

MESSAGE - When the Unexpected Happens - 01.11.26

Last week we heard several stories where God was clearly present as He guided His people, even when the path ahead wasn't clear.

One story described a year marked by many hardships. God wasn't causing the hardships. But *in the hardship*, He was faithfully guiding this person through the valley, providing peace and strength exactly when it was needed.

Another person described God working in our normal, everyday lives — even in something as simple as asking the LORD to help plan her day.

All of the stories you heard last week and even today's passage of Scripture are examples of **God's providence**.

[SLIDE 1] The Providence of God means that God reigns over creation and history, working through human choices and natural events, without endorsing or causing everything that happens.

In other words, God works in the world to bring about His will. And **while He doesn't pull every string, He never loses control of His story**. Even as we walk through the darkest valleys, He is a God who remains near, faithful, and in control... even in the little things of everyday life.

I love that! Because it reminds us of a truth that's easy to forget...

[SLIDE 2] God doesn't just show up when life falls apart. God is always near, even in the ordinary moments of life.

This is what we see in today's passage. We've got a family that lost some donkeys. Donkeys were mainly used for travel. So I imagine suddenly losing them is kind of like the modern day equivalent of our car not starting!

It's unexpected, it's inconvenient... and it's one of those things all of us experience at some point.

But in those moments, I'm guessing most of us aren't asking:
"Lord, how are You going to use this situation for Your will?"

Saul and his dad weren't asking that question either. They just knew they needed their donkeys back! But as the story unfolds, we'll see that God was doing far more than they realized.

Because as Saul was searching for lost donkeys, the nation of Israel was facing political and spiritual unrest. After decades of Samuel's faithful leadership, Israel was now asking for a human king... **They wanted to be like all the other nations.**

We talked about this a couple weeks ago... When the elders of Israel came to Samuel, asking for a human king, Samuel recognized what was really going on. They were rejecting Yahweh God... *again.*

That's the backdrop of what's going on in chapter 9. The heart of the nation was drifting... they were growing distant from God... and yet, as we'll see...

God remained near.

[SLIDE 3] His plan would unfold even in the midst of Israel's rejection... and it starts with some lost donkeys.

Check out the first few verses in chapter 1 Samuel 9...

The writer highlights three people:

[SLIDE 4] Kish, Saul, and their trusted servant.

Kish was from the tribe of Benjamin — which just means that his family belonged to one of Israel's twelve tribes. And as a Benjamite, Kish was said to be "a man of standing," which means that he was very wealthy.

Kish had a son named Saul. The translation you heard Laura read was correct in saying that Saul was "as **handsome** a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else."

But what's interesting is that the Hebrew word behind 'handsome' is *tob*. *Tob* simply means "good." Like in Genesis 1 — God created, "and God saw that it was *good* [*tob*]."

So, it's not just that Saul was 'handsome.' The writer is saying that Saul was exactly the kind of guy Israel wanted as their king.

He was 'good' in *their* eyes.

Bible scholar John Walton puts it this way:

[SLIDE 5] "By Ancient Near Eastern standards, Saul shows great potential. By biblical standards, however, the focus of his introduction exclusively on external qualities, with no reference to Yahweh being with him, is unsettling."¹

That "unsettled" feeling is the undercurrent of 1 Samuel 9. Because our human definition of 'good' is *very* different from God's definition of 'good.'

But this is what the people wanted. *They asked for it!*
In fact, that's what Saul's name means...

[SLIDE 6] "Saul" (in Hebrew) means "to ask" or "beg for"

So the Lord choosing Saul as their king was Him saying:

This is what you asked for.

You think he's good.

But I'll show you what good really looks like.

And, interestingly enough, God begins to show His goodness, with a herd of lost donkeys!

Look at the next few verses...

[SLIDE 7] The Search for Donkeys (1 Samuel 9:3-5)

¹ John H. Walton, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 311.

We've got Saul and the servant going around from town to town looking for their donkeys. Verse 20 tells us that they were searching for about 3 days!

Those of you that hunt can probably imagine that. You're just completely off-grid for the weekend. Any longer and your family starts to worry.

Saul felt this as well. So he tells his servant they're leaving. But look at what the servant said...

