

# The "Witch" of Christmas Past

*Faithfulness of God*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Samuel 28  
**Preached On:** Sunday, December 11, 2022

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles in the Old Testament to the book of 1 Samuel 28. Now as you're turning to 1 Samuel 28, I want to welcome those of you that are guests and visitors with us today as we get to those final stages of walking through this book of the Bible that has demonstrated over and over again what does it look like when a people migrate from the holy to the worldly, from the sacred to the secular. Let me remind you, the Israelites at the beginning of 1 Samuel, they were under the leadership of the judges of God, according to the word of God, but in chapter 8 they made the decision they wanted to look like the world, sound like the world, so they asked God to give them a king. As we've seen the slow demise of the people, here in chapter 28 they're going to hit an all new low. In fact, today in chapter 28, we're going to read one of the most interesting and most unusual stories in all of the Bible. In fact, before we even read it, let me remind you this is one of those outlier stories, and what I mean by that is there are occasions in the scriptures where God does something, God allows something, God initiates something that he doesn't do anywhere else. In a moment, we're about to read the story of a woman who we refer to as the witch of Endor, who on the request of Saul in disguise, is going to summon Samuel, the priest of God who was recently deceased, to come up and to "give a word."

There's no other story like it anywhere in the Bible yet it is a story that has made it all the way to our popular culture. I'm sure you're familiar with that famous mid-19<sup>th</sup> century story by Charles Dickens where a man by the name of Scrooge is visited by three "ghosts" on Christmas Eve. You may remember that the first visitor was a business associate of his that had passed away some seven years before, and he comes with a very stark message. He reminds him that he should not go the path that he has gone. He lays there heavy-burdened by the chains of the life of misery and miserly that he lived, and he warned him not to follow suit. Today in 1 Samuel 28, there will be one who has recently passed that is going to give a very eerie parallel warning.

So today, I want you to join me in 1 Samuel 28 as we look at the story of the witch of Christmas past. Beginning in verse 1 it says,

1 And it came to pass in those days, that the Philistines gathered their armies together for warfare, to fight with Israel. And Achish said unto

David, Know thou assuredly, that thou shalt go out with me to battle, thou and thy men. 2 And David said to Achish, Surely thou shalt know what thy servant can do. And Achish said to David, Therefore will I make thee keeper of mine head for ever. 3 Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him, and buried him in Ramah, even in his own city. And Saul had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land. 4 And the Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem: and Saul gathered all Israel together, and they pitched in Gilboa. 5 And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled. 6 And when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. 7 Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor. 8 And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went, and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night: and he said, I pray thee, divine unto me by the familiar spirit, and bring me him up, whom I shall name unto thee. 9 And the woman said unto him, Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land: wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die? 10 And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, As the LORD liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing. 11 Then said the woman, Whom shall I bring up unto thee? And he said, Bring me up Samuel. 12 And when the woman saw Samuel, she cried with a loud voice: and the woman spake to Saul, saying, Why hast thou deceived me? for thou art Saul. 13 And the king said unto her, Be not afraid: for what sawest thou? And the woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth. 14 And he said unto her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man cometh 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 himself. 15 And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do. 16 Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the LORD is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy? 17 And the LORD hath done to him, as he spake by me: for the LORD hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David: 18 Because thou obeyedst not the voice of the LORD, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the LORD done this thing unto thee this day. 19 Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines: and to morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the LORD also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.

Again, it's a very unique story. Here is this king of Israel summoning one who speaks supposedly to the dead to bring a priest, a prophet of old, Samuel, to give guidance to the battle. Today, I want us to see that this is not just the story of 1 Samuel 28, this is actually the story of the culture that was on planet earth when Jesus Christ came in what we know as Christmas, and we're also going to see that it's not just relegated to history, that you and I are walking a very eerie path today that looks a whole lot like Saul. And I know what you're thinking, you're thinking, "I would never do what Saul did." You may be surprised to find out how often we actually do.

So let's talk about Saul and then Israel at the time of what we know as Christmas and you and I today. I want to walk through somewhat of a metric, so to speak. I want to look at the problem that he had, the propensity that he had, the product it produced, the pursuit that he made, and finally the prophecy that God made. We're going to look at Saul, we're going to look at Israel at the time of Christmas, and then we're going to look at our world today.

