

The Lord Has Torn the Kingdom Out of Your Hand
1 Samuel 28
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CenterPoint Church

Read 1 Samuel 28

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction

It was April 1945 and Germany was losing the war. The Allies were pressing from the west, the Russians from the east, and Hitler had stopped trusting his advisors and generals. But the news on that particular day was glorious for the Nazis: Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for the Third Reich, called Hitler to tell him that President Roosevelt had died. Goebbels was a superstitious man and had earlier put together a team of astrologers to advise him on how the supernatural signs should be guiding their foreign policy. He had recently seen several horoscopes that predicted that April would be a difficult month in the beginning, but end in triumph. He told the Fuhrer that, “It is written in the stars. The last half of April will be the turning point for us.” Perhaps he consulted the wrong horoscopes because Adolf Hitler committed suicide on April 30th. Goebbels became the chancellor for one day before committing suicide himself, and their enemies declared victory the following week¹

Joseph Goebbels grasped at anything he could that could tell him the future, that could give him assurance or hope. He was willing to ignore the reality of his country’s dire situation because some astrologer told him that the position of the planets meant that everything was going to be just fine. In our passage this morning, we’ll see that same kind of desperation that drove King Saul to consult someone who used the dark arts to help him understand the future, to summon up a spirit from the dead. We’ll see the impulse that drives someone to turn from the light to the darkness, and ask ourselves where we’re tempted to do the same. Artists have tried to capture the scene in this chapter – here are three paintings of Saul’s visit to the medium at Endor from different centuries:

- 1) William Sidney Mount painted in 1828
- 2) Benjamin West painted in 1777
- 3) Salvator Rosa painted in 1668

The first seven verses tell us that Saul was desperate on the eve of battle because of

I. The Silence of God (vv. 1-7)

¹ In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, “Understand that you and your men are to go out with me in the army.” ² David said to Achish, “Very well, you shall know what your servant can do.” And Achish said to David, “Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life.” ³ Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land. ⁴ The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. ⁵ When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. ⁶ And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. ⁷ Then Saul said to his servants, “Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.” And his servants said to him, “Behold, there is a medium at En-dor.”

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (England: Christian Focus, 2000), pp. 232-33.

We find Saul in the same place that he was back in chapter 17 when his army lined up across the Valley from the Philistines and their champion, Goliath, when he was scared out of his wits that he couldn't win the battle. Back then it had been the size of Goliath who had challenged anyone from Israel to single combat. Now it was the size of the Philistine army that had him afraid. The location of the battle was highly strategic for the enemy as it would give them tactical advantages and cut Saul off from his northern tribes. The first two verses make it sound like David would be fighting on the Philistines' side, but as we found out in chapter 29 in our last sermon, Achish would be forced by his fellow commanders to dismiss David and his men from their army because of their great distrust of him.

Who would a king of Israel usually turn to for guidance and direction? A prophet who would tell him the word of the Lord. But what did verse 3 tell us? That Samuel had died. Samuel was the last of the judges who had anointed the first two kings of Israel, so there was widespread mourning throughout the land. Verse 6 says that Saul sought the Lord, presumably to reveal His will and the future to Him, but that God refused to answer by any of the ways that He had in the past – through a prophet, a dream, or by the Urim (a set of stones on the priest's breastplate by which they discerned God's will). Saul had ignored the word of the Lord so many times that the Lord decided to give the king what he usually wanted – His silence. And keep in mind that in addition to ignoring the Lord's commands often, Saul had ordered the deaths of an entire town of priests back in chapter 22. He had forfeited his right to hear from the Lord. God has always reserved the right to keep the revelation of His will to Himself. Amos 8:11-12: *"Behold the days are coming," declares the Lord God, "when I will send a famine on the land – not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord... they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it."*

So Saul took matters into his own hands, as he often did. He was always getting himself in trouble, performing the sacrifices himself when he got impatient. And here Saul refused to go into battle without any counsel, so who did he turn to? He found out he could get help in Endor, the planet where the Ewoks live and the rebel alliance has to fight it out with the stormtroopers... Oh wait, wrong story, different Endor. En-dor was a town in Israel, and apparently there was a woman there who could help because she was a medium, someone who could call up the spirits of the dead. But wait, Saul had kicked the mediums and necromancers, the people who engaged in the dark arts to determine the future, out of Israel in a fit of righteous cleansing. Deuteronomy 18:10-12 had made God's attitude towards these people abundantly clear:

"There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you."

