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Sha'ul and the Lost Donkeys

First Samuel 9: 1-14

Sha'ul and the lost donkeys DIG: What are some of the traits we see in Sha'ul from this early picture of his life? What characteristics did Sha'ul possess that made him a good choice for king in the people's eyes? How did these differ from God's standards of what made a good king? In what ways does Sha'ul show us that he was not a spiritual leader? What distinguished the "man of God?"

REFLECT: If some seer were reading all that was in your heart and telling you where your lost items were, would you have reacted as Sha'ul did? Why or why not? What insight did Samuel give you into Yeshua's prophetic ability to know what was in the heart of man. What difference was Sha'ul's search for the lost donkeys, and Messiah's compassion in seeking to save the lost sheep, coin, son?

While Sha'ul was physically impressive, he was not a spiritual leader.

The first thing we learn about **Sha'ul** is **his** genealogy: **There was a Benjamite, whose name was Kish the son of Avi'el, the son of Tz'ror, the son of B'khorat, the son of Aphiah, a Benjamite. He was a mighty man of power and brave as well (9:1).** This was not a distinguished family tree - none of these names hold any distinction in the Bible - although **Sha'ul's father** possessed a degree of prominence and wealth. Moreover, **Benjamin** was the smallest of **Isra'el's** tribes, being the last of Jacob's twelve sons. However, from a political standpoint, **Benjamin** was not a bad choice to provide a **king**, since a member of that tribe could mediate between the powerful tribes of **Judah** to the south and **Ephraim** to the north.

Kish had a son named Sha'ul. The name **Sha'ul** means *asked for*. This corresponds to **the elders'** request for a **king**. **Sha'ul** was, in fact, exactly what **Isra'el** had *asked for*, the kind of man admired according to worldly standards. The world admires someone who looks and acts like a leader, and **Sha'ul was young and handsome**. Indeed, **among the people of Isra'el there was no one better-looking than he**. The word translated **handsome** is simply the word *good* (Hebrew: *tov*). The point is that **Sha'ul** made a very good impression. **The people** would have voted **him** "Mr. Isra'el" if there had been a contest. Moreover, in a

world that values physical stature, **Sha'ul** was something of a giant: **he stood head and shoulders above anyone else in Isra'el (9:2)**. The fact that **Sha'ul** is the only **Israelite** identified in the Bible for **his** great height - physical stature always being a mark of **Isra'el's** enemies (**Numbers 13:33; Deuteronomy 1:28, 2:10, 9:2, First Samuel 17:4**) - strengthens the impression that **Sha'ul** is precisely the kind of **king** who would be chosen by **all the nations**.²⁰⁶ However, another **Sha'ul**, also a **Benjamite**, though physically unimpressive (**Second Corinthians 10:10**), possessed the internal, spiritual qualities that would make **him** one of the greatest men who ever lived.²⁰⁷



The story begins with a common event in that agricultural world. **Now some of the donkeys belonging to Sha'ul's father Kish got lost. Kish said to his son Sha'ul, "Please take one of the servants with you, go out, and look for the donkeys."** He went through the hills of Ephraim and the territory of Shalishah, but they didn't find them. Then they went through the territory of Sha'alim, but they weren't there. They went through the territory of Benjamin but didn't find them there either (9:3-4). Sha'ul and his servant took a circular tour, returning close to **Ramah**, though neither **Samuel** or the city are named here. **Sha'ul's** home was in Gibeah, which was only five miles from **Ramah**, and yet **he** didn't even know what all of **Isra'el** knew (3:20), that a **man of God** named **Samuel** lived in **Ramah**. **Sha'ul's** complete ignorance of **Isra'el's** chief prophet and judge is confirmed later when **he** meets **Samuel** and asks: **Please tell me where the seer's house is (9:18)**, only to learn that the person **he** was looking for was standing right in front of **him**. **Sha'ul's** spiritual blindness would play a significant role in events to come, especially as **he** misjudges the motives of **his** godly son **Jonathan** and sees faithful **David** as a threat.²⁰⁸

How could **Sha'ul** live so close to **Isra'el's** spiritual leader and not know about **him** is a bit of a mystery, but suggests that **Sha'ul** simply lived and farmed with **his** family at Gibeah and minded **his** own business. Apparently, **he** didn't attend the annual feasts (see the commentary on **Exodus, to see link click Eh - Three Times a Year Celebrate a Festival to Me**) and wasn't greatly concerned about spiritual matters. Like many people today, **he** wasn't against "religion," but **he** didn't make knowing **ADONAI** a vital part of **his** life.²⁰⁹