What was Saul's problem? Look in verse 6, he said, "The Lord will not speak to me. There's no dream. There's no prophet. There's no Urim." Now for those of you that see that word and go, "I'm not quite sure what that is," the priests in Old Testament days would wear what we call an ephod. It had a breastplate of the stones representing the tribes of Israel. It had two what we might call pockets on the front with two stones; one was white and one was black. And the Lord used the ephod, the Urim and the Thummim that was inside there to communicate sometimes a yes and sometimes a no. In fact, a couple of chapters ago, David sought out the ephod and the Lord actually responded in a complete sentence. The point is this: Saul's problem is he's got a problem and God is not responding.

So what was his propensity? He was a man of stature. He was a man of position. He was a man of wealth. He was a man that had all the resources. So what did he do? He schemed his way around God. He conjured up a plan, "How can I get the answer that I want even if it is beyond the bounds which God has established?" He set a precedent for us that when we don't like the answer that God gives us, we are determined to get the answer that we want to hear.

What did it produce? It's a double standard. A double standard. Now this is going to be different than hypocrisy that we're going to talk about in a moment. The reason it's a double standard is Saul did not show up as Saul. Saul disguised himself. He knew that it was wrong. He knew that he had gotten rid of those with familiar spirits. He had told those that practiced what she practiced that it was illegal to do what they were doing in the land, in fact, it was contrary to Deuteronomy 18 in every form, shape and fashion. So he created a double standard that it's okay if nobody knows versus if everybody is aware. He hid his identity, they were in an undisclosed location, at an undisclosed time, and as long as it did not go on the record, then he, in his mind, could get away with getting the information that God was not going to give him.

So what did he pursue? Here's the fancy word: necromancy. He actually sought out somebody who claimed to commune with the dead. Now this opens up a really interesting theological conversation that I'm just going to address briefly. Do you find it interesting how shocked this woman is when Samuel shows up? It's almost as if she'd been making a living making people think she was doing this, but when Samuel really did show up, I mean, she was like, "Uh-uh, I'm not doing this." You realize, I mentioned Deuteronomy 18 and a host of other passages, there's a lot of areas in the Bible that you might be able to say, "Well, that's negotiable, or that's a gray area." This isn't one of them. The Lord makes it very clear you don't commune with witches, you don't commune with warlocks, you don't commune with familiar spirits, and you don't try to talk to the dead. He got so low in his life that he was willing to disguise himself and overtly break the commandment of God to get the answer that he wanted to hear.

So what was the prophecy? Verse 18, Samuel makes it very clear, "By this time tomorrow, you and your children will die. The Philistines will take Israel into captivity." When you read the rest of the story, you find out the prophecy came true that he and his son Jonathan both had the same fate, at the same place, roughly the same time. He experienced death simply because he could not get contentment or satisfaction with the silence of God.

I mentioned that chapter 28 is kind of an outlier, so to speak, meaning there's no other story like it anywhere in the Bible, but one of the things that we discover as we read more of the Bible is that Saul's story is repeated numerous times just in little different ways. Let's go to the days of what we call Christmas. Let's go to that time, that culture, that missed the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Let's go to that day where the angels declared to the shepherds and not those that were the movers and the shakers. Let's go to that day when Jesus at 12 years of age stood and he confounded those of great wisdom and knowledge and yet they still would not entertain that this could be the Christ child, the Messiah.

You know, the Israelites of the Christmas day, you know they had the same problem as Saul? They wanted answers that God hadn't given. I want you to think about this. It had been 430 years since what we know as scripture had been given to the Israelites. Now let's parallel this to Saul for just a moment. He's upset. He's like, "The prophets aren't talking to me." He said, "The dreams aren't coming to me." I want you to think about the Israelites for a moment: even in the days where they were about to go into captivity, even when Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar were knocking on the door of their lives, Isaiah was speaking, Jeremiah was speaking, Amos was speaking, Hosea was speaking, the priests were speaking, the prophets were speaking, they were just ignoring the warning. For 430 years God said, "The next time I speak it will be in flesh in Bethlehem."

