

## Hide and Seek - 1 Samuel 9-11

Date: 4 June 2023, Trinity Sunday

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Seeking a King

Texts: 1 Samuel 10 (9-11)

In the first year of my theology degree my next door neighbour was a man from Uganda by the name of Alfred. One day we were talking about who would be the next archbishop in Sydney. He said to me, "Victor, you in Sydney are so worried. Don't you trust God? In Uganda, the best people are never elected as bishops." "Why?" I asked. "Bishops are very powerful. They speak to politicians. So whenever there is a vacancy, politicians start lobbying the best candidates. But we in the church don't want our bishops to owe our politicians anything otherwise they will become corrupt. So we never vote for those who have been lobbied. That means we always elect the third or fourth best candidate. But we don't worry. The Holy Spirit equips them for the job." Alfred is now a bishop, so I don't know if that means he was third or fourth best for his diocese. But in our text today, we meet Saul, an unlikely candidate for Israel's first king, and yet that is what he becomes.

We're looking at chapter 9-11 of 1 Samuel. As well as tracing the story of how Saul became king, these chapters point us to key elements in the Messiah, God's true king's story. They also teach us that the work of the Holy Spirit is to change us from the inside out to become the people God calls us to be. And that is great news for each of us as we know our own weaknesses and failings.

I've called this sermon Hide and Seek, because there are two games of Hide and Seek - first, Saul seeking his father's lost donkeys, and second, Israel seeking who is hiding. The story then finishes with Saul rescuing Israel. In each of these scenes Saul is acclaimed king, and the triple repetition confirms him as king. So let's have a look.

### Scene 1 - Hide and Seek 9.1-10.16

Chapter 8 finished with God promising to give Israel a king. Chapter 9 opens with a young man from the tribe of Benjamin, Saul, the son of Kish. We get a genealogy of 6 generations, which indicates the family is of some importance. What's more, Saul is tall and handsome. He's literally, in verse 2, head and shoulders above the rest, which is where we get that phrase from. He looks like just the sort of person who you'd pick to be king, tall and handsome. But as the chapter unfolds Saul it turns out is comically clueless and incompetent. His father sends him with a servant to find some lost donkeys. They travel all over the countryside, round and round in circles, but are not closer to finding those donkeys.

Saul says to his servant, "Come, let's go back, or my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us." In Hebrew narrative, the first words of a character define their character. Saul is hesitant, aimless, anxious, unsure. Hardly good material for kingship. It's his servant who

suggests that they go seek the man of God in the nearby town who might help. It's the servant who says, don't worry, I've got something we can give him. They ask some girls from the town where to find this man of God, and as they make their way up to Ramah, it turns out the man of God is Samuel.

Now we see that the quest for the donkeys has actually been part of the quest for who will be king. In 9.15 we read, "Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: **16** 'About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel; he will deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me'"

Saul however is clueless as ever. He comes up to Samuel and says, "Would you please tell me where the seer's house is?"

Samuel replies, "**19** 'I am the seer,' Samuel replied. 'Go up ahead of me to the high place, for today you are to eat with me, and in the morning I will send you on your way and will tell you all that is in your heart. **20** As for the donkeys you lost three days ago, do not worry about them; they have been found. And to whom is all the desire of Israel turned, if not to you and your whole family line?'"

Saul can't believe it. He protests that he is from the least clan of the least tribe. And yet after having sat at table with Samuel, early the next morning, in secret, Samuel anoints Saul as king. Actually, it's more subtle than that. Have a look with me from our reading today, 10.1: "Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, 'Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?' Notice that Samuel doesn't say king, but "ruler". This is the term God himself used back in 9.16. God has chosen Saul to lead, and, despite the people's rejection of God as their king, he is still sovereign. It will in fact be the people who first acclaim Saul as king. Samuel's elegant rhetorical question demonstrates that God is the one who is at work here. Samuel may be the instrument, but has not the Lord anointed him ruler?

This, just as an aside, is the origin of what we saw in the coronation of King Charles just a few weeks ago. Or rather we did not see it because it took place behind the screen. The most sacred part of the coronation was not when the crown was placed upon his head, but when he was anointed with oil, just like all his predecessors on the throne of England. It's a moment of setting apart for service. A moment where in the Christian tradition of government, we understand that political authority is in the end the gift of God himself. He raises princes and prime ministers for the good ordering of society. And this leads to the second key moment in Saul becoming king: the Spirit comes upon him in power.

Read with me 10.6. Samuel now gives Saul a series of prophetic instructions as to what will happen next. These climax in Saul joining in with a procession of prophets. Verse 6: "The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a

different person.” And this is just what happens. And so, verse 9: “As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul’s heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day. **10** When he and his servant arrived at Gibeah, a procession of prophets met him; the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he joined in their prophesying.”

