

Merciful Providence: Delighting in God's Purposeful Sovereignty

1 Samuel 9

"For I have seen my people, because their cry has come to me."

Introduction: Last week I had the opportunity to spend time with a college friend who has established an incredible ministry in Uganda, with a 250 acre plot of land that centers around a church, offers education and medical care to the local community, and has the growing capacity to train scores of pastors through a seminary level education. It's a remarkable feat. In college he was a "normal" Bible major who went on to seminary himself in preparation for future ministry. As all of us did during seminary who had wives and families, he also had to get a job to support life. His job? Cold calling businesses to try to sell teddy bears and other paraphernalia, working the rolodex for hours in hopes of making a sale. Many had tried their hand at the same task, with each adding to a heap of would-be salesmen who could not handle the constant rejection. Our friend? All he did was land the Aflac account, selling countless stuffed ducks and becoming unusually wealthy along the way. In describing how it happened, I was reminded by more than a few people that it seemed that Shannon had a "golden horseshoe crammed somewhere", meaning the guy was incredibly lucky to do the business he did!

But was it luck? It's interesting that when mankind tries to categorize or explain the world around us *without the acknowledgement of a sovereign God*, they come up with all kinds of concepts. This person is lucky or unlucky. In fact, a psychology professor named Richard Wiseman wrote a book called "**The Luck Factor**" describing the traits of a "lucky" person, in that they: 1) lead at opportunities, 2) listen to their intuition, 3) are optimists, 4) and are resilient. Others will leave things to *chance*, to *fortune*, or to *fate*. These are nihilistic in nature, saying "*whatever is must be*", and leaving futures up to a nebulous, unloving, **at best** a neutral force, and **at worst** a whimsical deity. Even when people will acknowledge there is a god, often that god is like a clock-maker who creates and then takes his hands off, letting the natural world take its course, and whatever will be, will be. A mixture of all of these is how MOST of the world thinks, and the consequences are dire. This is a predominant reason why our world is so full of **fear** (be afraid of opposing views, viruses, death, climate change, religion, etc), and with such imbedded fear comes nervousness, unsettled decisions, unsure direction, and shaky purposes, which is why people end up simply getting whatever they can out of life, as scant as that actually may be.

But this is NOT how God works nor how the Bible describes life. God is sovereign over all things, and this describes His right and power to do all that He wills ("*Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases*" – Psalm 115:3). But God's sovereignty is also *purposeful*, and that is where we get the concept of **PROVIDENCE**, where God both *sees* ("*vide*" in Latin means "to see") and *provides*. God **sees and knows all things**: "*The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven; His eyes see, His eyelids test the children of man.*" (Psalm 11:4)

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good" (Prov. 15:3)

"...a land that the LORD your God cares for: The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it..." (Deut. 11:12)

"For His eyes are on the ways of a man, and sees all his steps." (Job. 34:21)

“And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the **eyes of Him to whom we must give account.**” (Heb. 4:13)

He sees all things, and nothing, NOTHING is hidden from Him, in action, attitude, desire, and intention. But He not only sees, but He provides:

- He **gives strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward Him** (2 Chron. 16:9)
- He will **counsel us with His eye upon us** (Ps. 32:8)
- He feeds the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field, so how much more will He provide for us (Matt. 6:26-30)
- He cares if a sparrow dies and knows the number of hairs on our head, so we do not have to fear (Matt. 10:29-31).
- His eyes are on the righteous and ears are open to their prayer, but His face is against those who do evil (1 Pet. 3:12).

So let me give you three, quick, overlapping definitions of **PROVIDENCE** that will help us frame this chapter:

*“The **PROVIDENCE** of God is His **purposeful sovereignty** by which he will be completely successful in the achievement of His ultimate goal for the universe. God’s providence carries his plans into action, guides all things toward his ultimate goal, and leads to the final consummation.”* John Piper, “Providence”

“PROVIDENCE – That wonderful, strange, mysterious, unguessable way Yahweh has of ruling his world and sustaining his people, and his doing it, frequently, over, under, around, through, or in spite of the most common stuff of our lives or even the bias of our wills.” – Dale Davis

“PROVIDENCE – “God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, be his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, **to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.**” *“Westminster Confession of Faith (1646 – Chapter 5).*

Providence is how God’s unseen hand is active in our lives each day, why we can trust God in our decision making, in the unknown, and rest in a tumultuous world that cannot find peace. We trust God is working all things out “to the praise of His glory”, which is the source of our ultimate **good AND joy!** The fact that God is in control AND has the ability to work all things out means we can **trust Him when we face the unknown, live in a world that is crumbling under progressive sin, and joyfully rest assured that God redeems even our bad and sinful decisions for His glory.**

