

# 1 SAMUEL—WEEK 6

## GOD CHOOSES



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)  
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

The men of Israel want a king to lead them into battle, never mind the cost. Surprisingly, God tells Samuel to grant their request. Then He sends Saul out to find some donkeys and so brings him to Samuel, who is told, “This is the guy.”

Samuel treats Saul like a king, surprising the heck out of him. Something’s up.

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1 1 Samuel 8:19–22 (ESV)

*But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.”*

Today’s reading begins with two interesting Hebrew idioms. The first, translated as “*obey the voice*” (לְשִׁמַּח בְּקוֹלֵךְ, le-sha-mah bcole), is literally “listen in the voice”. In Hebrew, you can either listen to a voice or listen in a voice. “Listening in” means taking heed or obeying. “Listening to” means just hearing the words. This idiom gives the sense that if you listen to someone’s voice, but ignore the advice, you weren’t listening very well.

The people refused to listen in to *the voice of Samuel*. Also, the Hebrew word translated as “but they refused” (וַיִּמָּאֵחֻנוּ, vah-yimah-ah-noo) is a deliberate refusal, not just that they failed to listen in. This adds to the sense that the people weren’t really listening.

The second Hebrew idiom is the word that’s translated as “But” (כִּי אֲנִי, key eem). It’s a somewhat emphatic idiom of contrast that means “except”, “only”, or, “on the other hand”. The ESV tries to capture the emphasis by putting an exclamation point after “No.”

That slightly misses the point. They weren’t disagreeing with Samuel’s claim that a king would take their stuff (in 1 Samuel 8:11–18).

They were saying (with emphasis) that they wanted a king anyway.

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So, we get the strong sense that the people had made up their minds about a king and weren’t open to any discussion. Given the radical nature of such a change in the structure of their government, this is astonishing. Thorough debate is clearly warranted. So we get yet another example of the goofiness of sin. What were they thinking?

The obvious comeback is, “They weren’t thinking.” However, there is a legitimate reason mentioned in the text—“*our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.*”

The idea that they need a king to fight their battles is still nuts—the LORD has given them a long hiatus from any battles—but it does explain why they think that a king would be useful. This is about national security. Despite the many amazing ways that the LORD has provided for them in battle, they want a king to lead their army.

That concept of a military king is at the root of their expectation of a military messiah.

Thus, this seemingly insignificant passage is the first reference for why the Jews mistook Jesus for a pretender.

2 1 Samuel 9:1–4 (ESV)

*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.*

*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.*

As we will soon see, Saul will be anointed by Samuel as king over all Israel.

But in this passage we see how amazingly unqualified he is for the job. He's exceptionally tall and handsome, but that's it. We learn nothing about whether he possesses the characteristics that would make a good king (or judge or military leader).

What we do learn is that Saul is given the task of tracking down some errant donkeys. Also, he's told to take one servant with him. This is an extremely menial task for a future king.

And his search for the donkeys is quite unimpressive. Saul heads straight for the hills and passes through a number of places in the hill country of Ephraim. We aren't told why Saul thought that's the direction the donkeys would head, and it appears he guessed wrong.

So, this passage gives the impression of a thin resume. Saul could well become a great leader—anything's possible—but this passage gives the opposite feel.

That seems to be by design.

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It is by design. Everything in scripture is by design. The Bible is not badly written. Saul's thin resume is displayed to make a point. God is giving Israel a populist king.

There may be some advantages to a king that looks good, but other things matter more. Many Israelite leaders wrote inspired scripture. Saul wrote none. If he had any significant insights he didn't record them.

The parallel with modern American politics is striking. We elect the tallest and/or best looking candidates almost every time. And so, we end up governed by pretty people.

And this doesn't just apply to politicians. Why is it that when highly attractive people become skilled in the performance arts (e.g., music or acting) we hear their opinions on things like foreign policy or the science of climate? Their actual credentials (or lack thereof) don't seem to matter.

Our culture of celebrity (and appearances) is dysfunctional, but it's not new.

3 1 Samuel 9:5–10

*When they had come to the land of Zuph, Saul said to his servant who was with him, “Come, let us return, lest my father cease caring about the donkeys and become worried about us.”*

*And he said to him, “Look now, there is in this city a man of God, and he is an honorable man; all that he says surely comes to pass. So let us go there; perhaps he can show us the way that we should go.”*

*Then Saul said to his servant, “But look, if we go, what shall we bring the man? For the bread in our vessels is all gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What do we have?”*

*And the servant answered Saul again and said, “Look, I have here at hand one-fourth of a shekel of silver. I will give that to the man of God, to tell us our way.” (Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he spoke thus: “Come, let us go to the seer”; for he who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer.)*

*Then Saul said to his servant, “Well said; come, let us go.” So they went to the city where the man of God was.*

Saul does something impressive here; he listens to and takes the advice of his servant. That’s an important leadership skill. Saul may have a thin resume, but he has potential. The servant is impressive too. He has a good plan, and he has the things necessary to implement it. So, they’re off to see the wizard.

But the Old Testament is a plot twist factory, and their trip to see the seer won’t turn out as planned.

Yes, the donkeys will be okay, but greater things are afoot.

