

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Samuel 9 opens the narrative of Saul's emergence as Israel's first king. The chapter introduces Saul through a genealogy establishing his Benjaminite lineage and a physical description that sets him apart as impressive by human standards — tall, handsome, without equal among the people. The narrative engine is a domestic errand: Saul's father Kish sends him to find lost donkeys. After searching through multiple regions without success, Saul is prepared to turn back when his servant suggests they consult a nearby "man of God." That man, as the narrator reveals to the reader (though not yet to Saul), is Samuel. Meanwhile, the LORD has already spoken to Samuel the day before, telling him that a Benjaminite man is coming, and that Samuel is to anoint him as *nagid* (prince/leader) over Israel to deliver the people from the Philistines. When Saul arrives asking about donkeys, Samuel — informed by divine revelation — already knows who he is and why he has come. Samuel reassures Saul about the donkeys, speaks cryptically of Saul's future, seats him at the head of the feast as the guest of honor, and gives him the portion that had been set aside. The chapter closes with Samuel sending the others away so he can speak privately with Saul, anticipating the anointing in chapter 10.

This Text — Intent:

God is using this chapter to establish that Israel's kingship — whatever it becomes — originates entirely with Him, not with the people's will, Saul's ambition, or human political processes. The chapter is structured to make this unmistakable: every element of the narrative (the lost donkeys, the journey through multiple territories, the servant's suggestion, the prior divine word to Samuel) is a demonstration of divine sovereign orchestration. The reader is meant to see that the LORD is the one who finds, chooses, and positions Saul — and that Saul himself is largely a passive recipient of what God is doing. The theological intent is not to celebrate Saul but to establish that even a flawed institutional response to Israel's unfaithful demand (cf. 1 Samuel 8) is governed by God's providential hand. God is calling the reader to recognize His unseen governance behind what appears to be coincidence, human initiative, and ordinary circumstance.

Subject Sentence: God sovereignly locates and designates Israel's king before any human process begins.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through this narrative that His providential hand governs every step of history's turning points — that what looks like coincidence, human initiative, and lost donkeys is in fact divine orchestration, so that no one but God can claim credit for what is about to happen to Israel.

Interpretive Evaluation

The meaning of *nagid* (v. 16): The word translated “prince” or “leader” (*nagid*) in God’s instruction to Samuel is not the standard term for king (*melek*). Some interpreters (particularly those with a Deuteronomistic editorial lens) argue that this distinction signals ambivalence in the tradition about Saul’s kingship — that he is appointed a lesser or provisional role. Reformed and evangelical exegetes rightly note, however, that *nagid* is used elsewhere for fully legitimate rulers (David is also called *nagid*; cf. 2 Samuel 5:2) and functions here as a *divinely designated* ruler in contrast to *melek*, which carried connotations of the people’s political demand. The distinction is theological, not hierarchical — Samuel is anointing God’s chosen deliverer, not merely a compromise figure. This reading is preferred because it accounts for both the seriousness of the divine commission in verse 16 and the full anointing narrative that follows in chapter 10.

Providential coincidence or literary convention: Some historical-critical interpreters read the “coincidental” elements of this narrative (the lost donkeys, the servant’s timely suggestion) as folkloristic motifs or compositional devices rather than as theological claims about divine providence. This is a methodological error, not a textual one — the text itself makes the theological point explicit through the divine speech in verses 15-16. The LORD tells Samuel the day before that a man from Benjamin will arrive; the “coincidences” are the text’s own demonstration that God already knew. To strip the providentialism from the narrative is to read against its own explicit framing.

Saul as tragic figure — reading chapter 9 through chapter 15: Some expositors, aware of Saul’s eventual rejection, read chapter 9 primarily through the lens of his later failure — presenting him in this chapter as already compromised or as a symbol of human kingship’s inherent inadequacy. This overreads backward. Chapter 9 does not ironize Saul. His imposing appearance is presented straightforwardly, and no textual signals indicate that the narrator is winking at the reader. The chapter’s theological weight is about God’s sovereign choice and orchestration, not about Saul’s tragic arc. That arc belongs to later chapters. Preachers must resist importing chapter 15’s verdict into chapter 9’s narrative.

No significant divergence among major Protestant traditions on the core claim of this chapter. Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, and Wesleyan interpreters read the providence theme consistently. The primary divergence is between theologically conservative readings (divine providence is the point) and historical-critical readings (the providence language is editorial theology, not historical description) — and the Reformed reading of the text on its own terms is clearly preferred.