As we come to 1 Samuel 9-10:16, we see this whole section *framed as an expression of God’s providential care over His people Israel.* They had unwisely and sinfully asked for a human king to be like all the other nations, when God had reminded them that **HE** was their king and they were supposed to be distinct from the other nations. But God not only gave them what they wanted, He would redeem their request to progress them toward a monarchy that would not only produce King David, a man after God’s own heart, but ultimately lead to Jesus Himself coming on the scene. This section tells the story of

how Saul was **anointed king**, and how ***Israel's rejection could not thwart or paralyze God's plan or providential care***. That gives an amazing amount of comfort to us today, as God redeems all things for His glory and our good.

God's Providence is Often Unseen in the Minutia of Life (9:1-14; 18-27)

1 Samuel 9 is told with exceptional detail. It moves us from meeting an unknown and unsuspecting young man named Saul, how he meets Samuel, and how Samuel is told by the Lord that he is the guy, to Saul being anointed privately, to Saul NOT telling his family about what happened. In fact, the whole narrative reads like a story where everyone in it is in the dark, not sure what's really going on. We, the reader, are given a key piece of information in vv. 15-17 which informs us of exactly what God is doing, but the people who lived it did NOT know. Much like the story of Job, the circumstances could be read as **random, or unlucky, or coincidental**, but nothing is further from the truth. God works in not only the **big displays** in life, but in the mundane, *like looking for lost donkeys!* The gist of the story is Saul looks for his father's donkeys in a 6+ mile radius of his home, which lead him to seek the counsel of the unknown prophet, who happened to be Samuel. Samuel then takes Saul, anoints him as king, gives him signs to assure, and sends him home. God cares about and works in the minutia of life, and everything that goes on matters and has purpose.

Read with me the first 2 verses of chapter 9. Notice that God gave Israel exactly who they asked for: a king who fit the bill, looked the part, and filled out a suit of armor nicely. Saul was from a wealthy family, from the tribe of Benjamin, and his name meant "*asked for*" or "*dedicated*". He was described **twice as handsome**, and also a head taller than any other Israelite. If you lined up all the eligible men in Israel in a lineup and had them choose the one who looked like a King, Saul was hands down the choice. What's interesting is that this is the **ONLY** time that an Israelite was identified by his height, since physical stature and prowess was a mark of Israel's enemies (Num. 13:33; Deut. 1:28; 2:10; 9:2; 1 Sam. 17:4). Again, it's God shining a light on the one they wanted was NOT the one they needed.

Now, I believe Saul could get a bad rap, since he was a little like the #1 draft pick of a sport who did not work out, but did not **CHOOSE** to be drafted by that particular team. Some will call that player a "bust", but really it had to do with where and who chose him. It is clear that Saul did NOT ask nor desire to be king, but was thrust into the position by God's choice. We will see some good parts of Saul, but overwhelmingly Saul was marked by his lack of godly character. **REMEMBER, Biblical leadership requires FAR more than outward abilities and personalities but is dependent on proven character forged over time.**

Let's start with some positives about Saul:

- He showed true concern and respect for his father (9:5), desiring to go back home as to not have his dad be anxious about his whereabouts in the search for the missing donkey's
- He agreed with his servant to inquire after God's prophet, seeking the help of the nation's spiritual leader (9:10)
- In meeting with the "seer" or "prophet" (9:9), he respectfully said they needed to bring a gift to honor him (5-7). He was willing to follow good social protocol. He would have brought flowers home, would have been courteous at a dinner party, and would not have overstayed his welcome at a friend's house.

But we also see his shortcomings revealed, that he was NOT the man Israel needed as king:

- It's interesting that God equates spiritual leaders as *shepherds*, from Moses to David, propensity as a shepherd overlaid beautifully as a leader of people. In fact, leaders in the church are compared to shepherds, which is the function of **elders** (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). The fact that Saul could not find the lost donkey's pictured his inability to truly care for the people he was tasked to rule.
- Though he went to see the prophet, the fact that he did NOT KNOW SAMUEL at all betrayed the fact that he did NOT follow God's leadership. Samuel had made the circuit throughout the land (1 Sam. 3:20) and was known from Dan to Beersheba. On top of this, the land of **Zuph** where Samuel lived now was IN BENJAMIN and within miles of where Saul lived. It reminds me of people who tell me they attend a church but they cannot tell me who the pastor is. He knew the concept, but not the person, which revealed his spiritual standing.
- It was at the prompting of his servant (9:6) that they went to see Samuel at all. A leader is one who makes decisions by conviction and who moves confidently. Saul was a follower and easily swayed, often taking the path of least resistance.

