

You Never Know What You Might Find When You Go Off Looking for Your Lost Donkey

1 Samuel 9:1-10:16

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Now the summer has gone and September is here and we're back in Samuel. And it was a long time ago, in a place far, far away, and we've forgotten the story, but I'm going to take just a couple of seconds or so to remind you of the story because it's very easy. Chapter 8 of first Samuel, you'll remember, the people of Israel are demanding a king. In verse 20 of chapter 8, you'll notice they want a king "so that they can be just like the nations." Actually, they are rejecting God. Samuel was royally ticked. He said, "monarchy means big government, taxation, conscription, and war." He did not want a king, but be careful what you ask for because sometimes God will give it to you anyway to teach you a lesson. And that's precisely what we're going to see in chapter 9. Now we're going to read — we have a long reading — we're going to read all the way to verse 16 of chapter 10. Before we do that let's look to the Lord in prayer.

Father we thank You for the Scriptures and again, we need Your help. We want this Word not only to inform our minds, but to get right into our very hearts and lives and for that we need the help of Your Spirit. So come, O Lord, help us as we read the Scriptures to not only read but to profit from that which we read. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

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.

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?” 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.

As they went up the hill to the city, they met young women coming 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.

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 retrain My people.” 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. 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 in this way?”

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.

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 prince 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. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over His heritage. 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?’ Then you shall go on from there further 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. After that you shall come to Gibeathelohim, 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 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.”

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.

Well so far, God's holy, inerrant Word.

I. The sovereignty and providence of God.

In 1948, in *Reader's Digest*, a story appeared about a man by the name of Marcel Sternberger. He was in New York. He was going to work. He was getting on the subway. He was a Hungarian, an immigrant, and as he stepped onto the subway, a man suddenly stepped up and rushed off the train — he had almost missed his station — and Marcel Sternberger took this man's seat. He found himself sitting next to Bela Paskin, another Hungarian. He was reading a Hungarian newspaper, and he lent over and he said to Bela Paskin, "I hope you don't mind me reading over your shoulder." They got into a conversation. It turns out that Bela Paskin had come to New York after the war. The Russians had deported him from his town, oh, I'm not sure how to pronounce it, but let me say it's Debrecen, in Hungary. He had been taken to Ukraine by the Russians to bury German soldiers. When Bela Paskin came home to Debrechen in Hungary, he found his home occupied by strangers. His family had died and his wife had died. They had been taken by train to Auschwitz and presumably had been killed. He immediately fled and came to New York.

Now, Marcel Sternberger, just a few weeks before, had met a woman, a Hungarian by the name of Marya, Marya Paskin. He said to Bella on the train, "What was your wife's name?" "Marya," he said. They stopped at the next station. Marcel Sternberger made some excuse about wanting perhaps to have some coffee with him before going to work. But before having coffee, he said, "I must make a telephone call." He had apparently taken down this woman, Marya Paskin's, phone number. And he calls her. And he says, "I met you just a few weeks ago." And she says, "Yes, I remember." "Can you tell me the street and the number in the street that you lived in Debrecen?" And she told him. And he turns to Bela and says, "What was the street you lived in and what was the number of the house?" And yes, you've guessed it, it was the same house. He hands him the phone and says, "Your wife wants to talk to you."

That's a true story. Well, if you believe *Reader's Digest* it's a true story (Joseph M. Stowell. *Radical Reliance*, Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p.23. http://www.dhp.org/files/WL619_excerpt.pdf). I'm going to believe that it's a true story. Coincidence? Or, as *Reader's Digest* ended that story, was

God riding the subway?

