

Samuel to King David 1 Samuel 28:Saul and the Witch

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The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Since it's a few weeks since we last looked at the book of First Samuel it might be worth a brief review of where we left things. The three main characters in the first book of Samuel are: Samuel himself, Saul, and David. Samuel, as directed by God, anointed Saul as the first King of Israel, but around three years into Saul's reign, he was rejected by God because of his disobedience. Samuel then, once again at God's direction, anointed David to replace Saul. This had to be done secretly to avoid Saul's anger. Saul continued to rule, and David served under him for some years, but Saul became increasingly jealous of David, and eventually David was forced to flee. David was pursued across Israel by Saul for, perhaps, two or three years, then, as recorded in 1 Samuel 27, David went to shelter with the Philistines in Gath. Around a year or so before David left Israel, Samuel had died, as recorded in 1 Samuel 25.

That brings us to our chapter for today, so let's read the first three verses:

“Now it happened in those days that the Philistines gathered their armies together for war, to fight with Israel. And Achish said to David, ‘You assuredly know that you will go out with me to battle, you and your men.’ So David said to Achish, ‘Surely you know what your servant can do.’ And Achish said to David, ‘Therefore I will make you one of my chief guardians forever.’ Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land” (1 Samuel 28:1-3).

David's unhappy compromise

In the previous chapter, we considered David's mistaken, though understandable, decision to shelter from Saul by living under the protection of a Philistine lord called Achish. In this chapter we start to see some of the inevitable consequences of that decision. The Philistines have come to do battle with Israel, as they do regularly during this period, and David is caught between two loyalties. He had been anointed as the king of Israel and, famously, had fought with the Philistine giant Goliath, but now Achish expected him to fight for the Philistines against Israel! David's reply to Achish is rather ambiguous, and it is not at all clear how he intended to escape from this dangerous situation. Whenever we make compromises on our position as Christians, keeping quiet about our faith, or deliberately doing things we know to be wrong in order to 'fit in' with non-Christians, we risk putting ourselves into the kind of impossible situation that David was in.

But we will have to wait for the next chapter to see how David's dilemma was resolved! We need to switch our focus back to Saul.

The death of Samuel

It's no coincidence that the writer reminds us of the death of Samuel which he has already recorded three chapters previously. Samuel had a 'soft spot' in his heart for Saul. We read in 1 Samuel 15:35,

“Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death. Nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul.”

Chapter 16 starts with God saying to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel?” It wasn't that Samuel didn't see Saul's disobedience and other failings, but he retained an affection for the man, perhaps remembering the time when Saul was “little in [his] own eyes” (1 Samuel 15:17) and looked set to be a good king.

Rather than wanting to criticise Samuel for appearing reluctant to follow God's commands to move on, I am touched to see a man who had human sympathy and wasn't in a hurry to see God's judgement carried out. Rejoicing in somebody's downfall, even when it is part of God's plan, is not a healthy sign. Samuel had been well loved as a judge and prophet of God's people and we read that, “all Israel had lamented for him.” That is a happy epitaph!

Maybe it was in honour of Samuel that Saul acted in accordance with the laws of Moses and banished the “mediums and spiritists” from Israel. Clearly, those laws had not been properly enforced before this time. Unfortunately, Saul would soon act in desperation and ignore his own decrees. Let's read the next section of our chapter.

Saul is afraid of the Philistines

“Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets” (1 Samuel 28:4-6).

Shunem is in the northern third of Israel; a long way from the area controlled by the Philistines in the south. It is around 80 miles from Gaza where David was. No wonder Saul was afraid if the enemy had marched so far through his territory! [The events recorded in chapter 29 take place in Aphek, which is much further south. It seems that they actually took place before the events of chapter 28 and before the Philistines marched north. The author seems to follow the story of Saul during chapter 28, then goes back to David in chapter 29 and starts a few days further back.](#)

Saul and the Israelites are gathered together somewhere near Mount Gilboa, which is 10 miles or so Southeast of Shunem. Despite the fact that Saul was head and shoulders taller than all the other Israelites (see 1 Samuel 9:2 and 10:23), and that the people had chosen him to, “go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Samuel 8:20), Saul was afraid. He was a man with every natural advantage, and he had been anointed king on God's instructions, but he had refused to obey God, and then spent years relying on his own strength and acting on his own instincts. Like everybody else, he found that his own resources were strictly limited, and he was in a position where he did not know what to do.

