

“Slow: God at Work”

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God finds those He chooses.

1 Samuel 9-10

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Season 6, Episode 5, Part 1

A few weeks ago Linda and I started watching a long-running Canadian television drama called “Heartland” about two sisters whose mother has died suddenly. They work with their grandfather working to keep the family ranch going. We thought it might be enjoyable to watch a few episodes. Now that we’re hooked, we found out Netflix has over 200 episodes in 13 seasons.

It’s tempting to watch Season 13 and find out where Heartland is headed. Will Amy and Ty get married? Will Mallory ever get a filter on her mouth? Will Grandpa live through all the seasons? But that would be cheating, right? We should let the story play out and not get ahead.

The Bible is kind of like a TV series. When we arrive in the books of Samuel and Kings, we’re in Season 6 – “Kings.” Today we come to Episode 5, but it is a 2-part episode. It’s tempting to read 1 Samuel 9 & 10 (Part 1) through the lens of what we know will happen in Part 2 of Episode 5. I’m going to stay with Part 1 today.

The Bible as a TV Series

- Season 1 – Creation
- Season 2 – Patriarchs
- Season 3 – Exodus
- Season 4 – Conquest
- Season 5 – Judges
- Season 6 – Kings

Season 6 – “Kings”

- Episode 1 – “Give Me a Son” (Hannah’s Prayer)
- Episode 2 – “A God Who Knows” (Hannah’s Song)
- Episode 3 – “Here I Am” (Samuel as a Boy)
- Episode 4 – “Give Us a King!”

Still there (9:1-14)

In last week's episode, the people of Israel demanded a king like all the other nations. Samuel was not happy but God told him to consent to their demand.

God is still there in ordinary times.

At the beginning of 1 Samuel 9, we meet a "man of standing" (wealthy, influential, a man of pedigree) named Kish. We learn that *Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else* (2).

We assume that Saul is probably going to be the first king, but we meet him on a rather mundane errand. His father has sent him and the head servant to look for lost donkeys. The possession of a drove of donkeys reinforces the family's wealth. The modern parallel might be a fleet of 18-wheelers. These were pack animals.

In most cases, it wouldn't take more than an hour or two to find the missing donkeys. Follow the hoof prints, follow the dung. The two men probably took very few supplies and no money. "Finding" is a key word in this story, and these two can't find the trail. They happen to wander northwest through Ephraim climbing hills but can't find the donkeys (4). Finally, Saul says, "Let's give up and go home. Dad has probably stopped worrying about donkeys and now he's worrying about us" (5).

Our future king is looking for donkey poop. The ordinariness of this scene is precisely the point. Things have been mostly ordinary in Israel for decades. True, in Episodes 1 & 2 (1 Samuel 1-2) of this season an extraordinary prayer of an extraordinary woman named Hannah led to an extraordinary birth and the extraordinary dedication of the boy Samuel to God's service in the temple. In Episode 3 (chapter 3) God both appeared to and spoke to the boy Samuel, and he became a prophet. We skipped over long stretches of time where Samuel disappeared from the story while the Philistines attacked and stole and returned the Ark of God (chapters 4-6). Samuel then led the people to renew their covenant with God and defeat the Philistines (chapter 7), but when he got old the people demanded a military-style king (Episode 4, chapter 8).

It's been decades since Samuel became a well-known spiritual leader, but the tall, handsome son of Kish has no clue who Samuel is. Saul's servant has to tell him about the "man of God" who is "respected" (6). He happens to live in a nearby town.

Saul says, "Well, OK, let's try. But we have no food and no money. We'll have to 'pay the preacher' to help us out" (7). The servant happens to have a small coin (8). At the moment they head toward the town, some young ladies just happen to be coming out of the city (11). The girls happen to know that Samuel is planning a big dinner party that very night with important, invited guests (12-13).

Except for references to Samuel as “the man of God,” God hasn’t even been mentioned in this story. God doesn’t seem to be on anyone’s mind as this Episode opens. But there are a series of coincidences that can only be explained as God at work. The ordinariness and even obliviousness of the characters is precisely the point this story makes about God. You can overlook him or even actively ignore him, but God is still there. God is never not there. You might find God when you’re looking for donkeys.