It's another day on the farm and the donkeys have broken out. Kish, the father of this young, handsome young man, Saul, he has to wake him up, as all young men have to be woken up, and be told that he has to go and look for them. And for the next 25 verses in 1 Samuel chapter 9, we read this fascinating story about a search for donkeys — a fruitless search as it turns out, that took three days and they travelled something like twenty miles. The servant, when Saul decides he's had enough of this looking for donkeys — the food as it happens has run out — he does mention that his father might be more worried about them than his donkeys — the servant suggests, "there's a prophet in this town." Yes; ching-ching. "His name is Samuel." And they suggest that they go and see Samuel. Samuel has a fee, an interesting point of exegesis which I dare not go into. And it just so happens that the servant has a coin in his pocket to give to Samuel. Now, the day before, God had told Samuel that Saul, this young man, would come. He would meet the future prince, king, of Israel.

Now how do you think God would bring that about? If you didn't know the story, how do you think God would bring that about to Samuel? There'd be, you know, Cecil B. DeMills, there'd be a parting of the clouds, there would be a light. You know as I was driving down tonight there was one of these phenomenal rays of sunshine coming down through the light that you sometimes see in paintings and you think that never really happens in real life, but it does. This ray of light suddenly appears through the cloud and there this man, this handsome young man would be standing and there would be an aura around his head. No, not at all. Donkeys have broken loose and this young man is looking for donkeys. It's providence.

I want to ask you tonight, do you believe in the sovereignty of God? Well, of course you do, you're Presbyterians, but do you believe in the sovereignty of God? Because if you believe in the sovereignty of God, there are no accidents. There are no happenstances. There are no chance occurrences. Everything, absolutely everything, falls beneath the plan and control and overruling of God. It doesn't get more mundane than looking for donkeys. Now I know that some of you love *Animal Planet* and this story really grips you. You can see it all; you can visualize the donkeys breaking loose, you can wax eloquent, but at the end of the day — I'm a farmer's boy. I know about animals breaking loose and having to go and look for them. I may not look like it, but I actually do know what that is. It's a long time ago. It's a really mundane story. At any level, it's a mundane story. And in the most mundane of events, God is working out His plan and God is fulfilling His purpose.

You see, sometimes we think God only guides in the big things. You know, the person you marry, the house you live in, the job that you have, whether you move from Mississippi to Tennessee — that's a major decision and God is in that decision for sure. And my dear friends, God is in every decision, absolutely every

decision, every event, every circumstance. This is a story about the providence of God. “A man's mind plans his way but his steps are ordered by the Lord.” — Proverbs 16:9. “A man's mind plans his way but his steps are ordered by the Lord.” You may be doing something very ordinary, but let me quote *Reader's Digest*, “God is riding the subway.” He is everywhere and in everything.

II. The mercy of God.

It's about the sovereignty of God, it's about the providence of God, but it's a story about the mercy of God. You'll notice in the middle of chapter 9 that there is a sort of hiatus in the story, verse 16 is a hiatus. The writer is telling us in verse 15, “Now the day before Saul came the Lord had revealed to Samuel.” Samuel already knew that Saul, at least a young man, would be coming. And why? “I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin. 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.” God is raising up Saul, at least for a part of the reason, because the Philistines are back. God has heard the cry of His people. He has heard their prayers. Yes, the request for a king was a sinful request. They wanted a king so that they could be just like the nations, and in so asking, they were actually rejecting God, but our sins do not dry up the fountain of God's compassion. And in the midst of what was a sinful request, God still shows His mercy. He still shows His love.

Now notice in verse 17, “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, other translations have it differently, but let's go with the ESV, the pew Bible, for a minute. “He it is who shall *retrain* My people.” What does that mean? And there are two possible explanations. One is that the restraint is the restraint because Saul is preventing Israel from knowing the blessing that it otherwise would have got. God is going to grant Saul, but the fullness of His blessing isn't going to come to Israel. Saul is going to be a restraint from God showing blessing. That's how some interpret this passage.

I'd rather think that it's the exact opposite of that.

Israel had asked for a king so that they could be just like the nations, but the king that God is going to give to them, at least at first, is actually going to be a king that is going to be better than what they were actually asking for. He *restrains* Israel from committing the sins that they otherwise would have committed.