So what was their propensity? Ready for this? Legalism. You see, when you're not satisfied with what God has given you, what you do is you create a system to make what God has given you say what you want it to say. Now we have what we know in the book of Exodus as the 10 Commandments. Do you realize that these Pharisees, these Sadducees, these religious leaders of Jesus' day concocted an additional 613 laws and/or

rules to somehow complement the 10 Commandments. Now I was not a math major in college but that averages out to about 60 new rules for every rule that God gave. You say, "Why is that important?" Because that's what legalism does. Legalism finds a way, like Saul did to scheme, legalism finds a way to break the law without being convicted by the law.

Let me take just one simple example that I know every one of us can relate to. The Bible says do not bear false witness. It's one of the commandments. We are not to misrepresent truth or to overtly lie and such, but one of the things these religious leaders had done so well in Jesus' day is they had found ways to get other people to misrepresent truth for them so they were not the guilty parties even though they got the benefit of the information that had been miscommunicated. You see, legalism is basically taking what is written on the books and getting around it with creative verbiage and outcomes.

What was the product? Hypocrisy. You see, this is the difference between the Jewish people of the Christmas season and Saul. At least Saul – listen to me – at least Saul had the common decency to change his outfit. The Pharisees showed up in all of their self-righteous regalia and basically said, "We did exactly what you did, we just got away with it." I want to give you my definition of a Pharisee; I know we talk about them negatively a lot in context like this. Here's my definition of a Pharisee: a Pharisee is somebody who's done the exact same thing you did, they just have enough money and resources to get away with it. That is what hypocrisy is, that because they've split hairs on all the commandments so many different ways, they found a way to do the exact same thing they're pointing the finger at you for doing but they feel a clear conscience because they did not directly involve themselves.

So what's the pursuit? Religion. Now I'm going to make a statement today that is statistically verifiable: more people have blown open the doors of hell through religion than through atheism. More people on planet earth are lost and headed to hell in religious expression than those that would say, "I believe nothing." In fact, you can quote me on this: religion kills. And it does. But think about what they did in Jesus' day, think about those ones who missed his birth in Bethlehem, who couldn't understand him in the temple, who had the audacity to say, "We'd rather have Barabbas than Jesus." What is religion? Religion is a man-made system of "checking off boxes" so that we feel as if we are good with God not based on his standards but based on our interpretation of his standards, and one of the things that I've discovered about religion is those who create it make it very accessible for them to be able to pass their own test. That's exactly what they did when what we know as Christmas when Jesus came in flesh, these men primarily had created a system where they were just as guilty as everybody else of doing all the things you shouldn't do but they thought that because they had legalized their way into this, they checked the boxes in just the right order and in just the right manner.

What was the prophecy that the Lord gave? It's interesting that all throughout the gospels Jesus had story after story and illustration after illustration to say this, that, "Even though I have come to you, the Jewish people, even though I am the fulfillment of your prophecies and your scriptures, if you reject me and you hold onto your legalistic

religion, this message is going to go to the pagan, pig eating Gentiles that you cannot stand." I find it interesting that in 1 Samuel we see this migration from the sacred to the secular and it goes sideways in chapter 8. Did you know in the book of Acts there's almost the same number of chapters and it goes sideways in chapter 10. I mean, think about it. Pentecost, it's the Jews from every nation hearing the message of Jesus and by the time you get to chapter 10, it's gone to the Gentiles and the Jews are doing everything they can to silence the message. 2,000 years later, you and I are the beneficiaries of this prophecy, that we heard the gospel story, we heard the name of Jesus, the fact that we have the scriptures in the tongue of which we speak and the tongue in which we read.

