

Saul's Features Great And Tall

1 Samuel 9:1-27 July 19, 2026

Steven Bradbury was the first Australian to ever win a Winter Olympic gold medal. In fact, he was the first person from the *Southern Hemisphere* to ever win winter gold.¹ How did he do it? By “just sitting in the back, waiting for things to happen.”² You see, Steven was a speed skater. But in 2002, *no one* expected *him* to stand on the podium.

In a quarterfinal heat, Steven finished 3rd. Only the top 2 finishers moved on to the semifinals. But after the race, the second-place finisher was disqualified. Steven was on to the semis.

He made it into the finals when some of his competitors crashed and didn't finish. And so, racing against 4 other skaters for the gold, he decided to use the same strategy. He later said, “I figured I might as well stay out of the way and be in last place and hope some people get tangled up.”

Three of his rivals had a combined 15 gold medals.³ When the 1000 meter race began, Steven was way off the pace of the others. But on the last turn of the last lap, all 4 of his competitors crashed and fell, and Steven cruised casually into the history books.

I don't mean to demean any of his hard work. You don't become an Olympian without dedication and sacrifice. But what a historical oddity. This *first* gold medal winner's strategy was hang back and wait for things to happen. He not only won gold, but received the key to the city of Brisbane, the Medal of the Order of Australia, and was inducted into the Sport Australia Hall of Fame.

1 Samuel chapter 9 introduces us to Israel's first king. He is a main character for the rest of the book. Typically, I think of 1 Samuel as being a book about David - and it is - but it is just as much a book about Saul. He ruled over Israel for more than 40 years.⁴

As he's introduced, notice how he is presented to us as passive, hesitant, and ineffective. It is a foreshadowing of things to come. Verse after verse, Saul does not lead, he is acted upon. He is propelled forward not by his own faith or his own desire to see things through, but by the prodding and direction of others.

Now, we might say, “Yeah, it's Saul. He's in the villain category of the Old Testament.” But we have to remember it didn't *have* to be that way. We'll see that God was willing to use Saul, to empower Saul, to guide Saul, to accomplish a great work of deliverance through his life. And, at first, God is *able* to do those things as Saul is swept along by the unfolding history of Israel. But in the end, Saul the *first* becomes one of the worst. His story ends in spiritual and personal tragedy.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Bradbury

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUi4-H6hfw8>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN7ih576VYM>

⁴ 1 Samuel 13:1, Acts 13:21

1 Samuel 9:1-2 - ¹ There was a prominent man of Benjamin named Kish son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah, son of a Benjaminite. ² He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man. There was no one more impressive among the Israelites than he. He stood a head taller than anyone else.

Our author wants us to be impressed by Saul. His father is called a “prominent” man. That’s the same way Boaz was described. It meant he was an influential figure in his community, but it often also meant he was a valiant soldier - a war hero.⁵ The genealogy given implies great wealth.⁶

Not only is Saul’s family impressive, he himself is without equal in Israel at the time.⁷ Everything about his standing and stature is desirable. In fact, that term for impressive is the same word Genesis uses when saying that creation was “good.”

But there is already a subtle hint that this character will be trouble. Saul is the *only* Israelite who is noted in the Bible for being tall. Usually that description was reserved for Israel’s *enemies*.⁸

But what did Israel ask for? An impressive king just like all the other nations had.

1 Samuel 9:3-10 - ³ One day the donkeys of Saul’s father Kish wandered off. Kish said to his son Saul, “Take one of the servants with you and go look for the donkeys.” ⁴ Saul and his servant went through the hill country of Ephraim and then through the region of Shalishah, but they didn’t find them. They went through the region of Shaalim—nothing. Then they went through the Benjaminite region but still didn’t find them. ⁵ When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to the servant who was with him, “Come on, let’s go back, or my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and start worrying about us.” ⁶ “Look,” the servant said, “there’s a man of God in this city who is highly respected; everything he says is sure to come true. Let’s go there now. Maybe he’ll tell us which way we should go.” ⁷ “Suppose we do go,” Saul said to his servant, “what do we take the man? The food from our packs is gone, and there’s no gift to take to the man of God. What do we have?” ⁸ The servant answered Saul, “Here, I have a little silver. I’ll give it to the man of God, and he will tell us which way we should go.” ⁹ Formerly in Israel, a man who was going to inquire of God would say, “Come, let’s go to the seer,” for the prophet of today was formerly called the seer. ¹⁰ “Good,” Saul replied to his servant. “Come on, let’s go.” So they went to the city where the man of God was.