Key Canonical Support

- **Proverbs 16:9** — *“The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.”* The principle made explicit here is demonstrated narratively in 1 Samuel 9: Saul plans a donkey-search; God establishes his steps toward a throne.
- **Genesis 45:5-8** — Joseph’s declaration that God sent him to Egypt, not his brothers. The same pattern: human actions (brothers’ betrayal; Saul’s errand) are the surface mechanism; divine purpose is the actual engine. Canonical precedent for reading “coincidence” as providence.
- **Acts 9:1-6** — Saul of Tarsus on an errand of his own choosing, interrupted and redirected by a divine encounter he did not seek. The structural parallel is striking: a man named Saul, on a mission, is suddenly rerouted by God’s initiative into a role he did not anticipate.
- **Ephesians 1:11** — *“In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”* The theological ground for reading 1 Samuel 9 as providence narrative — God works *all things* according to His counsel, including the domestic errands of future kings.
- **Isaiah 46:10** — *“I make known the end from the beginning... saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”* God’s advance word to Samuel (v. 15-16) is an instance of this principle: the end (Israel’s deliverer) is declared before the beginning (Saul’s arrival).

Aim: To show the reader that God’s sovereign governance of turning-point events demands trust in His unseen hand over human circumstances — and to expose the tendency to credit human initiative or chance for what only divine providence explains.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
9:1	Genealogy of Kish, a Benjaminite of wealth and standing	Establishes Saul’s lineage; Benjamin = smallest tribe (cf. 1 Sam 9:21); irony built in
9:2	Saul introduced: handsome, tall, head and shoulders	Physical description is literary setup — Israel wanted a king who <i>looks</i> the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	above the people	part (cf. 1 Sam 8:20)
9:3	Kish's donkeys lost; Kish sends Saul with a servant to find them	The domestic errand that becomes a providential journey; Saul is entirely reactive
9:4	Saul and servant search through multiple hill territories without success	The geography of fruitless searching emphasizes human inability; God has not yet inserted Himself visibly
9:5	Saul, concerned about his father's worry, proposes turning back	Saul shows filial responsibility — a positive character note; he has no ambition in view
9:6	Servant suggests consulting the "man of God" nearby who is highly regarded	Providence uses the servant's suggestion; Saul does not seek Samuel himself
9:7	Saul objects — no gift to bring the man of God	Saul's practical concern; he doesn't know this meeting is above ordinary consultation
9:8	Servant produces a quarter shekel of silver — a small sum	Detail emphasizing the smallness of human provision; God's purposes don't require adequate human preparation
9:9	Editorial aside: "prophet" was formerly called "seer"	Narrator's note connecting terminology across eras; signals the text's self-awareness of historical distance
9:10	Saul agrees; they go toward the city	Simple compliance; Saul is still on a donkey-errand in his own mind
9:11-12	Young women at the well direct them to Samuel, who has come for a feast	Providence layers: the right people at the right place; Samuel is already there
9:13	Instructions: go up quickly, catch him before the feast begins	Urgency without knowing why; the meeting is timed by God, not by Saul
9:14	Saul enters the city; Samuel	The convergence of two

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	is coming out — they meet	trajectories, one human-initiated, one divinely directed
9:15-16	The LORD's prior revelation to Samuel: a Benjaminite is coming; anoint him <i>nagid</i> ; he will deliver from Philistines	The interpretive key to the entire chapter: God already knows; the narrative is God's doing from beginning to end
9:17	As Saul approaches, the LORD confirms to Samuel: "This is the man I told you about"	Real-time divine identification; Samuel's recognition is not natural discernment but divine speech
9:18-19	Saul asks Samuel for directions to the seer's house; Samuel reveals himself and invites Saul to the feast	The reversal: Saul looking for the seer; the seer already knows him; Saul is the guest, not the petitioner
9:20	Samuel tells Saul the donkeys are found; speaks of Israel's desire being set on Saul and his father's house	The donkey mission is resolved immediately; the larger mission is introduced; Saul is disoriented
9:21	Saul protests his smallness: least tribe, smallest clan	Genuine humility or confusion; parallels Gideon (Judges 6:15) and Moses (Exodus 3:11); God consistently chooses the unlikely
9:22-24	Samuel honors Saul with the seat of honor and the reserved portion at the feast	The portion was "set aside" for this occasion — providence has been at work before Saul arrived
9:25-26	Samuel and Saul talk on the rooftop; Samuel rises early to send Saul on his way	Private conversation anticipates the anointing; Samuel is managing the transition
9:27	Samuel asks the servant to go ahead; tells Saul to stand still so he may declare the	The chapter closes in anticipation: the word of God is about to be spoken;