Interesting that Saul, particularly in chapter 28, gets such a bad reputation for the things of which he did with this woman in this night, but the Israelites at what we know as the Christmas season were really guilty of doing the exact same thing. Frustrated with the silence of God, they create their own system that produces a product that makes them feel good about themselves. Unfortunately, the Lord says, "Your standard is not mine." This is where it gets personal. Surely, surely this isn't our story. I mean, after all, and I'm not going to go doing an inspection of your respective homes, surely you don't have Ouija boards and crystal balls and witches on speed dial. I'm sure you don't. And I know you're thinking it's Christmas. I mean, and we've got all the décor and all the songs. This story is the last story that would represent us. Let's be careful for a moment. You know that you and I today have the exact same problem that Saul had. Look in verse 6, he's frustrated. He said, "I want dreams. I want prophets. I want something overt." How many times have you known, seen, or even experienced people who get caught up soliciting people who claim to be modern day prophets to give them information the Bible does not contain? You do realize one of the most frustrating things about today, even as a believer in Jesus Christ, is that he has not added or taken away from his word in about 2,000 years. In other words, we're in the same boat Saul was. God was silent in chapter 28, God was silent to the Israelites for 430 years, and here you and I for 2,000 years he hasn't added and he hasn't taken away.

So what's our propensity? What do we tend to do much like Saul, just on a different avenue? We tend to embrace liberty or license. Let me share with you how this works. You see, over 2,000 years of history, you and I have experienced some incredible things just as a society and as a culture. We've experienced the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the smartphone. I mean, we've got a lot of stuff going for us. There's a lot of things that we have access to, we have exposure to, that is so dramatically different than 2,000 years ago and here is our propensity: because we have institutions that did exist then, and because we have opportunities that exist that did not exist then, we want to do the same thing Saul did, we want to scheme our way around it and say, "Well, the Bible doesn't specifically speak to this, therefore, I'm gonna just conjecture that this is okay for me."

Now I'm going to use some pretty overt examples. You do know that you can read Genesis to Revelation start to finish and you will not find the phrase or the term Internal Revenue Service. It's not there. And how many times do we scheme and go, "Well, the Bible doesn't mention them. I guess I don't have to respond to them."

Let me get a little more serious. You know, the Bible speaks that it is contrary to the will and the way of God to present ourselves outwardly differently than the way that God birthed us, but you and I live in a world today that says, "You know what? If you're not happy with the way that God birthed you, if you're not pleased with the shape and the faculties that he gave you, just change it. Just change it. We've got procedures. We've got medicine. The Bible doesn't speak to it specifically." Do you know what? You're right. You're absolutely right. It doesn't mention the Internal Revenue Service and it doesn't mention surgical procedures to change your gender from birth, but I've got news for you: there are a whole lot of passages in there that allude to it and speak of it and say, "Woe unto them that practice it." But that's our liberty, that's our license. We say, "Well, the Bible doesn't talk about how to handle social media so I'll just make up my rules anyway I want to. Jesus didn't speak about social media so I guess I can do whatever I want." Do you see how that works out?

What's the product? Worldliness. Worldliness. We make up so many rules of liberty and license that so far exceed what the scripture has given, we basically have manufactured and concocted our own personal pleasing to us faith that makes us have a clear conscience without any reference to how God has established things. It's worldliness is what we've done. That's why when you get to Revelation 3 it talks about that church of Laodicea, it talks about they bragged about the outward appearance, they brag about how wealthy they are, they brag about all the success they have, but the picture is that Jesus is standing outside the door saying, "Hey, I know you're having church but I'm not inside." That's the picture that we have,

So what's the pursuit? What do we do in light of this? It's called an agenda. Now I know I've said this so many times that you're probably getting tired of me saying it but there's an old adage in communication that when you're tired of saying it they're finally getting it. So here we go. It is my gift of sarcasm coming out and I apologize. Do not let the facts get in the way of your personal agenda. That is the world that we live in today. It doesn't matter what the data says. It doesn't matter what the facts say. It doesn't matter what the research says. Our personal agenda is, "This is what I want. Jesus didn't specifically address it so I've got the freedom to express it." That's the society, that's the culture, that's the world that you and I unfortunately find ourselves in today. Here's the irony. We look at the story in 1 Samuel 28 and we say, "You know what? I would never in the middle of the night put on a disguise and seek information from the dead." But ironically what do we do? We put on the cloak of worldliness and we demand that God change what he has said for thousands of years to fit our own personal agenda so we can live with ourselves. We're really no different.