So good for Saul for evicting them earlier in his reign, but now he was rethinking that decision because he needed someone to tell him what to do. So he ended up breaking his own godly law as an "ends justify the means" move. This is Saul at his absolute most desperate, he has nowhere else to turn, no other options for seeking counsel on the edge of battle. En-dor was actually beyond the area where the Philistines were encamped, so Saul would have to make a long journey around the enemy force to get there, but the risk was apparently worth it to him.²

² John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), p. 513.

I'm not going to belabor an obvious point of application here, but Christians should have nothing to do with the dark arts. No one should, but Tarot cards, Ouija boards, palm readers, psychics, hallucinogenic drugs, and seances are all forms of trying to gain wisdom from the supernatural. Those that dabble in these things think they can control them, but demonic forces always have the advantage over human beings. The atheist or agnostic who doesn't believe in spiritual forces may think that it's all fun and games, but believers in God know that there are demonic powers in the world. Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that *"we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* James 4:7 commands us plainly: *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."*

The next twelve verses show Saul getting what he wanted: a conversation with the dead prophet.

II. The Word From Samuel (vv. 8-19)

⁸ So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you." ⁹ The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" ¹⁰ But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." ¹¹ Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." ¹² When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul." ¹³ The king said to her, "Do not be afraid. What do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see a god coming up out of the earth." ¹⁴ He said to her, "What is his appearance?" And she said, "An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe." And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage. ¹⁵ Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do." ¹⁶ And Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy? ¹⁷ The Lord has done to you as he spoke by me, for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. ¹⁸ Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you this day. ¹⁹ Moreover, the Lord will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The Lord will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines."

The medium, who is often referred to as the Witch of Endor, obviously was on her guard suspecting a trap, a sting operation. She knew that something was off from the get-go, but Saul swore that she was safe. The irony that he would swear an oath in the name of the Lord in the midst of this rebellious action seems to have been lost on Saul.³ Additionally, asking the woman to bring up Samuel the prophet, who had expressly forbidden inquiring of the dead, shows how confused and desperate the king was. Then Samuel appeared and the woman really panicked. Her terror at realizing that she was in the presence of both the king who had outlawed her dark arts and the prophet who was God's mouthpiece is understandable. She was also used to the spirits just speaking through her, so some of her surprise and terror might be that Samuel actually showed up in person.⁴

³ Woodhouse, p. 514.

⁴ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. *1 & 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), p. 185.

Luther, Calvin, and other commentators found it unthinkable that the prophet Samuel could have been called up by Satanic power. They don't question the truth of Scripture here, but they try to explain it away as not really being Samuel. But the text certainly believes that the real Samuel was called up from beyond the grave. If Moses and Elijah could stand with Jesus hundreds of years after their deaths, why could God not have intervened and sent Samuel in the midst of this evil act?

If Saul thought he was going to get a kind word and favorable prophecy from Samuel, he clearly had another think coming. Samuel gave Saul the straight and hard truth, as honest in death as he was in life: God has deserted you; He's actually become your enemy because of your disobedience. Your army is doomed and I'll be seeing you and your boys real soon in the land of the dead. Not one word of hope or deliverance. Be careful what you wish for, Saul, you might just get it; he wanted to know the future and now it's inescapable. The last six verses record the king's response:

III. The Terror of Saul (vv. 20-25)

²⁰ Then Saul fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night. ²¹ And the woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, "Behold, your servant has obeyed you. I have taken my life in my hand and have listened to what you have said to me. ²² Now therefore, you also obey your servant. Let me set a morsel of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way." ²³ He refused and said, "I will not eat." But his servants, together with the woman, urged him, and he listened to their words. So he arose from the earth and sat on the bed. ²⁴ Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly killed it, and she took flour and kneaded it and baked unleavened bread of it, ²⁵ and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

