

Part 19

1 Samuel 28:3–25; 31; 1 Chronicles 10

The King is Dead!

First Samuel opens with the birth of a gifted baby, Samuel, and closes with the death of a guilty man, King Saul. The early chapters cluster around the tabernacle where God spoke to young Samuel, and the closing chapters focus on a forsaken man to whom God refused to speak. Samuel prayed and God defeated the Philistines; Saul sought for God's help but He didn't answer, and the Philistines defeated Israel. First Samuel is the book of man's king and is a record of Saul's decline, defeat, and death. Second Samuel is the record of God's king, David, and it shows how God made a mighty monarch out of a shepherd boy. King Saul's final days are recorded in these two chapters.

1. A night of deception and distress (1 Sam. 28:3–25)

Of all the “night scenes” in the Bible—and there are many of them—this one is perhaps the strangest and most dramatic. The spirit of a dead man returned to announce the doom of a despairing king who can find no way of escape. Samuel and Saul met for the last time, and it was not a happy meeting.

Saul didn't receive God's help (1 Sam. 28:3–6). We have already learned that Samuel was dead (25:1), but the fact is repeated here for perhaps two reasons. First, Israel was in trouble and Samuel wasn't there to rescue them as he had done before (7:7–14), and second, Saul was in trouble and Samuel wasn't there to give him God's counsel. When Samuel was alive, he had told Saul and the people what they needed to do to defeat the Philistines (7:3). However, their faith in God had gradually eroded under the leadership of King Saul, who was now deliberately seeking help from the evil one. It was Israel's darkest hour, but if God had deserted them, it was only because Saul had first deserted God.

The Philistine army was already mobilizing, and Saul and his army weren't prepared to meet them. When he saw them assembled, he became very frightened and trembled. The Philistines first gathered at Aphek while Israel assembled at Jezreel (29:1). Then the Philistines moved to Jezreel (v. 11) and finally to Shunem (28:4), where they prepared to attack the Israelite army stationed at Mount Gilboa (v. 4; 31:1).

Saul attempted to get in touch with the Lord through dreams, but there was no answer. He had no prophet with him, as David did (22:5), and David also had a priest with an ephod (23:6). The “Urim” mentioned in 28:6 must refer to a new ephod that somebody had made for Saul, because the ephod from the tabernacle was with David. No matter what means Saul tried, he received no answer from God. But during most of his life, he didn't want God's will because he wanted to do things his own way. Is it any wonder that at the end of Saul's career, God deserted him?

“Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, they would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies” (Prov. 1:28–31, NKJV).

Saul disobeyed God's Word (1 Sam. 28:7–14). The information in verse 3 about Saul putting away the people involved in spiritistic practices prepares us for the shock of Saul seeking for a spirit medium to assist him. The Law of Moses condemns all forms of spiritism (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:9–13), so Saul was right in having these people expelled, but he was wrong to seek their help. In doing so, he was both a deliberate sinner and a hypocrite. The fact that some of his servants knew where a spirit medium lived suggests that Saul's clean-up campaign wasn't too thorough and that not all of his officers agreed with him. Some of them knew a medium Saul had overlooked.

Leviticus 19:31 (NASB)

³¹ 'Do not turn to mediums or spiritists; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 20:6 (NASB)

⁶ 'As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will also set My face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.

Deuteronomy 18:9-13 (NASB)

⁹ "When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.

¹⁰ "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, ¹¹ or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

¹² "For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.

¹³ "You shall be blameless before the LORD your God.

The night before the battle (1 Sam. 28:19), Saul disguised himself by taking off every sign of royalty and dressing in common clothes. He had a ten-mile journey from Mt. Gilboa to Endor and would pass very near the Philistine lines, so it wouldn't do to be recognized as the King of Israel. Furthermore, he didn't want the medium to know who he was. Saul began his reign at the dawning of the day when he was anointed king by Samuel the prophet (9:26), but he ended his reign by going out at night to visit a spirit medium. He broke the very law he attempted to enforce.

The woman was no fool. She wanted to be sure this wasn't a trap to catch her and condemn her, for spiritism was a capital crime in Israel. Saul took an oath using the name of the Lord whose law he was breaking, that she would not be prosecuted, so she agreed to cooperate. Saul not only violated the law himself, but he encouraged her to violate it! He asked her to get in contact with Samuel, the man Saul didn't want to contact when the prophet was alive.

