

Saul: Israel's "First King" (Old Testament Figures)

The king Israel asked for, the man God saw, and why the outside was never the point

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, January 23, 2022
PASSAGES	1 Samuel 9-15; 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Samuel 8:19-20; 1 Samuel 10:22-27; 1 Samuel 11:5-13; 1 Samuel 12:14-22; 1 Samuel 13:13-14; 1 Samuel 15:16-17; 1 Samuel 17:38-45; Revelation 3:20
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:47:45 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Israel asked for a king who would look and fight like the kings of the other nations, and God gave them exactly that man — tall, handsome, wealthy, and named *asked for*. Read him honestly and Saul is sympathetic, even admirable in places. That is the point: the story is built to show how little our eyes can see, because the Lord looks on the heart.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Saul is not a one-dimensional bad guy. He is anointed, Spirit-filled, told "God is with you," and used by God to relieve his people from oppression.
- ◆ Israel let slip what they actually wanted: a strong man out front who would fight their battles for them. Saul's name means "asked for," and his body is described in detail because his body is what they asked for.
- ◆ When the worthless fellows despised him, Saul held his peace. When the crowd wanted them executed, Saul refused. Those are not the instincts of a monster.
- ◆ A tall king with armor and a sword had real but limited use — it lasted until a taller man showed up on the other side of the valley.

- ◆ Line up Saul's failures against David's and the comparison is confusing, which is the clue: the difference between the two men was never visible to the people watching.
- ◆ The way we evaluate other people is unreliable, and we use the same broken instrument on ourselves. Outward wins can look like obedience from the outside.
- ◆ The most valuable thing a person can have is the one thing nobody can inspect: affection for God in the heart, and God's own Spirit taking up residence there.

► 0:50:35

Matt set himself one task before opening the text: to get the room to stop reading Saul as a villain. "King Saul is a character that I think we ought to sympathize with," he said — because loyalty to David usually pushes Saul into a cartoonish gear, miserly and dark, and "there are a lot of things that he does that are so admirable I'm not even sure if I would have had the strength to do that."

1. The king they asked for

► 0:51:41

Samuel — last of the judges, a seer, raised at the temple by Eli — had told the nation no. They pressed anyway: a king to be over us, to judge us, to go out before us and fight our battles. In that last clause they let slip an intention of the heart. "We would like a front man," Matt said — "a strong man, someone to make us feel comfortable." Think of the oil paintings: decorated armor, crown, elite troops. It does convey strength, and strength was the one thing they did not have. The Philistines had them so far down that Israel was not permitted its own blacksmiths. To sharpen the tools that worked the land God gave them, they had to ask enemy permission.

► 0:53:16

"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."

1 SAMUEL 9:1-2 ↗

Special care is taken to tell us what this man looks like, and the reason is in his name. Saul, in Hebrew, means *asked for*. “This is what you wanted, right? An alpha male. Here he is. He’s huge, and he’s handsome to boot, and wealthy.”

2. A man out looking for donkeys

► 0:55:38

Saul enters the story with no idea what is coming. His wealthy father could have sent servants after the missing donkeys; providentially he sends his son. Days in, the servant suggests asking the local seer, and they scrape together a sliver of silver to pay for a word about livestock. God had already spoken to Samuel the day before:

“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... Here is the man of whom I spoke to you! He it is who shall restrain my people.”

1 SAMUEL 9:16-17 ↗

► 0:56:44

Don’t snag on the word *prince*; God calls him king later. Hear instead what God intends to do with him. It sounds like one of the early judges — a man raised up to redeem an oppressed people. “God’s not just going to give them the king they asked for and then say that’s that and walk away.”

Then the day goes strange on Saul. The seer tells him the donkeys are already found and asks for whom all that is desirable in Israel is, if not for him and his father’s house — a question to ask a man still clutching his shekel. He is seated at the head of a feast with a portion set aside for him. In the morning, on the road with the servant sent ahead, Samuel pours oil on his head and kisses him, and promises signs — ending with a company of prophets:

“the Spirit of the Lord will rush upon you... and be turned into another man... do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you.”

That is the man we write off as rubbish: minding his own business, anointed, Spirit-filled, told by a prophet that God is with him.