So what's the prophecy that's involved? There's a phrase that's used all throughout your Bible. You read throughout the Bible and you'll see this all the time: in the last days. What's interesting is when you read the Bible and it talks about "in the last days," there are these lists. You find them in the book of Romans. You find them in the book of Titus. There are all these lists that talk about all this bad behavior, erroneous behavior, contrary to God behavior, and I mean, it's a pretty seedy list if you read it all the way through. Here's the thing I want you to hear: those lists of "bad behavior" are not calling out the

sins of the world, they're calling out the sins of the church, that the church so unhappy with "Thus saith the Lord" that we go outside of scripture, we create our own agendas to propagate our own feelings or whatever it may be, and the life is contrary. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 2, it says there is a day coming when the Lord is going to return but before he does, it says there will be a time of a great falling away. It's not talking about the world getting worse, it's talking about the church being indistinguishable from the world.

So today, we're not in Endor cloaked in regalia to hide our personal identity, but let me ask you a very difficult question: do you suffer from the same issue that Saul and Israel did and our culture is today, where you have a propensity, you have an agenda, you have a desire that you know is contrary to scripture but you're going to twist it, you're going to turn it, you're going to gather a social media following to support it so that you can have a clear conscience of openly rebelling against God? I've got news for each and every one of us: one day Jesus Christ is going to show up lest you meet him face-to-face before, and I've got news, he's not going to care how you felt. He's not going to care how many "followers" you had on social media. He's not going to care that that was the trend, the fad, or the expression of the day. Can I remind you what the last paragraph of your Bible says? "Do not add and do not subtract from the words of these prophecies."

Saul was accountable to the scriptures that had already been written even though he wanted new information. Israel was subject to the scriptures that had already been written even though they wanted new information. And you and I today are subject to the same information even if we want new information. The Bible says in Romans 6, "The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The rules have not changed. We can flower it up. We can pretty it up. And we can social media it up. It's still sin and it still leads to death and no matter how you want to educate yourself or socialize yourself, Jesus Christ is still the only one who can solve it.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're that person today that today is that day where the Spirit of God took the word of God and really did just a spiritual surgery on your heart and your life, and maybe today you'd be willing to say, "I didn't do it on purpose. It was unconscious. I fell into the trap. I fell into the temptation. I just fell into this thing called the world." The Bible still says that we are accountable for our sin and the consequences are death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Maybe you're that person today who needs to enact Romans 10:13, it says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It doesn't say whoever checks off a box, whoever does more good than bad, or who jumps through a religious hoop. It says whoever calls on the name of the Lord. Maybe that's you today. Maybe today you realize your desperate need for Jesus Christ in your life. If that's you, can I encourage you though you don't have to say the same thing that I would say, you don't have to repeat the exact words I would repeat, but maybe your conversation, your prayer, your talk with the Lord would go a little something like this. "God, today I recognize I've got a sin problem. God, I've been places I shouldn't have been, I've done things I shouldn't have done. God, I've said things I shouldn't have said. I have thought things I shouldn't have thought. And God, unfortunately, I've not only defended it, I've justified it. But God, today I believe. I believe that I deserve that death your Bible speaks of because I have been and done those



things, but I also believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be the solution to the problem. God, I believe, particularly at this season, that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf, he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, I believe that when they nailed him to his cross he was paying the punishment and the price for my sin. And God, I believe that three days later when he rose from the grave, he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't know all the answers to the world's problems but I know this, I cannot keep living in my sin. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me. God, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who for the very first time had that conversation with the Lord. In just a moment, I'm going to pray for us, we're going to stand and sing together and I want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We've got a team set aside, a room set aside. We'd just love to hear your story, to celebrate with you. As Pastor Paul said earlier from the baptistery, when one soul comes all of heaven rejoices and the angels sing. We just want to get just to be a part of the party. We'd love the privilege of praying with you and praying for you whatever the decision, whatever the circumstance.

*Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of invitation and when we think about this season, when we think even of the message in particular today, this consistent historical inability to solve it ourselves, and yet you were willing to give the ultimate price. God, today may we no longer take for granted your love, your mercy, and your grace. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*