He discovered God's plan (vv. 15–19). Taking the plain meaning of the text, it seems clear that Samuel did appear to the woman *but she was shocked when it happened*. Samuel didn't come up from the realm of the dead because she was a good medium but because the Lord willed it to happen. This was not a demon imitating Samuel, or the medium using clever tricks, otherwise the woman wouldn't have been shocked. Her surprised loud cry was evidence that Samuel's sudden appearing was something she didn't expect to happen. She saw the prophet but Saul didn't (vv. 13–14), but Samuel spoke directly to Saul and not through the medium. Samuel was a prophet of God and needed no "mouthpiece" to convey the Lord's message. In fact, verse 21 suggests that the woman was not close to Saul during the time Samuel delivered his message to the king.

Another commentator: This chapter of the Bible tells us nothing whatsoever about the practice of mediums and necromancy (except to remind us of the fact that the Law and the prophets forbade these practices). It is a mistake to try to draw conclusions on that subject from this chapter. Did the woman have the power to bring Samuel back from the dead? The text does not say so. It simply tells us that Samuel appeared. It seems far more likely to me that the Lord sent Samuel to Saul on this evening, just as on a very different occasion he sent Moses and Elijah to Jesus (Matthew 17:3). The dark powers of this woman (if she possessed such) were irrelevant.

Let's look at several other commentators opinions

Warren W. Wiersbe says this:

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Saul had only one question for Samuel: "What shall I do?" The Philistines were ready to attack, Saul was a weak and worried man, and everything he did to ascertain the Lord's will didn't work. "God is departed from me." Seven times in his brief message Samuel used the word "Lord" as he reminded Saul that God had departed from him because he refused to obey God's will. God tore the kingdom from Saul because he hadn't obeyed in the matter of slaying the Amalekites ([15:28](#)), and for the first time, Samuel announced that David was the "neighbor" who would inherit the kingdom ([28:17](#)). But the direst news of all was that the next day Saul and his sons would be slain in battle and join Samuel in the realm of the dead.

2) Robert D. Bergen says this:

Questions naturally arise at this point: Did the medium actually make contact with a living spirit-being, and if so, was it really the prophet Samuel? While this matter is not likely to be settled to everyone's satisfaction, the following observations can be made. First, the plain statement of the Hebrew text is that she did in fact see Samuel. Second, the medium reacted to Samuel's appearance as though it was a genuine—and terrifying—experience: she "cried out at the top of her voice." Her strong reaction also suggests that Samuel's appearance was unexpected; perhaps this was the first time she had ever actually succeeded in contacting the dead. Third, the speeches attributed to Samuel contained allusions to a prior interchange between the two, allusions that would have been appropriate only for the real Samuel to have made. Fourth, Samuel's role and message as a prophet, so much a part of his ministry in life, was unchanged in his encounter with Saul here.

Indeed, a straightforward reading of the biblical account suggests the possibility that mediums may possess the capacity to contact dead persons and establish lines of communication between the living and the dead. This view is not explicitly rejected elsewhere in Scripture; the Torah prohibits necromancy not because it is a hoax but because it promotes reliance on supernatural guidance from some source other than the Lord.

An alternative reading of this passage suggests that it was not the skill of the medium but rather a unique act of God that brought Saul into contact with Samuel. The medium did not possess the capacity to disturb a dead saint; but God, as "a sign of his grace," permitted Saul to have one last encounter with the prophet who had played such a determinative role in the king's career.

3) The Nelson Study Bible New King James Version says this:

The appearance of Samuel has been interpreted in various ways. It has been suggested that the appearance took place in Saul's mind, as part of his psychological breakdown. The church fathers believed that a demon impersonated Samuel and appeared to Saul. Others have thought that the medium was a fraud who tricked Saul into thinking that he saw Samuel. It seems best to follow the early view that this was a genuine appearance of Samuel which God Himself brought about. Several points favor this interpretation: (1) The medium was surprised ([1 Samuel 28:12](#)); (2) Saul identified the figure as Samuel ([1 Samuel 28:14](#)); (3) the message Samuel spoke was clearly from God ([1 Samuel 28:16-19](#)); (4) the text says that the figure was Samuel ([1 Samuel 28:12, 15, 16](#)). There is no inherent difficulty with God bringing back the spirit of Samuel from heaven and allowing him to appear to Saul—in spite of the woman's evil profession.