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	word of God	Saul waits

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	9:1-2	The Man Introduced: Lineage, Appearance, Human Qualification
2	9:3-10	The Errand: Human Initiative on a Domestic Mission
3	9:11-14	The Convergence: Providence Brings Two Men Together
4	9:15-17	The Divine Prior Word: God Already Knew, Already Spoke, Already Chose
5	9:18-24	The Honor: Saul Receives What Was Set Aside Before He Arrived
6	9:25-27	The Threshold: Saul Waits for the Word of God

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God sovereignly locates and designates Israel’s king before any human process begins.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through this narrative that His providential hand governs every step of history’s turning points — that what looks like coincidence, human initiative, and lost donkeys is in fact divine orchestration, so that no one but God can claim credit for what is about to happen to Israel.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Reframe “coincidence” as the ordinary grammar of God’s providence.

The reader who has been trained to read their life as a sequence of self-directed decisions interrupted occasionally by divine moments needs to have their interpretive framework inverted. Saul’s donkeys are not background noise to a spiritual event — they *are* the spiritual event. The chapter teaches that ordinary, non-religious, even frustrating

circumstances (a lost herd, a fruitless search, a servant's suggestion) are the normal medium through which God works. The preacher should call the congregation to the discipline of asking not "where is God in my crisis?" but "where is God already working in what I assume is just my life?"

2. (Affections/Worship) Receive with gratitude what God has set aside for you before you knew to ask for it. The detail in verse 23 is quietly stunning: the portion of meat reserved for Saul had been set aside before he arrived — "I told you to keep it," Samuel says. Saul did not request it. He did not earn it. He came looking for donkeys. The application is doxological: God's people are recipients of provision they did not seek, arranged before they arrived. This should produce not self-congratulation but worship — the kind that says, "You were already at work while I was running my errands." The congregation should be led to identify places in their own story where God clearly prepared what they received before they knew they needed it, and to respond with explicit, named gratitude rather than attributing those moments to their own foresight.

3. (Will/Behavior) Stop using your smallness as an excuse to exempt yourself from God's call. Saul's protest in verse 21 — "Am I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest tribe, and my clan the least?" — is genuine humility, but it is the wrong response to a divine appointment. The text does not validate the protest; it proceeds past it. The LORD already knew Saul's tribe and clan when He chose him. God regularly chooses from the margins: the smallest tribe, the youngest son, the barren woman, the stutterer. Application: when a person deflects a clear call or responsibility with "I'm not the right person" — wrong background, insufficient gifts, too young, too obscure — they are not being humble; they are exempting themselves from what God has already accounted for. Identify the specific call or role you have been deflecting and take the next concrete step toward obedience.

4. (Mind/Belief) Trust that God's governance of history does not depend on human awareness or cooperation. Saul did not know he was going to be king. He did not know Samuel was the seer. He did not know his servant's suggestion would change the course of his life. He was not spiritually alert, praying for guidance, or seeking a prophetic word — he was looking for livestock. Yet God's purposes were not hindered. This passage is a corrective to the anxiety that says "I might miss God's will if I don't navigate perfectly." God's sovereign purposes are not contingent on the creature's full awareness. This does not produce passivity — Saul still walked the road — but it frees the believer from the burden of having to engineer divine outcomes. The congregation needs to hear that God can and does work through their ordinary, unspiritual, donkey-searching moments without their full understanding.

5. (Affections/Worship) Let God's prior, unseen work on your behalf generate deep confidence rather than anxiety about the future. The chapter ends with Saul standing still, waiting for the word of God (v. 27). He does not know what is coming. But the reader knows — and has seen how much has already been arranged before this moment. The application is one of settled confidence: if God has already been orchestrating the converging paths, the set-aside portions, and the prior revelations, then the person