You would think he did the right thing when he looked for guidance from God, but God did not answer through dreams, or the Urim stone in the high priest's breast plate, or the prophets. Why not? Saul was determinedly going his own way. He knew that God had appointed David to replace him, but insisted on clinging to power. He wanted God to help him fight a battle that Saul should

not have been leading, since God had rejected him from being king. It is no good turning our back on God and refusing His directions, and then asking Him to help us achieve our own plans! Of course, if Saul had truly repented and turned back to God, I am sure God would have answered, but that was not what Saul was doing. Instead, He wanted God's blessing while he acted in direct disobedience to God. God remained resolutely silent, so Saul took a disastrous step.

Saul looks for help in the worst possible direction

“Then Saul said to his servants, ‘Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.’ And his servants said to him, ‘In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.’ So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, ‘Please conduct a séance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you’” (1 Samuel 28:7-8).

We get an insight into Saul's spiritual status when he moves swiftly from seeking guidance from God, to asking his servants to find a medium so that he can consult the dead! In fact, we get an insight into the attitude of Saul's servants and the wider nation as well. The fact that there was still a medium living in an Israelite city tells us how loosely Saul's instructions had been obeyed and, probably, how sympathetic to her the local people were, since she apparently lived undisturbed. We might also wonder just how Saul's servants knew about the woman and where she lived! It is evident that Saul's decree had not changed much in the hearts of the people, or, indeed, in his own heart! It is all too easy to comply outwardly with God's commands and have a heart that is anything but compliant!

En Dor is about twelve miles north of Gilboa and less than five miles from Shunem, so Saul's journey with two of his servants was quite risky. But Saul was now desperate and ready to take any chance to get help with the coming battle, or insight into how it would end.

Let's continue the story.

Saul and the medium

“Then the woman said to him, ‘Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?’ And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, ‘As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing’” (1 Samuel 28:9-10).

The woman does not recognise Saul, but she knows about the threat to the lives of mediums and spiritists from the recent decree and she thinks that this man is trying to trick her into revealing what she is, so that he can have her killed. Saul seems to find no irony in the fact that he swears by the name of Jehovah not to enforce Jehovah's laws – laws that Israelite kings were meant to copy out, learn and enforce! As we consider the life and actions of Saul, it seems that he is a man who simply never learns. He suffers significantly from disobeying God but carries on in disobedience. He admits at times that he is foolish and wrong to persecute David but then does exactly the same thing soon afterwards. His actions are often impetuous and are motivated by pride, jealousy, and anger. And yet he is often weak and indecisive. He is too frightened to take on Goliath or the Philistine army in the battle that he now faces and seems unable to decide what to do next. At one moment he outlaws mediums, then he goes to consult one himself! And yet he was once a meek, shy man who looked likely to make a good king. How sad to see a life that began so well, unravelling so badly. How quickly anybody can go dreadfully wrong if they turn away from God.

Time for our next section.

Samuel is summoned

“Then the woman said, ‘Whom shall I bring up for you?’ And he said, ‘Bring up Samuel for me.’ When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, ‘Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!’ And the king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid. What did you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.’ So he said to her, ‘What is his form?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.’ And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down” (1 Samuel 28:11-14).

I’m not sure exactly what modern day mediums do. I’m sure some are simply fakes, using a few tricks to deceive the gullible. It’s possible that some speak to demons who may pretend to be a person who has died. I rather doubt that they are genuinely able to contact people from beyond the grave. Even if they did, it is hard to see how the unsaved dead can give any useful information to the living. Those who have died ‘in the Lord’ will not be involved in a practice that the Bible strictly forbids. But this woman, on this occasion at least, was able to contact a person who had died, that is Samuel. The fact that the woman was terrified at Samuel’s appearance, suggests that her séances did not normally follow this pattern! Evidently Saul could see Samuel in some form and bowed before him. I doubt that Samuel would have been impressed by such respect in such circumstances!

Let’s read on.