3. Hiding among the baggage

► 1:00:18

At the public assembly the lots fall tribe by tribe, clan by clan, to Kish's family — and the man cannot be found. "Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage." They fetch him, and again we are told he stands head and shoulders above everyone; "Do you see him whom the Lord has chosen?" Whether Saul hid out of fear, indifference or distraction, Matt wouldn't guess. What is clear is that he was not eager for the crown.

Samuel writes the rights and duties of the kingship in a book and sends everyone home.

Men of valor whose hearts God had touched go with Saul; worthless fellows ask "How can this man save us?" and b
Note who is on which side, and note what the new king does with an insult.

4. The first national crisis

► 1:02:49

The Ammonites besiege Jabesh-gilead and offer terms:

a treaty, on condition that every man's right eye be gouged out. The elders beg seven days to look for help, and the Ammonites — inexplicably — agree. Messengers reach Gibeah, where the newly minted king is:

► 1:05:05

"Now, behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen, and Saul said, 'What is wrong with the people, that they are weeping?' So they told him the news of the men of Jabesh. And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled."

1 SAMUEL 11:5-6 ↗

No gilded palace; he is behind the plow, out of the loop. You can read that generously — the working man's king, still an Israelite like you and me — or you can notice that the rights and duties were read out a chapter ago and the king is the last to hear the news. What is not ambiguous is the Spirit rushing in, exactly as it did on the judges, and anger kindled at exactly the right thing. He butchers a yoke of oxen, sends the pieces across Israel, and the nation musters as one man.

► 1:06:36

Three divisions, an attack at the last watch, fighting until the heat of the day, and a win. This is precisely what Israel wanted, delivered. High on the vindication, the crowd wants the earlier scoffers put to death —
and Saul refuses: "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has worked salvation in Israel."
"Some of us would have been tempted," Matt admitted.

5. Rain on the parade

► 1:08:16

Samuel calls everyone to Gilgal to renew the kingdom — peace offerings, a huge party, Saul made king for real this time. Then the prophet addresses the assembly and it becomes clear he is still back at the part where they should never have asked.

Obey the Lord, because he is the one who fights for you — and is this not the wheat harvest? I will call on the Lord and he will send rain. He calls down rain on their parade, during the celebration of the thing he is denouncing.

► 1:09:45

Terrified, they beg Samuel to pray, and his comfort is pointedly not about them:

the Lord will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased him to make a people for himself. Not for their sake, not for the new king's, not for the prophet's reputation.

6. Seven days, and a man after God's own heart

► 1:11:12

Jonathan strikes a Philistine garrison, the report credits Saul, and the Philistines muster like sand on the seashore. Saul's army gathers and trembles — because the Philistines have weapons and Israel has farm tools. A sword in that camp belonged to Saul or to Jonathan, and that was about it. Samuel had said wait seven days for the sacrifices. Seven days pass trembling. Samuel does not come, and the men begin walking away, looking their king in the eye as they go.

► 1:12:53

Saul calls for the sacrifices, does the best he can — and that is the moment Samuel arrives.

“You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the Lord your God, with which he commanded you. For then the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.”

1 SAMUEL 13:13–14 ↗

Flag that phrase — *after his own heart*. We have spent four chapters looking through the eyes of men: rich, handsome, enormous. God is not evaluating on those terms.

7. Little in his own eyes

► 1:15:24

Israel beats the Philistines anyway. Then comes Amalek, with orders to devote everything to the Lord. Saul wins a third battle, spares their king, and keeps the best animals — to sacrifice, he says. By now the shadow of Samuel approaching is a thing to dread.

► 1:16:06

“Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel.”

1 SAMUEL 15:17 ↗

Matt kept that verse for the sympathy in it. Three victories in, Saul is still fighting his own self-perception — even while setting up a monument to himself at Carmel, which from outside looks like megalomania. Both readings sit in the same chapter. Tally the failures: a sacrifice offered early when the prophet genuinely had not come; a king spared and some animals kept; and a rash oath in the heat of battle that nearly cost Jonathan his life, until the people refused to let it. “Honestly, I think he’s super relatable,” Matt said. “I don’t know how much my track record would have compared with his.”