Surprise (9:15-24)

Near Samuel’s home town was one of the “high places” Samuel had designated as a place to meet God, to worship, and to gather for special spiritual occasions. These high places would later become a problem, but at this point there is no central worship tabernacle or temple. At the moment Saul and his servant enter the city, they happen to meet Samuel on the way to the high place for the big dinner party.

God’s course corrections almost always involve surprise.
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What Saul doesn’t know is that God told Samuel about Saul the day before: *He will deliver (my people Israel) from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me* (16). It’s no surprise that God is going to deliver his people, and no surprise that the chosen person will at first miss or resist this call. That had happened with Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Gideon, and many others.

This encounter is not a surprise to Samuel. When he meets Saul, God whispers in his head, “There’s your king.” Saul doesn’t know this. He certainly doesn’t know that Samuel planned the dinner party so the important guests could meet Saul. The clueless Saul asks Samuel, “Where does the seer (prophet) live?” (18).

Samuel says, “You found me! Come on up with me. We’re having dinner at the shrine. Yes, yes, I know about the donkeys. We found them. I’m more interested in you. You are the future of Israel. You and your family are who all Israel wants” (19).

“What?” Saul exclaims? “Do you know where I come from? I’m from the tribe of Benjamin (the one the other tribes just decimated in a civil war). Within our own tribe, my family’s nothing. Why are you talking like that?” (21).

Samuel doesn’t answer. He takes Saul and the servant into the banquet hall, seats them at the head table, and gives them a Fred Flintstone-sized hunk of meat. “This party’s in your honor. Eat up” (24). Saul and his hungry servant do just that.

When we want God to do something big, something new, we re-imagine what he did before and want him to do it again. God almost never “does it again.” Almost every big God-story in the Bible and ever since has been unique. God’s course corrections almost always involve surprise. When you expect God to do the same thing in the same way, you’re likely to miss what he’s actually doing.

Changed (9:25-10:8)

After the dinner party at the high place, Samuel and Saul head back to Samuel's house for the night, and relax on their version of the deck – the roof (25). They chat for a while and go to bed. Early the next day Samuel calls to Saul, "Get up! You're headed home" (26). He walks Saul and the servant to the edge of town, then asks the servant to go on ahead. "God has something to tell you, Saul" (27).

God changes hearts
one at a time.

Samuel's next surprise is a flask of olive oil infused with fragrant spices like myrrh and cinnamon. Oil had formerly been used only for anointing priests in Israel. Saul is not a Levite. Samuel pours it over Saul's head, kisses him, and says,

Let me make this very clear. I am anointing you as the crown prince, the ruler of Israel (1). I know this is hard to believe, so I'm going to give you a few confirmation signs so you don't think these things "just happened." First, you're going to meet two men who will tell you your donkeys have been found (2). Next, you'll meet three men going to worship at Bethel. They're going to give you unexpected gifts (3-4). Then you'll go to Gibeah, where a group of prophets will be parading with musical instruments and prophesying. At that point, *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* (5-7). Saul, I'll meet you at Gilgal. I won't be there for another week, but you must wait until I tell you what to do (8).

It's clear the entire nation needs a new start. It's been years since that revival at Mizpah, a national covenant. And there have been many times – in the Bible and since – that God worked visibly in a mass movement. But most often, God starts with one. Just one. In this case, a future king. Sometimes we're waiting for God to do something big so we can jump on board. Most often, he's saying, "Let me start with just one – you."

Chosen (10:9-25)

It happened just as God said through Samuel. No surprise there. "All these signs were fulfilled that day" (9). Especially when Saul prophesied, witnesses were amazed – and none more than those who had known Saul. "What happened to the son of Kish?" they asked. He was the last person they expected to become a prophet, much less a king.

God finds those he
chooses.