standing on the threshold of an unknown future is standing inside a story God has already been writing. Anxiety about the future is, at its root, a failure to take seriously the evidence of God's prior, unseen work. The congregation should be called to remember specific moments of divine orchestration in their history as ballast against current fear.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 9 is a sustained narrative demonstration of divine providence operating through secondary causes. God does not appear visibly, does not speak audibly to Saul, does not interrupt the narrative with a miracle — yet He governs every detail: the timing of Samuel's prior word, the failure of the donkey search, the servant's knowledge, the reserved portion, the convergence of paths. This passage teaches that God's sovereign governance of history is not limited to dramatic interventions but extends to the texture of ordinary, unremarkable human activity. Additionally, the passage establishes the theological principle that divine election precedes human discovery — Saul does not find his calling; his calling finds him. The character of the God displayed here is one who is unhurried, unfrustrated by human confusion, and already several steps ahead of every human actor in the story.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This passage is a narrative ground for the Reformed understanding of divine sovereignty operating through means — what the Westminster Confession calls God's governance of “the most holy will of God” through “second causes.” The donkeys, the servant, the journey, the feast — these are not incidental to God's purpose; they are the instruments of it. Reformed theology insists that God's sovereign election and providence do not bypass human agency but work *through* it, and 1 Samuel 9 enacts precisely this. The prior divine word to Samuel (vv. 15-16) establishes the Reformed insistence that God's choice precedes and determines the outcome rather than ratifying a human process already underway. Furthermore, the passage plants the seed of a Christological pattern: Israel's true King will also be chosen before history demands Him, will come from an unlikely place, and will receive what was set aside for Him before He arrived — a pattern that 1 Samuel 9 initiates and the New Testament consummates.

Main Takeaway

God was not waiting for Saul to figure out what was happening — He was already arranging it. The donkeys were part of it. The servant's suggestion was part of it. The set-aside portion at the feast was part of it. The word to Samuel the day before was part of it. This is how God works in your life too — not only in the moments you recognize as spiritual, but in the

ordinary, frustrating, apparently fruitless stretches where you are just trying to find what you've lost. Stop calling it coincidence. Start calling it what it is: the God who works all things after the counsel of His will, already several steps ahead of where you think you are.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reading the chapter as Saul's biography rather than God's narrative.** The most common homiletical error is organizing the sermon around Saul — his character, his humility, his qualifications — rather than around the God who is orchestrating every scene. Saul is almost entirely passive in this chapter. He goes where he is sent, follows his servant's advice, and waits to be told what is happening. The protagonist is not Saul. Preachers who spend the sermon developing Saul's traits have missed the text's center of gravity.
- **Importing Saul's failure (1 Samuel 15) to ironize chapter 9.** Because readers know how the story ends, there is a strong temptation to preach chapter 9 as a tragic setup — to use Saul's physical impressiveness as evidence of Israel's shallow values, already dooming the experiment. But the text does not signal this. The chapter is not ironic in its own telling. Saul's appearance is presented as genuine distinction, and his humility in verse 21 is genuine modesty. The chapter's tone is anticipatory, not elegiac. Preaching chapter 9 through the lens of chapter 15 violates the narrative's own frame and produces a sermon the text does not support.
- **Flattening the providence theme into a generic "trust God" application.** The chapter's extraordinary specificity — the timing, the geography, the set-aside portion, the prior divine word — is the *evidence* for the providence claim, not just the setting. Preachers who extract a general "God is in control" takeaway without pressing into the particulars of how God worked through ordinary mechanisms will underdeliver on the text. The applications should be as specific as the narrative: God works through your errands, your servant's suggestion, your failed searches.
- **Treating Saul's protest (v. 21) as a model of humility to emulate.** Some sermons use Saul's "I'm from the smallest clan" response as a virtue example — genuine humility about one's qualifications. But the text does not endorse the protest; it simply records it and moves past it. Samuel does not validate the protest with a spiritual consolation; he proceeds with the meal and the anointing. Saul's smallness is real, but it is irrelevant to God's prior choice. Preaching Saul's protest as a virtue accidentally teaches that God calls the humble rather than teaching that God's call does not depend on the creature's qualifications either way.
- **Missing the eschatological and Christological resonance of the "set-aside portion."** The detail in verses 23-24 — that Samuel had already instructed the cook to set aside a specific portion, anticipating Saul's arrival — is one of the most theologically loaded details in the chapter. It is easy to read it as a hospitality

flourish. But it carries the weight of the whole chapter's providence theme: God's provision for His chosen is prepared in advance, before the chosen person arrives or knows what they need. Preachers who pass over this detail miss a pastoral and doxological opportunity, and lose the chapter's most concrete image of grace.

- **Neglecting the prior divine word to Samuel (vv. 15-16) as the chapter's interpretive key.** These two verses establish that everything in the chapter — before and after — is intelligible only in light of God's prior revelation. Without them, the narrative is a charming folk story about a coincidental meeting. With them, every preceding detail becomes evidence of providence and every subsequent detail becomes fulfillment of divine purpose. Preachers must not bury these verses inside the narrative's flow. They are the frame through which the whole chapter must be read, and they deserve extended attention.