4) The NIV Study Bible says this:

The episode has been understood in many different ways, among them the following: 1. God permitted the spirit of Samuel to appear to the woman. 2. The woman had contact with an evil or devilish spirit in the form of Samuel by whom she was deceived and controlled. 3. By using parapsychological powers such as telepathy or clairvoyance, the woman was able to discern Saul's thoughts and picture Samuel in her own mind. Whatever the explanation of this mysterious affair, the medium was used in some way to convey to Saul that the impending battle would bring death, would dash his hopes for a dynasty and would conclude his reign with a devastating defeat of Israel that would leave the nation at the mercy of the Philistines, the very people against whom he had struggled all his years as king. And this would come, as Samuel had previously announced ([15:26,28](#)), because of his unfaithfulness to the Lord.

Saul had only one question for Samuel: “What shall I do?” The Philistines were ready to attack, Saul was a weak and worried man, and everything he did to ascertain the Lord’s will didn’t work. “God is departed from me.” Seven times in his brief message Samuel used the word “Lord” as he reminded Saul that God had departed from him because he refused to obey God’s will. God tore the kingdom from Saul because he hadn’t obeyed in the matter of slaying the Amalekites (15:28), and for the first time, Samuel announced that David was the “neighbor” who would inherit the kingdom (28:17). But the direst news of all was that the next day Saul and his sons would be slain in battle and join Samuel in the realm of the dead.

Saul despaired over his plight (1 Sam. 28:20–25). The king was sitting on a couch next to the wall, and when he heard Samuel’s words, he fell helpless, full length on the floor. He had wanted a message from the Lord, but when it came, it wasn’t the message he wanted to hear. He was trembling with fear at hearing the announcement of his death, and he was weak from fasting. Why would a general fast before a strategic battle? Was Saul trying to buy help from the Lord as he had done once before? (14:28) Some authorities believe that mediums required people to fast before they came to a séance, so perhaps Saul had that in mind. In either case, his actions were foolish, because fasting can’t earn the blessing of the Lord if the heart isn’t right with God.

The medium shifted into a motherly role and begged the king to eat something. He had a dangerous journey ahead of him back to his camp, and the next day he had to direct his troops in the battle against the Philistines. As he had foolishly done before, Saul tried to “play the man” and appear the hero, substituting bravado for sanity, but the pleas of the medium and Saul’s men prevailed. The woman must have been fairly well to do to have a fattened calf readily available, because this was the

diet of the wealthy and a rare delicacy for the common people. Indeed, it was a meal fit for a king, but it was also his “last supper” before leaving this life. Saul ate and then left the medium’s house. The final statement in the chapter reminds us of Judas—“He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night” (John 13:30, KJV).

We can’t help but feel sorry for Saul, and yet at the same time, we must admit that he brought his plight on himself. Had he obeyed the Lord he wouldn’t have lost the kingdom, and had he stopped pursuing David and invested his time developing his army, he would have been better equipped to meet the Philistines at Jezreel. In spite of all the blessings God gave to Saul, and all the opportunities to grow spiritually, Saul was unprepared to lead, unprepared to fight, and unprepared to die.

2. A day of disgrace and defeat (1 Sam. 31:1–10; 1 Chron. 10)

Saul’s military record is summarized in 1 Samuel 14:47–48. It’s a commendable record that presents Saul as a conquering general and a national hero. He began his career as a great success; after all, the people did sing, “Saul has slain his thousands.” It was after his failure to destroy the Amalekites that Saul began to go downhill. When David came on the scene, Saul’s envy of the young man’s success so obsessed him that the king became paranoid and dangerous. Saul had many good qualities, but none of them was humble, obedient faith in God. Because of his pride and disobedience, Saul lost everything.

Saul lost his army (1 Sam. 31:1; 1 Chron. 10:1). Saul’s soldiers were no match for the Philistine army with its large divisions and its many chariots. Some of the men deserted and many others died on the battlefield. The Philistines preferred to fight on level ground because they depended on their chariots, while Israel tried to lure them into the hill country around Mount Gilboa. Israel was outnumbered and outclassed, but even if they had boasted superior forces, they still would have been defeated. Saul’s hour of judgment had come. Without Samuel’s prayers and David’s anointed leadership, the army of Israel was destined for defeat.