We don't know exactly what they meant by "prophesying." It might have been something like what we hear today as speaking in tongues. It doesn't seem to have been the normal proclamation of God's word that Samuel had been engaging in since boyhood. A supernatural spirit overtook Saul in the company of these prophets. It never happened to him again, as far as we know.

This was the clearest outward evidence that God was at work in Saul. Say what you will about what happened later, our narrator wants us to know that Saul was a man possessed by God at this point in his life. Saul was a king chosen by God. Israel was a nation chosen by God. Saul's journey from that point on doesn't invalidate his call, any more than Israel's up and down journey of faith and obedience nullifies their status as God's chosen people.

For this moment, Saul is God's choice. These signs prove it to Saul. Saul keeps the matter a secret, though, at this point. He and the servant meet Saul's uncle who asks, "Where have you been?" (14)

A lot has happened, and Saul could have told him everything. Instead, he answers, "Looking for the donkeys." It's true, right? Then he adds, "When we couldn't find them, we asked Samuel." (14)

The uncle knows who Samuel is, even though Saul had not. It's quite likely the uncle heard about the big dinner party. "What did Samuel tell you?"

"He told us the donkeys were found." True, but not the whole story. Saul didn't tell the part about the kingship (16). This is the first time the word "king" is used in chapters 9-10, but it's now clear the phrases "desire of the people" (9:20) and "ruler over his inheritance" (10:1) imply kingship. Saul knows this, but he's still not going to put himself forward. He knows that would be unwise.

Samuel gathers the people of Israel at Mizpah (17), the same location where he had summoned them to renew the covenant in chapter 7. He reminds them that their demand for a king "like all the other nations" to fight their battles was misdirected. *But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities* (19).

Samuel needs to demonstrate before all the people that this choice is a God-choice. Remember, nobody knows yet that Saul is to be the new king. That conversation was totally private. Some leaders know that Saul was invited to a dinner at the shrine and given the Fred Flintstone beef leg. Other people saw Saul prophesying and wondered what got into him.

Samuel orders everyone to line up according to their tribes and clans (20). He's going to do something that looks like it's more random circumstance – like it "just happened." But God will make it plain this is his doing. What happens next is not unlike a lottery drawing. Samuel puts the twelve tribes in a hat, and pulls out Benjamin. He then puts all the clans of Benjamin in the hat and pulls out Kish's family. He puts the names of all the men of that clan in a hat and pulls out one name – Saul (21). I imagine total silence. Those who had been at the dinner or seen the prophets are thinking, "Oh!" Those who hadn't are thinking, "Who's Saul?"

Saul at first is “not to be found” (21). He is a ‘missing donkey’! Apparently even Samuel doesn’t know where he is. They have to ask God and somehow God speaks to them. “He’s in the baggage (or ‘supplies’).” That seems appropriate, doesn’t it? Maybe we’re getting a hint that this guy has a lot of baggage.

But Saul is still God’s choice. God’s in charge of this. So they bring him and stand him tall and Samuel says, “Do you see this man the LORD has chosen? There’s no one like him!”

And the people answer, “Long live the king!”

The key point is this: God doesn’t need your cooperation. To be sure, he wants it. You’re invited into his story. But whether you’re a people or just a person, God is totally in charge. God finds those he chooses.

Silence (10:26-27)

Episode 5 in Season 6 ends with Saul going back home. There are more episodes ahead with Saul, and we’ll get to them next week. Meanwhile, we learn that not everyone is on board with this choice.

When you’re frustrated with God or people, shut up and wait.
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There are some “valiant men” who accompany Saul home. They’re on his team from the beginning. But not everyone. There are “scoundrels” (the same word used of Eli’s two sons) who are not on board with a clear sovereign choice from God. *They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent (27).*

I like Saul as we conclude this episode. Our narrator wants you to like him at this point, even if you know the rest of the story. He’s God’s choice. Sometimes we don’t like what God is doing. Sometimes other people don’t like us.

Saul is wise at this point to stay silent. We are too when we’re frustrated with God. Shut up and wait. God’s got this.

Episode 5 is “to be continued”.