

People of God, the mercy of the Lord endures forever. It is a phrase we know well. Yet, for all our familiarity, we can never truly grasp the depth of its meaning. The more we contemplate the mercy of God, the more embarrassing our unbelief and rebellion seems. The mercy of the Lord does indeed endure forever, but it especially endures in God's response to our foolish and rebellious sins.

Consider Israel during the days of Samuel. In 1 Samuel 7 Israel repented of their worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. As they joined to renew covenant at Mizpah, the Philistines assembled to attack them. God, so it seems, was content to test His people to see if they really would trust in Him to save them, or if they would fall back to their false gods, or an idolatrous conception of the Lord, like they did with the Ark of the Covenant.

Thanks be to God, Israel passed the test, and did not turn to idols for deliverance. Instead, they cried out to the Lord in prayer, and placed their trust for deliverance in the Lord alone. While Samuel was offering the sacrifice and praying, the Lord answered from heaven with a great thunder that scattered the Philistines in terror and granted Israel a great victory.

In gratitude, for the Lord's mercy, Israel raised a pillar to the Lord—an Ebenezer—declaring, *"Thus far the Lord has helped us."* And in that moment, they recognized that their

true King was the Lord alone, for He is the One who would fight for them and who would secure their peace.

But many years passed by, Samuel grew old, and his sons became corrupt. God's deliverance faded from the people's collective heart and mind. Israel began to look to the other nations around them and envied their kings—kings who rode into battle in splendor, arrayed in fine robes, flanked by armies in shining armor. Israel no longer wanted an invisible God to be their champion. They wanted a king they could see, a leader who would march before them with earthly power and prestige.

And so, they rejected God as their king, and chose for themselves a man. So, in response the Lord told Samuel, "*Give them what they ask for—but first, warn them.*" And so Samuel did. He described the burdens that their king would lay upon them—the taxes, the conscriptions, the endless demands of a kingdom built on human pride, and an ever-expanding bureaucracy. This king would only ever take from them, and in return they would no longer be free, but enslaved by the very ruler they desired.

Still, the people would not listen. "No," they insisted, "*but we will have a king like the nations!*" So the Lord gave them over to their desire. He granted their request, but not without a solemn warning: "*In that day, when you cry out*

because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, the Lord will not answer you."

And yet, stubborn and unyielding, they chose their king. And so God obliged.

Chapter 9 picks up the story of Israel's first king. Up to this point, everything has led us to expect the worst. The king whom the Lord would appoint, we assume, will be a disaster. We expect him to be proud, self-serving, and embodying all the worst traits a human ruler could possess. We are, quite literally, expecting a tyrant.

But all our expectations are suddenly suspended when we see the man whom God actually chooses. A man named Saul, from Gibeah, of the tribe of Benjamin.

Now, we know how Saul's story ends—his later apostasy, his relentless pursuit of David, and God's ultimate rejection of him as king (chapters 13–15). But here, in chapter 9, none of that has happened yet. For a moment, let's set aside what we know about Saul's future, and let us read this as if for the first time, unaware of what is to come.

What we find in Saul, at least initially, is something entirely unexpected. Saul is an act of God's sovereign mercy.

The Humble King

Despite Israel's rejection of God as their King—and despite the warnings God gave that He would not answer them on that day when they cried out for relief—what do we see here? Mercy. God tells Samuel in v. 16 – *"He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have heard my people, because their cry has come to me."* Instead of God immediately subjecting Israel to a ruthless tyrant, instead of God giving Israel over to be devastated by the Philistines and refusing to hear their cry – as he said he would – in His mercy, God gives them Saul, who would deliver His people from the hand of the Philistines, because God has heard their cry. This is mercy on top of mercy.

Now from what we learn here in chapter 9, Saul seems like everything one could desire in a king. He is tall, he is handsome, he is humble, and he is an obedient son, faithfully about his father's business—searching for his father's lost donkeys. A mundane task, perhaps, but a revealing one. Some might be tempted to fault him for the donkeys going missing, saying, "Oh, Saul is incompetent. He can't even keep track of the donkeys." But we are not required to read the text that way. In fact, there is nothing here that indicates that Saul is at fault for the donkeys going missing. Rather, what this reveals to us is that Saul is responsible. He honors his father. He even goes above and beyond searching for donkey's for three days, and then concludes, that he had better get back because his father

would stop worrying about the donkey's and start to worry for him.

Thus what we see in Saul is a man who initially does not despise small things. And isn't that how so many of God's great leaders begin? With mundane duties like shepherding? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Amos were all shepherds. Joseph, while not a shepherd, oversaw the daily affairs of the prison. Likewise, Saul here. He is one who is faithful in a little, carrying out the mundane task set before him, seeking his father's lost donkeys. And because he is faithful in little, he will be granted authority to be faithful in much.

Notice also his humility. When Samuel tells him that all the desire of Israel is for him, Saul does not puff out his chest and say, "It's about time." No, instead he questions Samuel. "*Why are you talking to me like this? Am I not a Benjamite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of Benjamin?*" (1 Samuel 9:21).

Remember what was recorded at the end of the book of Judges? A Levite came to the town of Gibeah in Benjamin with his concubine. And like the men of Sodom, the men of Gibeah wanted to violate the Levite. But the Levite threw his concubine out to them, and they ravaged her to death. In response to this, the Levite cut her body into

twelve pieces and sent them throughout all Israel, sparking a civil war that resulted in the near extinction of the tribe of Benjamin.