[SLIDE 8] 1 Samuel 9:6 - But the servant replied, “Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true. Let’s go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take.”

Let's talk about the servant for a second...

I'm glad the NIV translation calls him a servant, because the word "slave" isn't helpful for our modern ears. This guy is basically an employee of the family - he's paid to handle daily responsibilities - like a trusted household servant.

But notice how he's treated. The servant is given a voice. Saul already said, *Hey, Let's go back* — that was a command. But the servant feels free enough to offer a different alternative, and *Saul listens to him*.

So the servant suggests that they go look for the "man of God." He was talking about Samuel the Prophet — Samuel was highly respected, and everyone knew that everything he says comes true.

It's interesting that the servant knew Samuel was in this town.

Saul had no idea.

He's okay with the idea, but he assumes Samuel would want payment. The servant says he has a little silver to offer. So, Saul agrees, and they set out to look for Samuel.

[SLIDE 8a] The Search for Samuel (1 Samuel 9:11-14)

As they approached the town, they met some women at the local well (wells were usually located just outside the city gates). So they asked the women if the prophet was there. The women said Samuel was there, and they pointed Saul and his servant in the right direction.

Now we come to the heart of the passage...

As they entered the town, they looked and saw Samuel coming toward them — but, as we'll see, they didn't recognize him.

Now, so far this story has been told from the perspective of Saul and his servant, but here's where the camera shifts point of view...

[SLIDE 9] 1 Samuel 9:15-16 - Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: “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.”

By this point, the LORD had been revealing Himself to Samuel for decades. Samuel was older. He was Israel's prophet and judge. He was one of the most respected leaders in the nation. And he'd been walking with God his whole life.

So when Samuel was within eyesight of Saul, watch what happened...

[SLIDE 10] 1 Samuel 9:17 - When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, “This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.”

This is such a cool moment!

It says a lot about the LORD and the relationship Samuel had with Him.

It almost feels like casual conversation, doesn't it?
It's as if the LORD leans over and whispers to Samuel,
“Hey, that's the guy I told you about.”

I don't know if the LORD was literally standing beside him?
Or maybe the LORD spoke to Samuel in his head? Not sure!

Either way, this is a beautiful reminder of what it looks like when we walk with God. Because whether we ever hear the audible voice of God or not, part of seeking God's Kingdom is living with the awareness of His providence — meaning that:

He is *with us*.

He is *faithful*.

And He's *in control*.

Remember, not long before this, Samuel heard words from Israel he hoped he'd never hear: "*We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations.*"

That must have been gut-wrenching for Samuel.

His own people had rejected Yahweh God as their King!

But the LORD had a plan.

And His plan involved anointing Saul as king.

I'm sure Samuel felt *unsettled*.

This didn't *feel* right.

But Samuel chooses to trust the LORD's providence rather than drift with the undercurrent of uncertainty.

He knows the LORD is faithful.

And in the end, the LORD's will, *will* be done,

— even when human desires are misplaced.

So at this point, Samuel recognizes Saul as the person who God chose.

But Saul doesn't recognize Samuel...

[SLIDE 11] 1 Samuel 9:18-19 - Saul approached Samuel in the gateway and asked, "Would you please tell me where the seer's house is?" "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..."

[SLIDE 12] 1 Samuel 9:20 - “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?”

I love this... It's like Samuel is reading their faces and just says: “Yeah, don't worry *about the donkeys. We found them. You've got more important things to worry about now...*”

That last question sounds a little weird at first — “to whom is all the desire of Israel turned”? Samuel's saying to Saul: “**What Israel desires as ‘good’ is now placed on you. What they value; what they long for; you’re the guy that’s going to fill those shoes.**”

Saul's response was basically: “*Why are you talking to me like this?*” He was genuinely confused. He's thinking: “*Why is Samuel wanting to honor me and my family?*”

Notice there's no mention of Saul becoming king.

I think that's a clue to how Samuel's feeling about this.

In the next scene, we're taken into a dining hall. Saul and his servant were seated at the head of the table. There were about 30 people in total, probably all staring at them as they took their seats.

Samuel then instructed the cook to get the piece of meat he set aside for Saul...