God's Providence Display's His Mercy (15-17)

"Now 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 restrain my people.'"

Here is the injunction of the narrative that gives us a beautiful glimpse of what God is doing, one that we do not get but trust by faith that God is working in the unseen. The whole story of Saul looking for lost donkeys and wandering into a city where there was an unnamed prophet was all part of God's providence to bring him to Samuel, so that He could accomplish HIS WILL AND PLAN, all to HIS GLORY. Notice a few important emphases here:

- He calls Saul a "Prince" (v. 16; 10:1) or 'commander' – Saul would function as king, but clearly was not the king He had intended
- **Commitment of Protection** – "He will save my people from the Philistines" – Even in their short-sighted and wicked request, Israel was not disowned by God, but 3x's He referred to them as "MY PEOPLE". Just like our own kids who could not sin their way out of our love, God continued to lavish protection on His own. God said HE would fight their battles, and did it (7:3, 10), but they forgot and wanted someone else. God could have thrown up His hands and said, "fine, have it your way you cotton headed ninny muggings! See how you fare against the bigger, badder army of the Philistines!" But He did not do this. He gave them a leader who would be the front man of the band, even if he was simply lip synching the whole time.
- **Display of Mercy** – Far from vindictiveness that characterizes our sin nature, God responded with undeserved and lavished mercy. He heard their cry, he **sees their need**. *"These foolish, stubborn people do not cease to be objects of Yahweh's compassions. Again, let no sin be glossed over; let no one excuse its God denying wickedness. But sure, if you are a child of God, you rejoice to see that your God is "mule-ish" on mercy, that your sin does not dry up the fountain of his compassions, that his pity refuses to let go of His people."*¹

¹ Dale Davis, "1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart", p. 97.

The fact that God still listens, still responds, still loves in spite of our effusive sin is one of the most glorious realities of the universe. When we wonder why bad things happen or where God is during struggles or what He is doing in circumstances, we can often paint a picture that what is happening is **unfair!** But if God were FAIR, He would condemn us without hope, shut us off, pour out His deserved wrath and send us to Hell right now. But He is merciful! Even when our present scenario is of our own choosing and a result of our own decisions, His mercy is more!

*“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the **offspring of David**, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound in chains as a criminal. **But the word of God is not bound!** Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for:*

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

If we endure, we will also reign with him;

If we deny him, he also will deny us;

If we are faithless, he remains faithful-----for he cannot deny himself”

2 Timothy 2:8-13

God is faithful to His promises and to His people. He is actively working to bring our salvation to completion through the culmination of His glorious grace. In all things, the good and bad, the easy and hard, the known and uncertain, the wise and foolish decisions, His providential hand is on us. He is consistent with His nature, saving those who believe and punishing those who do not. We can bank our trust on a God who is absolute and perfect in every decision and every action.

- **Gentle but Consistent** – “He it is who shall restrain my people” – The word for restrain here is almost always used in a negative connotation in the OT, and it expresses hindrance or imprisonment. God’s refining and mercy is not without pain. Often we will go through trials that we do not choose or deserve consequentially, but other times we face the culmination of our choices. That is what Israel faced. Saul’s kingship would experience certain victories but would be marked by failure, leaving Israel in no better situation than they were in before. Taking things into our own hands, doing things our own way, trusting our own minds and hearts to figure life out is NEVER the best way forward and cannot lead to joy. It leaves us unsettled, anxious, fearful, and unsteady into the future.

The rest of the chapter continues the story, where Saul comes into the city, eats with Samuel who informs him that the donkeys have been found (I know everyone was worried) and stayed til the next day. From there, Saul would be anointed, given three signs of assurance, and returned home, telling no one what had happened.

What do we walk away with in this chapter? We remember that God is not only powerful, He is active in the minute and the large. Often when we’re studying something like this many conversations come up that deal with this very issue. Multiple friends this week referenced trusting God in the unknown, from shaky marriages, to unexpected moves, to having expected doors closed in faces. Trusting God’s strong, faithful, merciful and providential hand is easy to say, hard to do. He is always moving us somewhere, making us more like Christ. True joy comes when we trust Him implicitly, alone, without wavering. He sees His people, hears their cry, and always provides exactly what we need.