8. Now compare him to David

► 1:18:52

Set Saul beside the beloved king. David commits adultery and arranges a murder — two of the big ten — and takes a census he was not to take. Line the two men up on the visible record and you ought to be confused about why one is cherished and the other rejected. The explanation arrives when Samuel is sent to Jesse’s house and starts, predictably, with the oldest and tallest son:

“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

1 SAMUEL 16:7 ↗

Height and appearance. After all those careful, almost excessive descriptions of Saul, that is not a coincidence — it is the narrative answering itself.

9. The tall king and the taller giant

► 1:20:46

How useful was a tall king? Somewhat. Seeing him armored and towering did steady the ranks, and when they lost their nerve they scattered. Then the Philistines return with Goliath — a head and shoulders above everyone, the same phrase used of Saul. You would expect the matchup: tall man against tall man.

► 1:21:33

Instead Israel's giant is in a tent, trying to fit his armor onto a boy. And that detail, Matt insisted, is not a lesson about forging your own path. "As if the Bible story we're reading about David fighting Goliath is about how God wants you to do things your way — that's silly." The armor does not fit because David is a child and Saul is enormous. The point is the size gap. Strength in big men works until the other side has a bigger one.

► 1:23:26

David wins not by doing it his own way but by coming at Goliath in the name of the Lord of hosts. It was never a lesson in artillery over hand-to-hand combat. The stone could have missed. The Lord fights for his people — which is what Samuel had been saying the whole time.

10. What God sees

► 1:23:59

Here is where it turned on the room. Look at Saul after Amalek and the Philistines and you would conclude he obeyed — obeyed so thoroughly the victories came. A few sheep, fine, but basically good. "That's the way the outward appearance looks for ourselves as well, and for one another. This looks pretty good, most of the way there." But there is something God sees that we do not.

► 1:25:16

"The way we evaluate our lives is so messed up," Matt said. "The way we evaluate others is messed up. We could at least agree on that one — but we do the same for ourselves." You can total up your service and your prayers and still be reading the wrong instrument. What was special about David was not his size or his strategy; it was loyalty and love and affection for God in the unseen place, "truly there, growing wild." He sinned, badly, and he repented, and he loved God — and that love drove everything.

► 1:27:38

So the invitation was inward and specific: ask God how to kindle affection for him in the places no one can see or sneak a peek at. And on the fear that God must be begged into a reluctant arrival — no.

He is the one standing there knocking, and knocking, and knocking, while we sit like a baby in a high chair deciding whether to spit the food out. For those who have already fallen at his feet, this is not one and done; like David we keep sitting before the Lord, sins and all. Matt closed praying that God would till the soil of our hearts, pull the stones and weeds, and burn his love afresh in us — and promised more on David next Sunday.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- 1 Samuel 8:19–20
- 1 Samuel 9:1–2
- 1 Samuel 9:16–17
- 1 Samuel 9:20
- 1 Samuel 10:1
- 1 Samuel 10:6–7
- 1 Samuel 10:22
- 1 Samuel 10:24
- 1 Samuel 10:25–27
- 1 Samuel 11:1–3
- 1 Samuel 11:5–6
- 1 Samuel 11:13
- 1 Samuel 11:14–15
- 1 Samuel 12:14–17
- 1 Samuel 12:22
- 1 Samuel 13:13–14
- 1 Samuel 15:17
- 1 Samuel 15:12
- 1 Samuel 14:24–30
- 2 Samuel 11
- 2 Samuel 24
- 1 Samuel 16:7
- 1 Samuel 17:38–39
- 1 Samuel 17:45
- Revelation 3:20

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What kind of "front man" do you find yourself asking God for — what sort of strength would make you feel safe if he provided it?
2. Which part of Saul do you recognize in yourself: hiding among the baggage, holding your peace under contempt, or acting early because the help you were promised did not show up?
3. Samuel told Saul he was little in his own eyes while he was building a monument to himself. How do those two live together in the same person, and where do they in you?
4. If someone totalled up your visible record this year, what would they conclude — and where would that reading be furthest from what God sees?
5. Matt asked God to show him how to kindle affection for the Lord in the unseen places. What is one concrete way you will do that this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-r6gSiCbBpw&t=2865s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.