



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **The Reluctant King**

1 Samuel 8: 4-9; 19; 10: 14-15

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I give to you today the story of Saul, son of Kish, the first king of Israel. I give you the whole story. He is not someone to emulate, not someone to revere, but neither is Saul someone to forget or overlook.

Saul was on a wild goose chase. Some of his father's donkeys had strayed from the herd, and he had been searching for those cussed animals from the hills to the lowlands, his long legs eating up miles by the score. But the search had been going on for three straight days, and not knowing what else to do, Saul went to consult a seer, a holy man, a prophet. But the prophet didn't tell him about donkeys, this strange prophet with motives of his own said, "Saul of the house of Benjamin, all of Israel's desires are fixed on you, you shall rule over Israel as their king."

Saul did not think he should be king; he had been looking for donkeys. In fact, on his coronation day, he was found hiding among the baggage of a caravan. But a warrior was all the people had been looking for. And Saul was tall and powerfully built — head and shoulders over anyone else. As a leader of troops, Saul was unmatched, dealing death and defeat to all the enemies of Israel in battle after glorious battle. He defeated cruel King Nahash who gouged out the right eye of anyone he captured. Saul put to flight the seven kings of Zobah, and dashed the army of the Moabites. Wherever Saul turned he routed his enemies, and the people sang songs about their glorious king Saul.

That is, until one day. On that day, it was the Amalekites who stood arrayed for battle facing Saul. Once again, the Amalekites were no match for Saul; his army was many thousands strong and the battle devolved into sheer slaughter. The army of Israel carried away all the riches they could, leaving the Amalekites stoked in ruin and disaster. Just another day at the office for Saul.

But this time was different. The seer — a strange prophet with motives of his own, the one who had made Saul king — stormed into Saul's ever-busy war room in a rage and

demanded of Saul, “Why have you not destroyed the Amalekites as I told you?” “I did!” Saul replied, “I defeated them just as I defeated all the others, even capturing their king and taking great spoils!”

But the strange prophet said this was not enough, not nearly enough. The prophet said to him, “You should not have left a single one of them alive, you should have wiped every one of them out because of what their ancestors did to our people. The kingdom will be ripped away from you and another more worthy than you will take your place!” King Saul was aghast; he did not know what to do. He begged the prophet to forgive him of his sin, to intercede on his behalf with God; but though Saul begged for forgiveness, the prophet, for reasons of his own, refused to forgive Saul.

The seer stormed away and Saul would never see him alive again, because word reached Saul soon after that the prophet had died. And in death, this prophet carried with him down to Sheol any chance of reversing what became like a curse upon Saul’s kingship. The dead man’s words echoed in Saul’s mind: “The kingdom will be ripped from you,” and something changed inside of Saul. The man who had never wanted to be king – now he wanted to hold onto it.

It was like a shadow had fallen across his mind. Part of Saul’s spirit withered away, and something foul and fetid grew in its place. A vile spirit of tormented rage would seize hold of Saul, and he would fly into terrifying rages in his throne room. When he got like that, there was only one thing that would calm him: the music of the harp, the harp played by a young man named David. David had been brought to court by that same prophet before he died—the prophet who had motives of his own.

Saul loved him dearly, this young man David. He was red-cheeked and handsome. Saul found David a wife from among his own daughters. And for a short, charmed season, all seemed well again. But David proved to be skillful in more than just playing the lyre. He was himself a brilliant warrior, strong and crafty. David was so successful that Saul put him in charge of the army. David’s power was on the rise, and when he led Israel in battle, the victories were meteoric, Saul’s glory days paled in comparison. One day, when the army marched home victorious again, Saul heard the people come out to cheer them. But the voices of the people were no longer chanting for Saul; the people were singing songs about David. David, David, worth 10 Sauls in battle, is what the people sang. They sang only of David now.

At court that night Saul was in one of his dark and deadly moods, and so David began to play the harp. That prophet’s words were ringing in Saul’s ears — the kingdom will be ripped away and given to someone more worthy — who could it be but this David?

All they did was sing to David's glory, David and his sword, David and his glory in battle, and can't he play the harp so sweetly. But David's playing did not sound sweet to Saul, unstoppable David, incomparable David ... insufferable David, with his interminable playing, and his incoherent strumming insinuating itself into Saul's mind. Had there always been in his harp that mocking undertone? Had David's seditious fingers always loosed such dissonant snickering laughter with every single note? God! Would nothing make him stop?! Saul flung his spear with every ounce of his strength, hoping to pin David's guts to the wall. But David skipped to the side, and Saul's spear stuck thrumming a foot deep into the stone wall, and David fled for his life out into the countryside.

Hunting down David became Saul's obsession, and here he was like a child again, searching for his father's donkeys. He left off rule of the kingdom, paid his duties no attention. For month after month after month, Saul chased after David like a mad Captain Ahab after the whale, across Jeshimon and Ziph. David eluded Saul in the wilderness of Horesh and he slipped away in the mountain of Maon. Once, Saul had him in his grasp, but then a messenger arrived: The Philistines were attacking, it was a huge force, and Saul was needed urgently at the front.

When Saul laid eyes on the Philistine army, his heart melted inside him like wax. His army was overmatched, badly overmatched. While Saul had been chasing David, the Philistines had been making preparations for war. In trying to eliminate David as a threat to his rule, Saul had set in motion the very forces that would unseat him from the throne — an army of the Philistines. The sun set with the battle lines drawn, and night found Saul desperate for a way to salvage the battle that Saul could no more stop from coming than he could stop the dawn from breaking.

One idea consumed Saul: It had all begun with that prophet, the one who had made him king, the prophet who had motives of his own. Saul had to speak to that prophet — but he was dead. Saul left by himself to a place called Endor, in the hills. He found a witch there who was said to be a medium for spirits. Saul told her whom he sought from among the company of death, and in the ink of night the world of life sunk down toward the upward-stretching mouth of death, and in through the ellipsis where they met rose the figure of an old man wrapped in a robe. It was the same prophet who had set Saul's fate in motion for motives of his own.

"God has turned away from me," Saul sobbed, "I have summoned you to tell me what I should do." The prophet's ghost spoke: "Why so hasty to speak with me, Saul? This very day you and your sons will be joining me in death. The kingdom is torn from your hands and is given to David."

As the sun rose Saul walked into battle like a man already dead, oblivious to the world outside as time flowed past him like a stream. His fate had come, a fate made manifest by what he did to stop fate's churning wheel. Saul, once so feared by the Philistines, now faced those selfsame foes with no hope of escape ... an unscalable mountain, an unconquerable foe, an incomparable player of the harp whose music had been sweet, those songs whose peace tormented Saul would never know again until someday young David's shade would join his in the pit. As lines collapsed and archers fled and cavalry dissolved, Saul stood alone and nothing held, the center nor the flanks. The arrows leapt from string to air and from the air to Saul's once invulnerable chest, a king so gloried once now fletched in arrows like a target at the games. The final stroke that came was swung by hand of an Amalekite, it must have been an Amalekite's whose hand flashed to the sun before that hungry steel came falling, falling, falling back into his chest.

Here is the story of Saul, son of Kish, the first king of Israel, from beginning to its end. A man who had gone out searching for his father's donkeys and found a kingdom instead; a man who never wanted to be king and then was driven mad holding onto the throne he had not sought, an ordinary person from an unimportant family. He is not someone to emulate, not someone to revere, but neither is he someone to forget or overlook. But mortal, simply mortal, gloriously mortal, and his life and his death are worthy to be remembered.

May God bless us with understanding and memory.