When the fighting was over, Israel realized what they had done, and lamented how an entire tribe in Israel had been almost annihilated. So they devised a plan in order to preserve the tribe – they would find wives for the 600 remaining men of Benjamin. But they faced a dilemma—they had previously sworn that they would not to give their daughters as wives to the surviving Benjamites.

To solve this, they decided to attack Jabesh-Gilead, since that city had not joined the fight against Benjamin. They slaughtered all the men, women, and children, sparing only 400 virgins, whom they then gave to the Benjamites as wives. But that still left them 200 wives short. So they devised another plan—when the young women of Shiloh came out to dance at the festival, the remaining Benjamites would seize them as their wives, thus completing the 600 brides for 600 brothers.

Saul comes from one of the families that emerged from this chaos! Thus when Saul says: *“Am I not a Benjamite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of Benjamin?”* – all of that lay in the background. He is not feigning humility. Saul really is

humble and does not think of himself or his tribe or clan as much of anything at all. Because they are not.

Now what see here is a type of resurrection story in Saul. Saul is the Phoenix born of the ashes of Gibeah in Benjamin.

Just as all Israel joined forces to destroy Benjamin for the sin of Gibeah, so all Israel, yeah, even all the world joined forces to destroy Christ, who bore upon himself the sins of the world. And, just as from Benjamin's near total death came a king, one whom God says would "*save his people from the hands of the Philistines*" So does God raised up a prince, a king, in Jesus, who save his people from their sins.

Jesus, like Benjamin was stricken for the transgression of God's people. He made his soul an offering for guilt, and bore the sins of many. But He rose from death and delivers God's people from all their enemies.

Thus we see that Saul's humility is genuine. Unlike Adam and other kings who seized power before the time, Saul does not presume to take the throne by force. He begins with an awareness of his own smallness, even if he is head and shoulders taller than everyone else. Even in chapter 10 when Samuel proclaims Saul to be the king, they have to find him hiding among the baggage, because he really doesn't want the throne. He truly is humble.

Saul's humility, of course, foreshadows Jesus, the true King, who came in both humility and obscurity. Just as it might have been said of Saul, “*Can anything good come from Gibeah?*” so it was said of Christ, “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” Yet, while Saul outwardly looked the part of a king—tall, handsome, and regal—Jesus had “*no form or majesty that we should look at him*” (Isaiah 53:2). There was nothing in His outward appearance that drew people to Him. And yet, it was precisely in His great humility that He was qualified to be King of kings.

As Philippians 2 declares:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,

but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant,

and coming in the likeness of men.

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,

and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Moreover, when God identified Saul to Samuel as the man who would be king, He said, “*This is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall restrain my people*” (1 Samuel 9:17). This is significant. In the days of the Judges, there was no king in Israel, and every man did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). Now, God was providing a king whose role was to restrain the people—to curb their idolatry and disorder. This, after all, is the proper function of a king and, more broadly, of the civil magistrate.

As the Belgic Confession states:

And the government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.

Therefore, it was a tremendous act of mercy for God to give Israel Saul as their first king in order to restrain the sin

and idolatry of the people, so that public religion might remain pure, true, and undefiled.

Though Israel had rejected God as their rightful king, in His mercy He did not abandon them to their folly. Instead, He mercifully provided them with a man who, at least in the beginning, embodied all the qualities of a good king. There was so much potential in Saul to do what was just, right, and good—that, had he remained faithful, God would have established his house forever.

Your see people of God, the mercy of the Lord endures forever. Even after Israel spurned His kingship, He raised up Saul to deliver them from the hand of the Philistines, and to restrain their own sin and idolatry. God could have left His people to fend for themselves after rejecting Him. He could have, as He had done before, allowed the Philistines to punish them for their rebellion. He could have allowed them to fall victim to their sin and idolatry as He had in times past to teach them again and again about the foolish danger of sin and idolatry. But instead in their rejection, in their foolishness, God's mercy endured. He did not cast them off; instead, He provided a deliverer—not because they deserved it, but because they were His people. Listen again to what God tells Samuel:

“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 restrain My people.”
(1 Samuel 9:16-17)

People of God, consider the depths of the Lord’s mercy. Despite our many sins and provocations, despite our repeated failures and forgetfulness, despite the ways we often resist Christ’s kingship in our lives—God remains faithful to you, because *You are His people*. Even when you were enemies of God, He did not treat you as your sins deserved. In His divine mercy, He overlooked your transgressions and instead sent you a Savior—Christ the Lord.

And even now, He will not abandon you.

If while you were still sinners Christ died for you, how much more—now that you belong to Him—will He continue to fight on your behalf? How much more will He restrain you from falling completely into your sin? How much more, having given you His Spirit, will he strive with you to preserve you to the end?

Just as Saul was invited to the head of the table to enjoy the best part of the priests portion of the sacrifice, So Jesus welcomed you to His table as His own sons and daughters,

giving you His own body and blood as the best portion for you to feast on. In God's mercy, Christ intercedes for you, defends you from every evil, and promises to bring to completion the good work He began in you.

You are His people! He did not abandon you before forgiving your sins in Christ, and He will not abandon you now that He has forgiven you in Christ. The mercy of the Lord endures forever, for His mercy is greater than all our sins. There is nothing in Christ that prevents God from showering you in His love and mercy today, tomorrow, and forever. And this is what makes Jesus and His Father's house the desire of all nations. Amen.