigency—the adjacent Philistine garrison.

²² "Saul is to receive both the power of the Spirit vv.6-7 and the direction of God's word through Samuel v.8" (D.R. Davis, FOTB 99). "With the attainment of assured power Saul's method of government changed, and perhaps his character did too...[H]e substituted sacramental consecration for personal deeds of power as the basis of his office. Next he sacrificed respect for the ancient law of Yahweh to his own authority in the matter of the ban in the Amalekite war, and thus gave preference to his newly-won political power over the religious rule of service required from the man endowed with the Spirit. Here human greatness has set itself up against God, and is no longer prepared to spend itself in obedient service. [The] monarchy...presumed on the power of its office instead of seeking its highest legitimation in selfless effort on behalf of Yahweh's purposes." The great tragedy of Saul is that "his disposition to compulsive action in the service of his idea of Yahweh now breaks out in **half-crazy** fits of rage and emotionally disturbed behavior. We hear no more of any might deeds...the story is now one of murderous attempts on David's life..., acts which with cruel clarity betray the **disintegration of a mind** till now dominated by devotion to a great ideal, and inspired by it to forceful action... It was a disaster for Saul that an official position of power should have fallen to his lot which did not require to be constantly achieved afresh by a supreme effort of the spirit and by obedient commitment of his whole personality, but instead clothed him with an authority which deprived him of the compulsion to continually repeated inward decision, and so opened the way to self-sufficient autocracy (W. Eichrodt I:445, 446). In short, both Spirit and word are sacrificed on the altar of personal political ambition and excused with a veneer of public liturgical leadership—and it literally drives Saul crazy. Tragic, yet similar to the demise of anti-Christian thinkers like F. Nietzsche and W. Reich (Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), p.243.

²³ "There is considerable ambiguity woven through this narrative....God was present with Saul, but it is not entirely clear what this meant to him" (Firth, 128).
Paul Alexander ©2020

And ultimately, that is what is so unsettling about all this. God is in control. He asks no one's permission. He is not explaining Himself to anyone here, at least not fully, not even to Samuel and Saul. And there are elements of the story that confuse us. It's ambiguous so far. Yet the great challenge and the great comfort of this passage is one in the same—God is sovereign over all our moral confusion. When our moral circumstances do not appear to be black and white, when we are not sure what God is doing or how He can do it, there's a darkness to His work that can scare us. But "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to God; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with Him" (Ps 139:1-12).

CONCLUSION

Even adults are scared of the moral dark, because it's hard to see the dangers. It makes us feel sometimes like children; but all that appears morally and spiritually ambiguous to us, is perfectly clear to God. I was reading a little story to our younger ones before bed last week, Champ Thorton's book "Why Do We Say Goodnight." The little girl asks her mom: "But when it's dark, and I can't see—why do you say good night to me? It's not the same when there's no light. The dark's not good. I don't like night... You can't see when dark surrounds. What's that shape? What's that sound?" But her mom comforts her from Psalm 139 and says "Yet God sees all; his sight's not dim. The dark is like bright light to him. So when it's dark, with perfect sight, our God is watching through the night... Yes God can see when you're in bed, when scary thought run through your head. But there is more for you to hear; we say good night 'cause God is near. Just like a shepherd guards his sheep, the Lord protects when we're asleep... Since God is with you in the night..., since God can see without the light, All this is why we say goodnight... Good night dear one, you need not fear. Good night, sleep well... The Lord is here..."²⁴

God is doing a strange, mysterious work with Saul. It's a kind of moral work we are not able or allowed to do ourselves, a work we cannot comprehend, much less condemn or control. But our comfort is that it is the God of the Bible, the God of creation, the God of the Covenant, the Holy God, the Good God, the Faithful God, the Sovereign God who keeps Satan on a string, Our God—He is the one doing these things. The moral darkness of Saul is no match for God's light, even if all these twists and turns feel disorienting and even frightening to us, even when we're intimidated by the spiritual power dynamics at work. Christian, this is your God. Marvel at Him for His perfect night vision with Saul of Gibeah. Respect His power. Trust His wisdom. Obey His word. Return His love. Learn his ways. Trust his justice.

God knows his way around, even in the dark, when we ourselves are blind to all he's doing. We will find in the next few weeks that this is precisely what Saul himself refuses to trust. Saul presumes on God's power, but he refuses to trust God's ways, wait on God's time, or obey God's commands. How unlike the King of Kings, who even in the moment of God's darkest providence, the cross, "kept on entrusting Himself to the one who judges justly." We may not know the kind of king that Saul will be just yet. But praise God, we know the kind of king Jesus is. And in the end, that's what we really need to know.

²⁴ Champ Thornton and Rommel Ruiz, *Why Do We Say Goodnight?* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2019).
Paul Alexander ©2020

**Jesus doesn't conceal himself from us; he reveals himself to us.
God's true under-shepherds should serve willingly (10:16; 1P 5:2).**

