
“Misdirected Spirituality”

1 SAMUEL 28:1-25

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AT A GLANCE

When God feels distant, where do you turn? In this shocking story from Saul’s life, we’re warned of the dangers of rejecting God’s Word.

WHERE DO YOU TURN?

There are moments in life where a single decision quietly sets you on a path you never intended to walk. You don’t feel it at first. It doesn’t look catastrophic. In fact, it often feels reasonable—necessary even. But over time, what began as a small compromise becomes a collision course with consequences you never saw coming.

That’s where we find David at the opening of this passage. Standing in Philistine territory. Wearing, as it were, the uniform of the enemy. Preparing—at least it seems—to march against his own people. This is what fear does when it’s allowed to lead instead of faith.

But just when the tension reaches its peak, the story shifts. The spotlight moves off David and onto Saul. And what we’re about to see is not just a contrast between two men—it’s a warning. A warning about what happens when a man refuses to listen to the voice of God long enough that, eventually, he can’t hear it at all.

This passage forces a question on every one of us: When God feels distant... where do you turn?

SECOND AND THIRD ORDER EFFECTS

Verses 1-2 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.” ²David 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.”

Hold up, what?! Is David really about to fight *with* the Philistines *against* his own people? Will he really face off against Saul in battle? What about, “*The LORD forbid that I should put out my hand against the LORD’s anointed...*” 1 Samuel 26:11

But this is often the 2nd or 3rd order effect when you lean on your own understanding and let fear lead you rather than faith. It’s hard to see these risks when we’re in the heat of the moment and we let our feelings dictate our actions.

This is another reminder to be careful about listening to an emotionally and spiritually empty heart. You have no idea where its going to take you. But we’re going to have to wait until next week to see what’s going to happen to David. Because it’s almost like the author breaks into the storyline, reminds us what he told us in chapter 25 and then flashes forward in time.

SPIRITUAL CLIMATE

Verse 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.

Remember, when I preached through chapter 25, I asserted that **Now Samuel died** was more than just a factual statement. It had to do with the spiritual climate in the story.

By reiterating Samuel's death, the author sets up the tension for Saul. Chapters 25-27 show David's response to challenges after Samuel died. Chapter 28 shows Saul's.

There's an interesting parallel here. David was on his way to kill Nabal, when he encountered a spiritual woman and listened to her. In this story, Saul is also going to encounter a spiritual woman and listen to her. But there's a big difference, as we're about to see.

PROHIBITED MEANS

Verses 4-7 The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. ⁵When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. ⁶And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. ⁷Then 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."

As a brief note: these things took place after the events of chapters 29 & 30. Geographically, that's the only thing that makes sense.

The three means of entreating the Lord usually available to the leaders of God's people are no longer available to Saul. Samuel is dead. The Urim and Thummim now belong to David. And the Spirit of the Lord has departed from Saul, preventing any direct communication with the divine.

Saul's problems didn't begin when Samuel died, though. They began when Saul refused to listen to the voice of the Lord. Those who reject His Word often spiral into a life of stumbling around in the darkness unable to hear anything from Him.

Desperate from having exhausted the prescribed means of seeking spiritual guidance, Saul turns to the prohibited.

Verses 8-10 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." ⁹The 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?" ¹⁰But Saul swore to her by the LORD, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing."

What blasphemy for Saul, of all people, to speak in the Lord's name! How much more so to promise the Lord's protection for disobeying the Lord? It's no coincidence that Samuel had told Saul, *"rebellion is as divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry."* 1 Samuel 15:23

God knows the heart. God saw this in Saul from the beginning. He's not shocked by it. But we should be. And we should be on guard against rebellion and presumption in our own hearts. One who rebels against, and presumes upon, the Lord is poised to turn to the darkness.

SHROWDED IN MYSTERY

Verses 11-14 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.

Let me just say, this story is mysterious. There’s a lot of debate about what the woman saw. The narrator specifically says she saw **Samuel**. It also says that **Saul knew that it was Samuel**. Further, that Samuel spoke to Saul the words of the Lord. So, it’s best to take this at face value: the witch brought the spirit of Samuel to the scene.

This is where we must once again remember that the hero of the story from beginning to end is who? The Lord. Unless the Lord moves, all you read is brokenness and failure. It’s no different here. In an uncommon act, the Lord allowed the spirit of Samuel to be brought up and to speak.

It’s unique. It’s remarkable. It’s the presence of the Lord through his prophet, but in a tragically antagonistic sense. It is not the presence of the Lord in grace, but in judgment. It is not the Lord showing up *for* Saul, but *against* him. How we should tremble at the thought of the Lord standing against us! James says, “*The Lord opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*” *James 4:6* This brings new meaning to that verse!

As it relates to divination, the Lord prohibits it not because it’s fake, but because it’s powerful. There is real spiritual warfare. The Devil really exists and has real power. Both the Old Testament and the New testify to this reality. We’re not told to fear him. But we are told to be watchful and be armored up because we are at war against spiritual forces of darkness. Men, we’re going to jump all over that this Friday and Saturday at our men’s retreat. Some of you guys are walking around like Saul with no spiritual guidance and you’re more vulnerable to Satan than you think. Wake up! Sign up! Show up! Act like men.