[SLIDE 13] 1 Samuel 9:24 - So the cook took up the thigh with what was on it and set it in front of Saul. Samuel said, “Here is what has been kept for you. Eat, because it was set aside for you for this occasion from the time I said, ‘I have invited guests.’” And Saul dined with Samuel that day.

Let's pause here for a moment.

Let's think about what this *should* be...

Whether Saul knew it or not, this would normally be a meal of celebration!
It's the final meal before someone is declared the king!

But there's no celebration.
No mention of musicians playing in the background.
No long speeches honoring the new king.

It's just...
Sit here.
Bring the meat.
Eat this... I saved it for you.

The writer wants us to feel uneasy.
This is a *tragedy*.

**The one who embodies Israel's rejection is seated at the table.
And now he's being honored instead of the LORD.**

If it wasn't clear already, it's abundantly clear now.
Israel's heart was completely **misaligned** with the LORD's.
Their desires were no longer His desires.
Their ways were no longer His ways.
Whether they realized it or not, their hearts had drifted far from Yahweh.

But here's where God's providence shines through.
Today's passage shows us that...

[SLIDE 14] God remains faithful and sovereign even when His people's desires are misaligned.

As we continue in 1 and 2 Samuel this year, we'll see again and again that God's will was still done even in the midst of drifting and misaligned hearts.

And ultimately, God's plan leads to the beginning of a **dramatic realignment** at the Lord's table...

On the night before Jesus was crucified,
Jesus and His disciples were gathered around a table.

The hour had come.
This meal was intentional.
It was prepared.

And just like Saul at his table,
The disciples didn't fully understand what was happening.
They didn't realize that Jesus was becoming their true King,
—not through power, but through suffering, death, and resurrection.

Now, notice the parallels between these two tables:

[SLIDE 15] The Two Tables
At Saul's table, Israel honors the king they asked for.
At Jesus' table, God reveals the King they needed.

Saul's table represents hearts **misaligned** with God's.
Jesus' table begins the **restoration** of our hearts to God.

At one table, **God's people honor a king who keeps God at a distance.**
At the other, **God Himself comes near as King.**

This is God's providence at work throughout history.

Even when Israel's heart was misaligned with the LORD's,
God did not abandon His people.
He remained faithful.
He remained near.
And His will was still done.

And that truth still holds for us today.

Life doesn't always go the way we want it to.
Sometimes our desires drift.
Sometimes our hearts grow misaligned.
Sometimes we find ourselves walking through valleys we never chose.

But God's providence means this:

[SLIDE 16] Jesus does not step out of the story when things go wrong.
He steps into it.

As the psalmist reminds us in **Psalms 23**:

[SLIDE 17] Psalm 23:4 - Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

And then comes this promise:

[SLIDE 18] Psalm 23:5 - You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

That's not *after* the valley.

The table isn't set once everything is fixed.

The table is prepared *in the valley*.

That's the assurance of God's providence.

He *walks with us*.

He *provides for us*.

He *invites us* to His table.

**Not because we got everything right,
but because His faithfulness never failed.**

And Psalm 23 doesn't end with drifting hearts or misaligned desires.

It ends with a promise:

[SLIDE 19] Psalm 23:6 - Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

In other words, life may not be perfect.

It might not turn out the way we wanted it.

But through the providence of God,

His goodness and love will follow us,

Today, tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives.

So how does that truth shape the way we live now?

In essence, I think what we can learn from Samuel in today's passage is this:

**[SLIDE 20] When the unexpected happens, a faithful posture isn't anxiety...
It's curiosity about what the LORD might be doing next.**

Anxiety assumes:

Something has gone wrong,
Or that God must be distant,
Or that we need to regain control asap.

Curiosity, on the other hand, leaves room for God's nearness, His guidance, and His plans unfolding in ways we don't yet see or understand.

It's like Saul and his lost donkeys.

Saul just wanted them back.

But he had no idea that the LORD would use something so ordinary and so unexpected to move him in alignment with God's plan.

And so, when we're walking with Jesus and the unexpected happens to us...
His providence invites us to respond with curiosity.

Like: "***Lord, what are you about to do in this situation?***"

That's what it looks like for us to seek God's Kingdom and trust His will...
Even in the ordinary moments of life.

Let's Pray