Like a lot of depressed and anxious people, Saul found that he had no appetite. This pronouncement of judgment has taken the energy out of him; he just sat immobile, wallowing in self-pity. I don't know if this medium woman was afraid that Saul would die in her house and then she would be in a lot of trouble, or if she just wanted this whole thing over and for him to be on his way, but she took charge and talked him into eating. She killed a fattened calf, preparing for him and his men a great meal of steak and bread to strengthen him for his journey back to the front lines. One commentator I read summed it up well: "It was a meal fit for a king. The trouble was, it was eaten by a man not fit to be a king."⁵ This was Saul's Last Supper and then he and his men went into the night to face their impending deaths.

Conclusion

I want to get back to this idea that God would not answer Saul. The text makes it clear that the king has earned that with his disobedience, but as we think about other wicked kings in the Old Testament, we see that Saul didn't hear from God because he just wanted to use God. Saul was not running to God in repentance, he wasn't interested in knowing or submitting to Him. He just wanted God's help. In years to come, Israel would have very wicked kings who would offer some small bit of repentance to God, and God would answer that with mercy. In 1 Kings 21, Ahab reacted to Elijah's prophecy of his upcoming death by tearing his clothes, wearing sackcloth, and fasting. God told Elijah: "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's day I will bring the disaster upon his house" (v. 29). In 2 Chronicles 33, Manasseh had acted so wickedly that God had sent the Assyrians to carry him away with hooks, but Manasseh humbled himself and cried out in prayer. God was moved by his plea and brought him back to Jerusalem, where Manasseh then cleansed the

⁵ Woodhouse, p. 518.

land of the foreign gods, idols, and altars. Imagine if Saul had shown the least bit of faith and repentance, it's possible that God would have delivered the Israelites from the Philistines and saved thousands of lives.⁶

If we just seek God solely for what He can do for us – get us the jobs we want, the spouse we've set our hearts on, the health and prosperity that we desire – but have nothing else to do with Him, then we are in the same place as Saul. If we just ignore Him at all other times, with no inclination to trust in Him or love Him, why would we assume that He would answer our prayers? We're treating Him like a genie or a cosmic vending machine, not as the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe. What God truly responds to is a *"a broken and contrite heart"* (Psalm 51:17), humble people who seek Him when they have sinned. When we have acted in disobedience and unfaithfulness, we can either choose to hide, to rationalize, to ignore, or to turn back to Him. When we turn back in faith and repentance, He is the prodigal's Father running down the road to embrace us.

There's an old saying: "When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging." Saul never learned that lesson, he didn't know how to stop digging, he just kept making it worse for himself. 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 summarizes the end of his life: *"So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse."* Saul had already been deserted by God's favor, but this whole episode with the medium was the final straw, concrete evidence that Saul had no clue how to rule God's people well, seeking guidance from the devil not from the Lord.

This story shows us that it's wrong to use a human medium to connect us with the spirit world. But the Bible tells us that we do need someone to connect us with the Holy Spirit. We need a Mediator, someone who overcomes our sins and unites us to the holy God. On our own, we have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, earning separation from Him, eternal punishment when we die. But the good news of the Gospel is that He has provided the One who can reconcile us to Himself: 1 Timothy 2:5 – *"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time."* How did Jesus give himself as a ransom? He left heaven where He ruled for all of eternity to take on human form, lived a perfect life here on earth, and then died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins. Our faith in Him takes away our record of sin and connects us to God the Father directly. Hebrews 9:15a: *"Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance."*

You want to talk to the dead, to consult someone from the great beyond with the cares of this life? Just close your eyes and say, "Dear Jesus," and you have the Savior listening to you. But He is not dead, He is alive, having risen from the grave and ascended to the right hand of the Father where He intercedes and mediates for us. Through Him we receive the promised eternal inheritance. And all who receive that gift by faith said, "Amen."

Benediction - Colossians 2:13-14 - *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."*

⁶ Richard D. Phillips, *1 Samuel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), pp. 473-74.