What we read next is a tragic conversation between Samuel and Saul. What began with Samuel anointing Saul to be king over Israel ends with him proclaiming his imminent demise. How great was the fall!

BRUTAL HONESTY

Verses 15 -19 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.”

Can you even imagine hearing that? Ironically, this request from Saul to Samuel echoes the charge from Samuel to Saul at his anointing in chapter 10. There Samuel told Saul to wait for him to return

to tell him what to do. It was his failure to listen to Samuel's voice that ultimately cost him the kingdom.

Samuel was brutally honest. Saul wasn't seeking the Lord. He just wanted the Lord's favor. There's a big difference. And Samuel knew it. And the Lord knew it. And now we know it. There comes a time when sentiment and sympathy must yield to truth. The truth is it was only a matter of time before Saul's reign came to an end. **Tomorrow** it would be done.

EATING AT A TABLE OF DEMONS

Verses 20 – 25 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.

The news was understandably distressing, even to the point of fainting. Especially when in his distress the whole day he did not eat. Perhaps Saul had even been superstitiously fasting to try to curry God's favor.

Let me pull out some parallels here between Saul and David. Both were desperate, both encountered spiritual women, both were given something to eat. Because David was poised to listen to the voice of the Lord, God sent a wise woman with wisdom from above and David listened to it and was preserved. Because Saul didn't listen to the voice of the Lord he had to go searching for a woman and ultimately listened to her voice and ate at the table of demons. What a sober warning!

There's another parallel from scripture. It is between Saul and Adam. Adam listened to the voice of his wife instead of the voice of the Lord and he ate what she provided. God cursed Adam, saying, *“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’...”* Genesis 3:17

Like Adam, this was the last thing Saul ate before his death. (Adam's immediate death was spiritual, Saul's physical) Though we will not read of his death until chapter 31, chronologically, Saul died hours later. Why? Because he failed to listen to God's voice. Just like Adam.

What do we make of this story? I'd like to draw a key point from Dale Davis as he warns us against:

MISDIRECTED SPIRITUALITY

Where you turn in your hour of deepest need, reveals a lot about your spirituality. Dare I say it may be the most convincing thing? Saul went looking for answers because he was afraid. When he couldn't get answers from the Lord using prescribed means, he turned to prohibited means. Saul wasn't seeking the Lord, he was seeking the Lord's answers.

The truth is, we all face times when it feels like God is distant, silent, & disconnected. What we do in those moments helps us recognize the truth about our spirituality - genuine or misdirected? I'm sure you've felt what David described in Psalm 13: *“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”* Psalm 13:1

But watch this, the believer in times of despair keeps seeking the Lord. This is a key difference between true spirituality and misdirected spirituality: where you turn when the Lord feels distant.

David felt like God was taking forever to give him answers. He felt alone. As did Saul. But whereas Saul resorted to divination, David said, *“But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” Psalm 13:5-6*

WHERE YOU HOPE TRULY LIES

When push comes to shove, where you turn for answers reveals where your hope truly lies. If the Lord has to answer you immediately and according to your desired outcomes to maintain your trust in Him, that is misdirected spirituality. It is no different than Saul’s. It is superstitious, presumptuous, and rebellious.

Those who relate to the Lord this way do not want God, they want His favor. But believers, when they feel distance between them and the Lord, raise their complaint to Him and tell Him how they feel. But they keep turning to Him because there is no one else they *can* turn to.

This is really a great assurance. We ought to receive these moments with gratitude because it reveals to us what only God truly knows – the state of our hearts. That you continue to turn to God and seek His presence when you feel His absence demonstrates the sincerity of your faith.

So thank the Lord the next time you’re desperately seeking Him and wondering will He remain silent forever, for in your continued seeking Him, you are demonstrating where your hope truly lies.

INTO THE NIGHT

Let me close this morning by drawing out a nugget from the end of chapter 28 - ...**and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night. (v. 24-25)**

This is more than a factual statement; it’s a spiritual one. It revealed the spiritual atmosphere. And it would be echoed about a thousand years later, not many miles from there.

John says this, *“So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.” John 13:30* This is speaking of Judas on the night he betrayed Jesus. The note wasn’t a time stamp; it was a spiritual barometer. Another man who feigned a type of spirituality, a man who walked in close proximity to Jesus, would connect with the forces of darkness and would die hours later. But not before handing over the Son of God.

Yet, it was through the darkness of Judas’ betrayal that someone else entered our spiritual darkness and felt the pain of being forsaken by God.

“And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” Mark 15:33-34

Here’s what makes the gospel so glorious: Jesus Christ entered into the spiritual darkness of God’s absence so that sinners who deserve to be forsaken by God could be reconciled to Him instead. Jesus walked through the darkness so you and I could walk in the light.

Question for you as we close today: is yours a sincere spirituality or a misdirected one? Are you drawing close to God in proximity because you want Him or because you want His favor? Unfortunately, the clearest, truest, most trustworthy evidence comes not in the Sunday morning feels, but when God feels distant and you turn in desperation. Do you turn to Him or away from Him? In those moments are you desperate for His presence or His answers?

The beautiful thing is until you've breathed your last breath, there's time to turn to Him in sincerity and direct that misdirected spirituality to the One who deserves it. For everyone else, give thanks always, and especially for the seasons that test your faith and prove you've truly come to hope in Him!