Now, just as an aside, some of you may be asking, “What is prophecy? What’s going on here?” There’s a number of things to note. First, as this text clearly shows, prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit. Second, there are a variety of modes of prophecy in the Bible. We think of prophecy as foretelling the future, and that is certainly one mode. Second, and most clearly seen in the prophetic books of the Bible, prophecy is primarily a God speaking through a human agent. This is the “thus says the LORD” mode of prophecy. These are more what the New Testament has in mind when it talks about prophecy. Here it’s what you might call an ecstatic form of speech, not necessarily intelligible. In Paul’s language from 1 Corinthians what happens to Saul might be closer to speaking in tongues. In any case, all these modes of prophecy are from the Holy Spirit. The New Testament teaches us that God still does give people the gift of prophecy today. It does not have the same authority as the Bible. We’re called to test prophecy.<sup>1</sup> It is more like those first 2 modes of prophecy. That uncontrolled ecstatic experience seems to not be so much what the New Testament has in mind as “The spirits of the prophets are under the control of the prophets.”<sup>2</sup>

The main point here however is the Spirit comes upon Saul in power and he is changed. The phrase is repeated 3 times in these chapters. This is what the Holy Spirit does. He changes us from the inside out. His purpose is to make us like Christ. In Galatians 5 we read, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ... **19** The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; **20** idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions **21** and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. **22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness and self-control.”

Often when we think about what the Holy Spirit does, we can think about those visible clearly supernatural gifts like prophecy of tongues. But far more powerful are those internal changes where we say no to sin and yes to God. Where instead of fits of rage we exercise patience, gentleness and self-control. Where instead of bad mouthing others behind their backs or seeking revenge, we cultivate peace and joy. This is what happens when someone turns to Christ. They turn from their old way of life that was hostile to God and the Holy Spirit makes them a new person. Sometimes those changes can be radical and overnight, but more often it’s a slow and gentle work over months and years, but it is no less powerful. There is nothing more beautiful than seeing someone who has been walking by the Spirit for a lifetime, who the Spirit has been changing for many years.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 14.29

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 14.32

Back to 1 Samuel and Saul.

### **Scene 2 - Hide and Seek - 10.17-27**

So far both Samuel and Saul are keeping the whole kingship thing secret. Saul even keeps it from his nosy uncle, although again we hear that the donkeys have been found. But now Samuel summons all Israel to Mizpah, the site of his great defeat of the Philistines under the Lord's hand. He has them present themselves to the Lord, and there is a lot. Benjamin, then Saul's clan, then Saul himself is chosen. "But when they looked for him, he was not to be found." First it was the donkeys, now it's Israel's turn to play hide and seek with Saul. Just like your pesky little sister, it's the LORD who gives away Saul's hiding place.

**22** So they enquired further of the LORD, 'Has the man come here yet?' And the LORD said, 'Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies.'

**23** They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others. **24** Samuel said to all the people, 'Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.'

Then the people shouted, 'Long live the king!'

Despite the Spirit coming upon Saul, he's reluctant to step into the role God has called him to. On the people's side, they overlook his obvious hesitancy and focus on his outward appearance, with a little encouragement from Samuel. But, for all that it's the second confirmation of Saul as king. The episode ends on an ambivalent note. Saul goes home to Gibeah with valiant men whose hearts God had touched. But some scoundrels say, "How can this good for nothing save us?" They despise him and give him no gifts. That brings us to scene 3.

### **Scene 3 - The Lord rescues Israel - 11.1-15**

The view shifts from Saul's home in the south to his relatives in the north across the Jordan in Jabesh Gilead. This time it's not the Philistines, but the Ammonites threatening Israel. Nahash their king offers the men of the city a wicked choice - yes I'll make a treaty with you, "but only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel."<sup>3</sup> The elders of Jabesh send messengers throughout Israel for help. When they reach Saul, he's ploughing a field. Again, hardly what you'd expect from a king. But again we read, "When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger."<sup>4</sup> He takes his oxen, cuts them to pieces and sends the pieces throughout Israel proclaiming, "This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel."<sup>5</sup> Out of terror, all Israel turns out to fight, and Saul wins a great victory, delivering the people of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 11.2

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 11.6

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 11.7

Clearly this is the man God has chosen to fight Israel's battles, and so the people threaten to kill those who despised Saul. But Saul says, "No one will be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel."<sup>6</sup> He shows mercy and acknowledges that it is indeed God who rescues Israel. Finally, for the third time, Samuel leads the people to confirm Saul as king before the Lord and the chapter ends with a feast of celebration.

Yet beneath the celebration there are ominous signs. It's through anger and fear that Saul has mustered the people. And he does so following the pattern of the most sordid episode in Israel's history back in Judges 19. That precipitated a civil war. Will his leadership provide Israel the stability and faithfulness she needs? Will he walk by the Spirit, or resist the Spirit and refuse his calling?

And yet, at the same time Saul's coming to the kingship gives us a pattern for the one who will be Israel's true king. He will be chosen by God. He will be anointed, remember the word in Hebrew is Messiah. He will be filled with the Spirit. And he will rescue his people from their greatest enemies. Saul's victory over Nahash points to that day. Nahash is the Hebrew word for snake, and we know that it is Jesus, the true king of Israel who wins the greatest victory over the ancient serpent the devil. By his victory our disgrace is taken away.

"The Spirit of the Lord will come powerfully upon you ... and you will be changed into a different person." Isn't that what you and I want? Isn't that what we need? Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come."<sup>7</sup> That new creation is not less you. Rather it's the you that God has made you to be, cleansed of all the mess you've got yourself into, radiant and beautiful. If you're here today, and you're not a Christian, this is what God can do for you. What he wants to do for you. To make you new and whole. Healing what has been broken. Washing what you think can never be clean. The question is, will you ask the Holy Spirit to do that work? Maybe you're struggling with a sin or an addiction. Ask the Holy Spirit to come upon in power to change you. He's the one who raised Christ from the dead. He can break the chains in your life. He worked even in Saul's life. He can work in yours too. Will you ask him?

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 11.13

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5.17