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God’s plot twists are one of the most important, and glorious, aspects of life in Christ. The challenge for Christians is to do more than just adjust to or cope with these plot twists. We should learn to appreciate, even love them. God displays His personality and righteousness through His actions, and the actions that surprise us most contain the most information.

God appreciation is like art appreciation. If you see something in a painting that’s unexpected, even absurd, pay attention. It’s not there by accident; paintings don’t get photobombed. If you take the time to figure out what the artist is trying to communicate, you’ll get a lot more out of the art.

So it is with life in Christ. While not every little thing is a message from God, the surprising things (good and bad) often are. If you think about events the way you would analyze art, you can learn a lot.

But there’s a catch. Everyone knows that the artist painted every stroke in the painting. Not so with life. Not everyone thinks that God paints every brushstroke. Bad things happen. It’s hard to believe a good God would allow them—much less foreordain them. So, many folks conclude that these things had another source. That gives short-term comfort at the expense of understanding.

But understanding is the ultimate comfort.

4 1 Samuel 9:11–18

*As they went up the hill to the city, they met some young women going out to draw water, and said to them, “Is the seer here?”*

*And they answered them and said, “Yes, there he is, just ahead of you. Hurry now; for today he came to this city, because there is a sacrifice of the people today on the high place. As soon as you come into the city, you will surely find him before he goes up to the high place to eat. For the people will not eat until he comes, because he must bless the sacrifice; afterward those who are invited will eat. Now therefore, go up, for about this time you will find him.” So they went up to the city. As they were coming into the city, there was Samuel, coming out toward them on his way up to the high place.*

*Now the LORD had told Samuel in his ear the day before Saul came, saying, “Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him commander over My people Israel, that he may save My people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry has come to Me.”*

*So when Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said to him, “There he is, the man of whom I spoke to you. This one shall reign over My people.” Then Saul drew near to Samuel in the gate, and said, “Please tell me, where is the seer’s house?”*

This is the moment when all the pieces come together and Samuel sees his king. Everything that happened was to prepare for this moment. Kish’s donkeys wandering off was part of God’s plan. Saul and his servant failing to find them before their bread ran out was another part. The servant having a quarter-shekel of silver in his pocket was also a part. Samuel arriving in town that day was part too.

And at this moment, Samuel knows what’s going on.

But Saul doesn’t have a clue.

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The result will be an amusing series of interactions in which Saul is clearly off balance the whole time. Samuel is less than perfectly informed too—he has to depend on the LORD moment-by-moment for the specifics—but he knows where it’s all headed.

But Samuel can’t fill Saul in. There’s nothing specific he can say that would both make sense and be accurate. Thus, he’ll keep Saul in the dark in a way that looks almost cruel, and Saul will have to put up with this and just obey.

But it’s actually all perfectly orchestrated by God. Samuel’s great reputation gives him the credibility and authority to get away with all this mysteriousness.

And Saul is of a mind to follow along.

This is training. Saul is entering a mini-boot camp.

5 1 Samuel 9:19–24

*Samuel answered Saul and said, “I am the seer. Go up before me to the high place, for you shall eat with me today; and tomorrow I will let you go and will tell you all that is in your heart. But as for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not be anxious about them, for they have been found. And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?”*

*And Saul answered and said, “Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak like this to me?”*

*Now Samuel took Saul and his servant and brought them into the hall, and had them sit in the place of honor among those who were invited; there were about thirty persons. And Samuel said to the cook, “Bring the portion which I gave you, of which I said to you, ‘Set it apart.’ ” So the cook took up the thigh with its upper part and set it before Saul. And Samuel said, “Here it is, what was kept back. It was set apart for you. Eat; for until this time it has been kept for you, since I said I invited the people.” So Saul ate with Samuel that day.*

This feels like many of the conversations Jesus had with people. They’d be expecting something mundane (like drawing water from a well), and the next thing they know, their whole world is turned upside down.

Likewise, Samuel jumps this conversation to the next level when he announces that he is the seer and then says a bunch of seer stuff. Saul’s donkeys *that were lost three days ago* (how does he know that?) have been found. (How does he know that either?) Samuel also says that he, “*will tell you all that is in your heart.*”

But first, let’s eat.

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The meal turns out to be loaded with symbolism. Saul has to be sitting there with his mind reeling, wondering what’s going on. The end of the first paragraph above (“*And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?*”) is so puzzling that Saul questions Samuel about it. That must have taken great courage as he’s basically arguing.

But Samuel ignores Saul’s questions and focuses on dinner. From Saul’s point of view, this is as nutty as a Mad Hatter’s Tea Party.

Then Samuel drops a bomb on Saul by giving him the upper thigh portion and, just in case Saul doesn’t realize the significance, announces, “*Here it is, what was kept back. It was set apart for you. Eat; for until this time it has been kept for you, since I said I invited the people.*” The upper thigh was often *kept back* because it’s the choicest cut.

Saul now realizes that this meal is in his honor.

But why? He’s done nothing.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Why do the British so love their royalty?
2. Who are the great leaders of our time?
3. Can you appreciate difficulties?
4. When has withholding information proved useful?
5. Meals seem important to church social life. Why?

*Items for prayer:*