Saul lost his life (1 Sam. 31:2–7; 1 Chron. 10:1–6). One of the first rules of ancient warfare was, “Kill the enemy king!” (See 1 Kings 22:31.) Saul was on the field with three of his four sons; for some reason, Ish-Bosheth (also known as Esh-Baal) was missing (2 Sam. 2:8; 1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39). The three sons died first, and then Saul was fatally struck by an arrow and asked his armor-bearer to kill him. The Philistines were notorious for abusing and humiliating victims, especially officers and kings. Saul feared that he would be tortured to death, so when the young man failed to respond to his plea, he fell on his sword and died. The young man immediately took his own life, and eventually all of Saul’s bodyguards and officers around him met their death. It was total victory for the Philistines.

Saul’s reign was a tragic one and his death seemed inevitable, but how sad that three of his sons should die with him on the battlefield. Jonathan had dreamed of being coregent with David (1 Sam. 23:16–18), but that dream was never fulfilled. How often the sins of one bring pain and even death to others. “There is a sin leading to death” (1 John 5:16, NKJV). The sins of both Saul and Eli (4:1–18) cost them their lives and the lives of their sons. God is no respecter of persons.

Saul lost his honor (1 Sam. 31:8–10; 1 Chron. 10:8–10). Humiliating the prisoners and the dying and stripping the dead were the chief activities of a victorious army, for the spoils of battle were a big part of their wages for risking their lives. The Philistines took great joy in abusing Saul’s body. They stripped off his armor and cut off his head, and after parading both from place to place in their land (1 Chron. 10:9), they displayed them in their temples. The armor was put in the temple of their goddess Ashtareth, and the head in the temple of Dagon. Finally, they publicly displayed the mutilated corpses of Saul and his sons on the outside of the city wall of Bethshan, a Philistine controlled city in the Jezreel Valley. For a Jew not to receive proper burial was both humiliating and sacrilegious, and for the body to be mutilated and then exposed was even more scandalous. The Philistines were letting

their people and their idols know that they had won a great victory over their chief enemy, the people of Israel. Dagon had triumphed over Jehovah!

Saul lost his crown (2 Sam. 1:1–10). The account of Saul's death given to David by the Amalekite was primarily a lie. The man "happened" to be at the battle but was obviously there to steal loot, and he had taken the two insignias of royalty from Saul's dead body. He had not put Saul out of his misery because Saul had committed suicide and was dead when the man arrived. After removing the royal crown and bracelet, the Amalekite, (who may have been a mercenary in one of the armies) should have safely removed the body from the field and protected it until it could have proper burial. He thought that his heroic acts would win David's approval, but they only brought him death.

Because of Saul's sins, he first lost his dynasty (13:11–14) and then his kingdom (15:24–31), and finally he lost his crown. The warning of our Lord in Revelation 3:11 is applicable at this point: "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown" (NKJV). "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward" (2 John 8, NKJV).

3. An hour of daring and devotion (1 Sam. 31:11–13; 1 Chron. 10:11–13)

While the Philistines were making merry over defeating Israel and humiliating Saul and his sons, the men of Jabesh Gilead heard about the tragedy and came to the rescue. King Saul's first great victory had been the delivering of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11:1–11), so the people of the city felt an obligation to vindicate Saul's memory. All of their valiant men traveled fifteen to twenty miles at night to the city of Bethshan and took possession of the four mutilated and decaying bodies. In order to make this trip, they had to cross the Jordan River and go through enemy territory. Saul hadn't been a spiritual leader, but he was a courageous leader and the first king of Israel. Even if we can't respect the man, we must show respect for the office.

The men risked their lives a second time and carried the bodies to Jabesh Gilead. There they burned the bodies to remove the mutilated and decayed flesh, and they left the bones for burial. They didn't cremate the bodies, because cremation wasn't a Jewish practice. In times of emergency, the Jews would burn corpses that were so mutilated and decayed they couldn't be properly washed and anointed for burial; and then they would give honorable burial to the bones. After the people of Jabesh Gilead buried the bones, they fasted for seven days. It was their tribute to Saul and his sons.

Saul had often held court under a tree in Ramah (22:6), and now he was buried with three of his sons under a tree near Jabesh Gilead. Later, David disinterred the bones of Saul and Jonathan and had them buried in their family's tomb in Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:13–14).