To examine Saul’s behavior, let’s first understand the context. Losing these donkeys was a major economic problem for the family - like losing several of your paychecks.⁹ It wouldn’t be easy to find lost donkeys, but it was important. And Saul was the one who received the task from his father.

⁵ Robert Hubbard *The Book Of Ruth*

⁶ Bill Arnold *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*

⁷ Ronald Youngblood *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel*

⁸ Robert Bergen *The New American Commentary, Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*

⁹ Dale Ralph Davis *1 Samuel: Looking On The Heart*

Now, we're getting ahead of ourselves here, but many of us are familiar with the David story. One of the important elements of his backstory is how he was a *faithful* shepherd. When a bear or a lion carried off one of his sheep, David chased it down, killed the predator, and saved the lamb.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Saul is presented as an incompetent shepherd.¹¹ Yes, he spent three days and traveled around 60 miles.¹² That's a lot. But when it got tough, he wanted to call it quits.

The very *first* words Saul says are, "Let's turn back." One Hebrew scholar points out that a general principle of Biblical narrative is that the first reported speech is a defining moment for that character.¹³ Saul's first line is, "Let's give up."

Meanwhile, we also see all the initiative coming from *outside* Saul. It's his father that sends him out. It's his servant that convinces him to go on. It's even the *servant* that has to produce the silver they think they need to pay the man of God. He's consistently acting after being pressured by others. And that's going to become a big problem for him in the future.

There's another issue: We note Saul has *no idea* who Samuel was. Here's why that's remarkable: First, Samuel has had national renown for decades. He went on a circuit each year through multiple towns, judging Israel. *And* Saul lives close to Samuel's hometown!¹⁴ And yet, he doesn't know Samuel, he doesn't know him by name or by sight. He doesn't think to go inquire of the Lord. The future king is shown as being devoid of spiritual activity or sensitivity.¹⁵ He *wanders* ineffectively.

1 Samuel 9:11-20 - ¹¹ As they were climbing the hill to the city, they found some young women coming out to draw water and asked, "Is the seer here?" ¹² The women answered, "Yes, he is ahead of you. Hurry, he just now entered the city, because there's a sacrifice for the people at the high place today. ¹³ As soon as you enter the city, you will find him before he goes to the high place to eat. The people won't eat until he comes because he must bless the sacrifice; after that, the guests can eat. Go up immediately—you can find him now." ¹⁴ So they went up toward the city. Saul and his servant were entering the city when they saw Samuel coming toward them on his way to the high place. ¹⁵ Now the day before Saul's arrival, the LORD had informed Samuel, ¹⁶ "At this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel. He will save them from the Philistines because I have seen the affliction of my people, for their cry has come to me." ¹⁷ When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD told him, "Here is the man I told you about; he will govern my people." ¹⁸ Saul approached Samuel in the city gate and asked, "Would you please tell me where the seer's house is?" ¹⁹ "I am the seer," Samuel answered. "Go up ahead of me to the high place and eat with me today. When I send you off in the morning, I'll tell you everything that's in your heart. ²⁰ As for the donkeys that wandered away from you three

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 17:34-35

¹¹ Bergen

¹² John Walton, Victor Matthews, & Mark Chavalas *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*

¹³ Robert Alter *The David Story*

¹⁴ Walton

¹⁵ Bergen

days ago, don't worry about them because they've been found. And who does all Israel desire but you and all your father's family?"

This is one of those stories where the curtain is pulled back for us to see the incredible, detailed, perfectly-timed providence of God. Even though Israel rejected Him in chapter 8. Though they were turning their hearts away from Him, *His* heart was ever caring, ever thoughtful, ever present with them. God *would* show grace to Saul because He's that loving. And we see the Lord orchestrate this situation at just the right time, *while also* making sure Kish's donkeys make it home.

God cares about your life. God works providentially on your behalf. We don't always see it. We don't always understand how He's fitting things together to accomplish His work. But if we walk by faith, we should expect God to work providentially for us and through us. But notice: That *doesn't* mean things will always be easier or more comfortable. Sometimes the donkeys go missing. Sometimes we're walking around without much to show for it day after day, mile after mile. But if we walk by faith, we please God and He is able to approve us and spiritually reward us.¹⁶

Israel was in a time of rebellion against the Lord. But did you notice what God said in verse 16? "Anoint him ruler over *My* people." He still loved them. They were still His people, even though they had traded *longing* for God for longing for a random Benjamite. What a good God of grace.