Finally, we observe that while **Sha'ul** was supposedly in charge, it was actually **his servant** who led while **Sha'ul** was following. It was **the servant**, not **Sha'ul**, who insisted that **they** inquire of **God's prophet**. **Sha'ul said to his servant, "Come, let's go back; otherwise my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us."** But **his servant**, who saw **Ramah** in the distance, **replied, "Here now, there's a man of God in this city, a man who is highly respected as a judge and a prophet. Everything he says comes true. Let's go to him; maybe he can tell us something about where we should go to find the donkeys"** (9:5-6). It's a good thing **the servant** knew about **Samuel** and that **Sha'ul** listened to **his** advice! Later, when **he** became **king**, **Sha'ul** would frequently be influenced by the counsel of others rather than making up **his** own mind.

We recognize **Sha'ul**, do we not? **Sha'ul** is among us today as the executive who runs the company into the ground while demanding a lavish bonus, or the politician who masters the art of public speaking but never really tells the truth. The **Sha'ul's** of the world have little competence for the actual job at hand, but only the carefully cultivated impression of superiority. The **Sha'ul's** have few convictions but many ambitions. **They** are led by the winds of changing fashion. This was the kind of **king the Israelites** demanded, and in a corrupt world like ours, **Sha'ul** is the kind of man who often comes to fame and power.

While **Sha'ul** was physically impressive, **he** was not a spiritual leader. This is the major point made throughout **Chapters 9 and 10**. **His** spiritual aptitude was tainted by **his** inability to find **his father's** lost **donkeys**. Most of **Isra'el's** famous leaders had been shepherds - **Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses** - so **Sha'ul's** incompetence at tracking down even such large **animals** (who eventually found **their** own way home) is not flattering, to say the least. One of the most important qualifications of a spiritual leader is faithfulness in watching over **God's flock (First Peter 5:2-3)**, but **Sha'ul** gave up and wanted to go home.²¹⁰

Sha'ul said to his servant, "If we go to the man, what can we bring him? We've used up all the bread in our packs, and there's nothing for us to give the man of God - what do we have left?" In those days, it was common to offer a gift to a prophet if one

were asking for guidance. The gift expressed gratitude and thankfulness for the service of **the man of God**. In this we see that Sha'ul was concerned with outward appearances and doing the socially correct thing, but not so concerned with doing what was right in God's eyes. He was careful to obey social etiquette in offering a gift, but later, would not be so careful to obey what the prophet commanded him.²¹¹ But, **the servant** just "happened" to **have a silver quarter-shekel [one-tenth of an ounce] in his hand**. He said: **I will give it to the man of God to tell us which way to go.**" (In Isra'el, before Samuel was written, when someone went to consult God, he would say, "Come, let's go to the seer," or one who has eyes to see what is hidden from ordinary people, both in the present - like **the lost donkeys** - and in the future, **because a person now called a prophet used to be called a seer.**) Sha'ul said to his servant, "Good, come on, let's go" (9:7-10a). It is noticeable that Sha'ul didn't even provide **his** own gift for Samuel though **he** was a wealthy **man**, but instead, relied on **his servant's** generosity. Even from **his** earliest appearances, we find Sha'ul was not a strong leader; **he** followed the leadership of **his servant**.

It was evening when **the two men** arrived at the gates of Ramah. **So they went to the city where the man of God was. As they were going up a hill to the town, they met some girls coming down to draw water, and asked them, "Is the seer here" (9:10b-11)?** The girls gave **them** a long, detailed answer. Possibly prompted by the Spirit of God, they said: **He's here, he's right ahead of you. Hurry now, he just came into the city today, because the people are sacrificing today at the high place. Find him as soon as you enter the city, before he goes up to the high place to eat; because the people won't eat the sacrificial meal until he comes and blesses the sacrifice. Afterwards, the ones invited will eat. So go on up, you should find him about this time (9:12-13).** Sha'ul's haste here led to success; but later would lead to disaster when **he** didn't wait for **the prophet** (see [Ck - God Rejects Sha'ul](#)).