God does that all the time. You know, if we were left to our own devices, where would we be tonight? God gives us individuals who restrain us. He gives us wives and husbands. You know what extraordinary acts of folly some of us would have committed if it wasn't for our wives, or if it wasn't for our husbands — they make us look better than we actually are. And to an extent, I think that is what

God is saying here to Samuel. Saul, at least at this point in history, Saul is actually going to make Israel look better than she actually is. He's going to be a restraint. Well praise God for that. Praise God for the restraints. Praise God for the barriers He sets up, because otherwise, where would we be?

III. The mystery of God's ways.

But there's a third thing to see here. And that is, not just the sovereignty of God, not just the mercy of God, but the mystery of God's ways. The rest of the story, the latter half of chapter 9 and into chapter 10, Saul is invited to the evening sacrifice, he's given the place of honor, he's given the best cuts of meat and then a bed for the night on the roof of Samuel's house. And then in the morning as they are about to leave, there is this extraordinary event. The servant goes ahead. Samuel pulls Saul aside and does a private anointing ceremony. And it's Saul the anointed one; Saul, well, the messiah. He is the anointed one and he is given three signs. In chapter 10 and verse 2, he'll come to Rachel's tomb and he'll meet someone there who will tell him that the donkeys are home and that his father is concerned about him. He'll go a little further and he'll come to the oak of Tabor in verse 3 of chapter 10 and three men are going to Bethel and they'll give him food and drink. And then, at Gibeah-Elohim, he'll meet these singing prophets and the Spirit of God will rush upon him and he will be turned into another man.

Now don't make too much of that. Don't read into that that Saul is converted. That's not the language and that's not the intent. The Spirit comes upon him in order to enable him to perform certain actions. It's not a declaration that Saul has been converted, or in New Testament language, that Saul is in union and communion with Jesus; that's not the intent of the passage. But the Spirit will come upon him to gift him, to enable him, to be the king that Israel has asked for.

You notice in verse 7 of chapter 10, "When these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you." Well, there's a Philistine garrison in this location, Gibeah-Elohim. Some commentators think that what Saul is actually being told is, "When the Spirit comes upon you, now lead a charge, lead a revolt, lead your men into battle against these Philistines because God is going to be with you." Perhaps. And if that is the case, already you see something of Saul's failure because he doesn't actually do that. His uncle, his name is Abner — uncle Abe. Abner would be the next in line to inherit from Kish, Saul's father. His uncle meets him — wants to know where he's been. "Looking for donkeys." Who has he met? Tell me more about Samuel. What did Samuel say? "That the donkeys have been found. But of the matter of the kingdom, he said nothing."

Don't be too hard on Saul at this point. What is he, twenty? What is he going to say? He's going to say to his uncle, "Look, I met the prophet Samuel, and he anointed me as the next king of Israel." Do you know what they would have done

with Saul if he had said that? No, at this point, that's between him and Samuel. "God moves in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm." This is Israel's king — twenty something, tall, handsome, probably utterly unprepared for the task, but God has endowed him with His Spirit.

But you see, there is another king. This king couldn't find his donkeys, but there is coming a king who will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Saul, Saul will be a failure. He will be an unmitigated failure. If you put your faith and trust in princes, even young, handsome princes, you are going to be disappointed every time, every way, because the treasure, as Ligon so eloquently spoke to us this morning, the treasure is only to be found in the Prince of Peace Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ. They wanted to be just like the nations, but this prince, this king, will say, "I am not of this world," because He will be sinless, spotless, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners. Already, this story is paving the way, do you see, for the only true Savior and Deliverer of His people — our Lord Jesus. Don't put your trust, my friends, in princes. Put your trust in Jesus, in Jesus alone.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures, and pray now again this evening, as we close out this Lord's Day, that you would write it upon our hearts, help us to rejoice in You, to live out and out for You, to rejoice in our Savior. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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