There's a poetic symmetry to Saul's story taken as a whole. On the night before he's anointed, he seeks out Samuel for direction. And we'll see that on the night before his death, he does the same.

But there's also a subtle warning in God's message. When He said, "He will *govern* My people," God used an interesting term. One that can mean govern, but also one that often means restrain, hold back, hinder, or even imprison.¹⁷ And, sadly, by the end, Saul will do that and more to Israel.

1 Samuel 9:21 - ²¹ Saul responded, "Am I not a Benjaminite from the smallest of Israel's tribes and isn't my clan the least important of all the clans of the Benjaminite tribe? So why have you said something like this to me?"

Is this humility or hesitancy? What he says isn't exactly true. His family is very prominent. And he's the most impressive figure in all Israel according to human standards. We'll see Saul hesitate to step into the role God was calling him to even more at his coronation.

1 Samuel 9:22-27 - ²² Samuel took Saul and his servant, brought them to the banquet hall, and gave them a place at the head of the thirty or so men who had been invited. ²³ Then Samuel said to the cook, "Get the portion of meat that I gave you and told you to set aside." ²⁴ The cook picked up the thigh and what was attached to it and set it before Saul. Then Samuel said, "Notice that the reserved piece is set before you. Eat it because it was saved for you for this solemn event at the time I said, 'I've invited the people.' " So Saul ate with

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:5-6

¹⁷ Bergen

Samuel that day. ²⁵ Afterward, they went down from the high place to the city, and Samuel spoke with Saul on the roof. ²⁶ They got up early, and just before dawn, Samuel called to Saul on the roof, "Get up, and I'll send you on your way!" Saul got up, and both he and Samuel went outside. ²⁷ As they were going down to the edge of the city, Samuel said to Saul, "Tell the servant to go on ahead of us, but you stay for a while, and I'll reveal the word of God to you." So the servant went on.

Saul is silent throughout the scene. It's like he's part of the furniture. Just hanging in the background while things happen.

You know, Steven Bradbury is now part of the Australian dictionary. In 2016, they added the phrase "do a Bradbury," defined as: "To be the unlikely winner of an event." But Steven didn't always just let life happen to him. In 2022 he was out surfing with his son when he noticed four girls floundering in a riptide. He helped save all four of them from drowning.¹⁸

For being the most impressive man in all Israel, Saul's start isn't too inspiring. But he makes some progress. At the beginning of his story God *will* use him to save Israel from some of her enemies. Because God is *always* willing to empower those who will obey Him and walk with Him. But, in the end, Israel's first king is blown off course by pressures, by jealousy, and by a refusal to obey God.

Studying him as a character is interesting, but remember: God gives us these examples so we will learn spiritual principles from them. So what can we learn from Saul's introduction? This morning the main idea I want us to walk out of here with is that we *know* God wants to work providentially through our lives. He *wants* to continue His unstopping activity of grace and truth and love using your circumstances. *Since* we know that, we cannot just let life happen to us.

Saul was one of God's chosen people. And, he's about to find out he's specifically called to an important role in God's plan. Yet Saul, it seems, had *no* sensitivity or interest in spiritual things. He didn't know Samuel. We don't see him pray. We don't see him worship. He's just floating in life, which leads to an ineffective life.

You're called and chosen, too. If you're a Christian, the Spirit of the Living God dwells within you to lead and empower and use you. Do we *want* to be used? Do we *want* God's Word to be revealed to us so we can step into our calling? Instead of sleeping in like Saul, we want to have hearts that rise, ready for the Lord. Hearts that say, "Lord, we want to be sent on our way into *Your* purposes."

But that means we need to live life with purpose. Not just blowing around, not just propelled by pressures outside of us, but training our hearts to be after God's heart. And *expecting* God to show us what He's reserved for us. That we're not just sitting in the back, waiting for things to happen, but keeping pace with God's leading and discovering the good works He has prepared beforehand for us to walk in.

¹⁸ <https://www.news.com.au/national/queensland/news/australian-winter-olympic-champion-steven-bradbury-saves-four-teens-from-drowning/news-story/6426733196233f386729d273408dc686>