High places were open-air-sanctuaries, sometimes with shrines or other buildings (9:22), where worship was conducted. **The LORD** was occasionally worshipped there (**First Kings 3:2 and 4-5**), but **their** habitual use for idolatry and other pagan practices (**First Kings 12:31-32**) brought **them** under divine judgement (**First Kings 13:1-2**). **The kings** of the divided monarchy were often judged by whether **they** had destroyed **the high places** (**Second Kings 12:1-3, 14:1-4, 18:1-4, 23:4-15**). The association of **high places** with idolatry had contributed to the divine rejection of **Shiloh** and the capture of **the Ark** (**Psalms 78:58-61**).²¹²

The time of Sha'ul's arrival at Ramah was providential, for Samuel appeared just as

Sha'ul and **his servant** entered **the city**. **They went up to Ramah; and as they entered it, there was Samuel coming toward them on his way up to the high place** where he would offer a **sacrifice** to **YHVH (9:14)**. Since **the Ark of the covenant** was at **the house of Abinadab** (see [Bl - The Ark at Abinadab's House](#)), and **the Tabernacle** was moved to **Nov** (see the commentary on [the Life of David Av - David at Nov](#)), **the people** brought **their sacrifices** to a shrine at **Ramah** that was dedicated to **ADONAI** and located on a hill near **the city**.

As Richard Phillips relates in his commentary on **1 Samuel**, the final point made in the opening section of **Chapter 9** is **God's** providential control over the small affairs of our lives, according to **His** sovereign will. Yes, **Sha'ul** was chasing **donkeys**, yet, it was **the LORD's** sovereignty that directed the paths of both **Sha'ul** and **Samuel** that was completely unexpected by both **men**. It is obvious from the text that **YHVH** had ordained every detail of this journey, even having **Sha'ul** and **his servant** arrive at the town gates at precisely the moment **Samuel** walked through them (**9:14**). Here, we are reminded of **ADONAI's** utter sovereignty over even the smallest details of life that do not conflict with our free will. It is an antimony, two things that seem to be mutually exclusive, but both are true. We can ask **God** to explain all of this when we get to heaven.

The LORD had promised to provide **Isra'el a king like the other nations**, and by **His** appointed time and means that promise would be fulfilled. Furthermore, this event would work toward **God's** own sovereign plan for **His people**, foreknown and ordained from all eternity past.²¹³ **ADONAI** used some wandering **donkeys** to lead **Sha'ul** to **Samuel** in order to **anoint him as king**. Each step along the way could be viewed as a simple coincidence, but there are no coincidences in **God's** eyes.²¹⁴ Therefore, we know that **God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose** (see the commentary on [Romans Cl - Our Bodies and Redemption](#)). In this respect, **Sha'ul's** selection as **Isra'el's king** reminds us of **ADONAI's** provision for **His Son, Yeshua**, to reign as **the Savior of His people**. Whereas the religious leaders in Jerusalem thought they were merely betraying some rebellious rabbi in handing **Yeshua** over to the Romans, **Peter** declared to **the Jews** (see the commentary on [Acts Al - The Ruach Ha'Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot](#)) that **Yeshua**, whom **they** had **him arrested in accordance with God's predetermined plan and foreknowledge had Him nailed up on a stake and killed by men not bound by the Torah (Acts 2:23).**²¹⁵

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being such a terrific **Father**! There is nothing in **You** that anyone could ever want to be changed for **You** are perfect in **love (First John 4:8c)**, and perfect in **holiness**. **The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of***

eyes all around and within. They do not rest day or night, chanting, "Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh of Hosts, who was and who is and who is to come!" (Revelation 4:8). My heart is filled with overwhelming joy and peace for how wonderful **You** are! **You** ransomed people of **every tribe, language and nation**, from sin's clutches of death by the blood of **the Lamb of God, Messiah Yeshua**. **And they are singing a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. For You were slain, and by Your blood You redeemed for God those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).**

Ransomed is great, but it gets even better because **You** have promised to live within those who love **You**. **Yeshua answered and said to him: If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him (John 14:23).** It is so fantastic that **Messiah Yeshua** promises to prepare a future eternal home in heaven for those who love **Him**. **Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be (John 14:1-3).** Words cannot express the praise that wells up in my heart for **Your** mercy and grace, a **Father** who ransoms me, prepares an eternal home in heaven for me to live in. I delight in following and praising **You!** In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** Resurrection. Amen