Samuel’s terrifying, final prophecy

“Now Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’ And Saul answered, ‘I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.’ Then Samuel said: ‘So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? And the LORD has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbour, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines” (1 Samuel 28:15-19).

When Samuel asks Saul the purpose for which he has been summoned, Saul’s response is rather revealing about his attitude and perspective. “I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me” Saul says, focussing totally on himself. In fact, the Philistines were making war against all of God’s people, all of whom were probably distressed. It was part of Saul’s job to care for and defend these people, but he was entirely self-focussed and appears to have had no time to think about other people. In a society that is increasingly self-obsessed, we need to be constantly vigilant to make sure that our lives, and even our prayers, are not just centred on ourselves. This is the exact opposite of the way that the Lord Jesus lived, and He calls us to follow Him.

I find it startling that although Saul knew that God was not answering him, and he also knew that Samuel had been the servant and mouthpiece of God for all his life, he still expected Samuel to tell him how to win the battle! Perhaps he was so used to acting independently of God himself that he expected Samuel to do the same. Or perhaps he just expected everybody to do what he wanted, even a dead prophet!

Samuel's words are chilling. God has departed from Saul and become his enemy. Saul had departed from following God years before and God had therefore departed from him. Saul was overwhelmed by the threat from his enemy, the Philistines. Now Samuel tells him that God is his enemy as well! Based on these words, I can only deduce that Saul was not a true believer; not 'saved', in the language we might use today. This is more than the story of a genuine child of God who has gone astray – we might think of Saul's son Jonathan, or even David in later life as examples of that kind – rather Saul was a man who had had many opportunities and showed promise in his early life, but never truly put his faith in God. [For a New Testament parallel, we might think of some of those to whom the book of Hebrews is written, and who are warned in the starkest terms about turning back from the Christian faith which they had tasted but never yet committed to. They appeared to be believers on the outside, but their faith was not genuine. Saul seems to have been in this sad category.](#)

The rest of Samuel's message is no more cheerful! He rehearses Saul's history of disobedience and explicitly says that this is the reason that Saul finds himself in this position. He goes on to give Saul the insight that he wanted into how the battle will turn out, presumably as revealed to him by God, but it is not the message Saul was hoping for! God will deliver up Israel to the Philistines and Saul with them. This is an interesting way of putting things. I might have said "Saul, and Israel with him" since it is Saul's punishment. But God appears to be punishing Israel for their own failures as well, not just because Saul is their king. Samuel made it plain that the nation was wrong to demand a king. We have already thought about how the situation with the mediums does not show the people generally in a good light. Some of the people had also sought to betray David to Saul on several occasions. Both Saul and the wider nation were not living how God required, and both would be judged together.

[As to Saul himself, Samuel says, "tomorrow you and your sons will be with me." We should understand this to mean that they would die, not that they would go into the presence of God as believers. The Old Testament word for the grave is Sheol. Strongs concordance defines this as meaning 'the underworld' – the place to which people descend at death. It did not distinguish between believing dead and unbelieving, as heaven and hell do in the New Testament – it was simply the place that all the dead go, awaiting future judgment. Therefore, Samuel is simply saying that Saul and his sons will die in the forthcoming battle.](#)

The fact that his sons were to die as well would have been especially devastating for Saul. Saul was longing to have a dynasty following after him. He berated his son Jonathan for supporting David and so jeopardising his own claims to the throne – (see 1 Samuel 20:31). That Saul would die and leave no heir to take his place was devastating. We know that Ishbosheth, the one surviving son of Saul, reigned for a time over part of Israel, in competition with David, but his reign was weak and short, and he was the last of Saul's line to sit on the throne.

[Samuel's final words are about how the LORD will deliver the army of Israel to the Philistines. This should have been the most solemn thing to Saul, as the ruler and representative of the people, and I am sure it was of primary importance to Samuel, but I suspect that Saul's character meant that he only really bothered about his own life and that of his sons.](#)

There is one more section of this chapter for us to read.

Going on with no hope

“Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, and was dreadfully afraid because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day or all night. And the woman came to Saul and saw that he was severely troubled, and said to him, ‘Look, your maidservant has obeyed your voice, and I have put my life in my hands and heeded the words which you spoke to me. Now therefore, please, heed also the voice of your maidservant, and let me set a piece of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.’ But he refused and said, ‘I will not eat.’ So his servants, together with the woman, urged him; and he heeded their voice. Then he arose from the ground and sat on the bed. Now the woman had a fatted calf in the house, and she hastened to kill it. And she took flour and kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread from it. So she brought it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night” (1 Samuel 28:20-25).

I am sure that if I was to be told, by somebody whom I knew to be reliable, that I and my children would die in a few days, I would fall on the ground in grief and fear! Saul seems to have made the visit to En Dor urgently and in an agitated state, and had therefore not eaten for 24 hours. There is little wonder that he was “severely troubled.” But while we might have natural sympathy for Saul, we should notice that there is no record at all of him praying, seeking God’s forgiveness or showing any repentance. We can contrast him with David, who, when told that his first child by Bathsheba would die because of David’s sins, spent seven days fasting, weeping and praying for the child. David’s first reaction was to turn to God and look for mercy, even when he knew that he did not deserve it. Saul had no such reaction; he was simply overwhelmed by natural grief and fear.

How sad that the person providing comfort and counselling to Saul at this time is not a prophet, or a priest or a royal counsellor, but a medium, who should have been put to death for her sins! We read that Saul heeded the voice of the woman and his servants, but he didn’t heed the voice of God speaking via Samuel in the past. How low Saul had come, the king of Israel sitting on the bed of a medium, trusting her for food and encouragement! Saul had dragged his two servants down to the same level as himself and they shared the meal, as they had shared the journey. We seldom go wrong entirely by ourselves, usually pulling other people down in our own failures.

The chapter ends with the brief sentence, “Then they rose and went away that night.” They stood up without any hope, and travelled back to rejoin the army for a battle they knew they would lose, and they had to make the journey back in the dark. What a gloomy end to a chapter and what a gloomy end to a reign that had begun so promisingly. Saul had been feted as the man to fight the nations battles, but he was often too afraid to do so, and he was now about to lose his final battle. He had commenced his reign as a quiet, retiring character, but became jealous self-centred, and self-pitying. He had every natural advantage but squandered all his opportunities. He was anxious for his son Jonathan to reign after him, but ended up leading him into a battle in which they were both destined to die.

Jonathan is one of the Old Testament’s most poignant characters. He delighted in David’s bravery and loved him like a brother. He was quite happy for David to take the throne and would have gladly served under him as we can read in 1 Samuel 23:16-18,

“Then Jonathan, Saul’s son, arose and went to David in the woods and strengthened his hand in God. And he said to him, ‘Do not fear, for the

hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Even my father Saul knows that.' So the two of them made a covenant before the LORD. And David stayed in the woods, and Jonathan went to his own house."

The beginning of these verses underlines the bond between these two men and the encouragement that Jonathan gave to David in very difficult circumstances. The middle section demonstrates Jonathan's readiness to resign his claims to the throne to his friend – and this was no small sacrifice! But at the end of where we read, David goes back into exile and Jonathan, rather than going with David, returns home to a comfortable palace. Jonathan decided to stay close to his father Saul. Normally, that would be commendable family loyalty, but in this case, it led to Jonathan's death, and meant that he never realised that dream of being second in command to David.

I trust that none of us will prove to be like Saul, showing early promise, but ultimately proving to be unreal and unrepentant. I also pray that we will not be like Jonathan, allowing some kind of earthly loyalty, or longing for comfort, to tempt us to not stand with the Lord Jesus, David's greater Son, in His rejection. We will all falter and fail at times, like David did at the start of this chapter, but there is always a way back via repentance and accepting God's forgiveness on the basis of Christ's sacrifice. Let's not rely solely on our own strength and determination – remember how that ended for Saul!

God and Father, we thank you for the strength and courage you provide for us to live and work for You in this world. We acknowledge that our own strength fails incredibly quickly, and our own schemes and plans can lead us astray. Please keep speaking to us from Your word, by the Holy Spirit, that we might prove your faithfulness and enjoy fellowship with Yourself and Your Son while awaiting His return. Amen.

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