

Introduction

We finished last week with a cliff-hanger. As I said then, it was like the old Batman shows where either Batman or Robin or both had been captured by one of the notorious enemies of Gotham city. They were placed in an impossible situation in which their doom was at hand. In one show Mr. Freeze seemed to have outwitted the dynamic duo. The masked crusaders were about to be consumed and turned into Icee's by a giant frosty freeze machine. That is where the show ended and the announcer alerted you to stay frozen in your seat and tune again on the same channel to find out if Batman and Robin would survive.

The cliff-hanger we encountered last time was wondering what David would do about the determination of Achish that David and his men join with the Philistines to fight against their own nation of Israel. How can David possibly escape the tangles of his own faithlessness? Well, we are going to have to stay on the edge of the cliff one more week. That is because the narrator interrupts the telling of David's predicament to fill us in on the dilemma of Saul as regards this ensuing battle.

[Read text and Pray]

We have before us this morning one of the more curious passages in the scripture. Saul consults a medium, a necromancer, a witch, knowing it is forbidden. And to us, shockingly, the person he was seeking to contact actually appears and speaks to him. Significant questions attend to this event. Did this woman, this medium, really have the power to raise the dead? Is the spirit who appeared really that of Samuel? And what are the implications for us in terms of necromancers specifically and the occult in general? This is where I am going to begin this morning and then we will move on to observe several other important principles and truths here.

I. What About this Instance of Necromancy?

Let's just start with that word. Necromancy is the act of communicating with the dead by summoning them to present themselves in spirit form. The person who claims to have the ability to communicate with the dead in this way is called a medium or a necromancer. Samuel had anointed Saul as king and previously had given divine guidance to Saul, but he was now dead. Saul was getting no answers from God as to how to deal with his terrorizing circumstances. So he turned to a medium. Clearly, he knew this was forbidden by the Lord because he himself had "put the mediums and necromancers out of the land" and threatened to punish by death any who practiced the demonic craft.

So the first question is whether the medium from Endor actually had the power to summon the spirits of the dead. I think most biblical theologians would answer in the negative. Reflected in Luke 16:18-31, the souls of the departed are separated by a chasm from the world, a chasm which may only be crossed through the power of God. Therefore, a medium is either of two things. He or she is a fake, a fraud, a scammer who deceives people into believing they are communicating with the dead. Otherwise, the medium is a tool of Satan; he or she is actually in contact not with the dead, but with the demonic realm. Mediums and necromancers operate in opposition to God. When people go to them, they are rejecting what light they have from God and his word and are making connection with the realm of spirits which must not be mistaken for angels but can only be demonic in nature.

So, no, the medium at Endor lacked the power to actually raise up the spirits of the dead, although she might have been connected with the demonic realm. When Samuel appeared, and the woman saw him, she cried out with a loud voice. Her startled and fearful reaction is a testimony to the fact that this was not the normal experience for her. Something unusual was going on.

Now a second question occurs to us. If the woman was unable to actually bring up the spirit of a dead person, who was this that came? Well, the text tells us it is Samuel. The text says, "the woman saw Samuel." It says, "Saul knew that it was Samuel." The text says that Samuel spoke to Saul. There have been those who denied this could actually be Samuel because he would not be subject to the power of the devil. The suggestion is made that this could be the devil in disguise. However, to arrive at that conclusion is to cast doubt on what the narrator is stating.

The assertion that the spirit who speaks is in fact Samuel is supported by what he says. He gives to Saul the same message he had given when he was alive. You find this in verse 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." This is certainly not the message Saul would have been seeking, nor is it the message the medium would have wanted him to hear. Nor is it the message the devil would have desired to communicate. It is not like the devil at all to tell the plain truth. Moreover, the spirit purported to be Samuel delivers a word of prophecy concerning Saul that comes true. So, we rightly conclude that the spirit which appeared before the medium and before Saul was indeed that of Samuel.

That leaves us with another question, "How might this be?" Well, it does seem that Samuel was summoned. Surprisingly, to the medium, it was in fact Samuel who appeared. However, it could not be an appearance brought about by satanic or demonic power. Samuel would not have come at the bidding of a necromancer or of the devil. But he would have come by the will of the Lord, who deemed it appropriate at this time and in this way to reiterate through a supernatural appearance of Samuel that what he had said was not going to change. This is not the only time dead persons appear to say something to someone. Notably, when Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared with him to encourage him. But indeed, since Saul had gone so far as he had now to consult a medium, he would be killed the next day. The message of Samuel from the Lord was a message of judgment.

Saul's consultation with the necromancer reiterates the teaching of the whole of scripture. To do such a thing is an abomination to God. Deuteronomy 18:10-12 says, "There shall not be found among you . . . 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. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this."

I can't do better than to repeat the warning given by Richard Phillips: "Never toy with anything occult! It probably is true that it is a fraud that there are charlatans involved, but there are demons involved and there is a devil and we are warned here that even while it may be Ouija boards, tarot cards, even which you may think it's a game, it is something that may involve in fact—in a way that you did not count on—powers that are greater than you. No Christian should ever toy with any divination, with any occultic appeal to any kind of knowledge, to any astrology charts, tarot cards,

any of these things. What folly it is to expose ourselves to those who knowingly or unknowingly are servants of the devil.”

Saul paid a high price for this consultation. 1 Chronicles 10:13 says, “So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the LORD, because of the word of the LORD which he did not keep; and also because he asked counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it.” So in essence, this text communicates that God is the Lord of all. Every human and every medium and every necromancer is subject to his rule and lordship.

Now outside our focused attention on Saul’s consultation of the medium, there are three additional facets of his experience that I want you to see this morning.

II. The Anguish of Facing Life’s Battles Without God.

Look at verses 4-7. “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.”

Saul has been in this predicament before. Remember back when the battle lines were drawn and the Philistines were challenging the Israelites to send out a champion. It went on day after day for forty days. Now, again the Philistines had gathered together to fight. But Saul has been growing deeper and deeper in his rejection of the Lord. Twice David has spared his life, and yet he remains bent on resisting the determination of Yahweh that David will be king over Israel. He would still be seeking to end David’s life had David not taken refuge across the border in the territory of the Philistines.

Saul’s distance from and hard-heartedness toward the Lord contributed to a reaction of fear and trembling when the enemy drew up to fight his people. Now he needs a word from God. The situation is bigger than he is; it overwhelms him. What is he going to do? Saul needs direction. So at last he seeks the Lord. He inquires of the Lord. But in whatever way he tried to get through, the Lord was silent. The Lord did not answer. Saul now agonizes over the situation. He is in panic mode. This is what he tells Samuel down in verse 15, “I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me and God has turned away from me and answers me no more.”

Do you feel Saul’s anguish? Can you sense now that the stress level on this king is extreme? And he feels so alone. He does not know what to do. The battle is a mountain whose peak is out of view. It dwarfs his strength and his understanding. He needs help only God can provide, so he asks, but God says nothing. What is going on here relates to a principle James teaches us in the New Testament. He says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must NOT suppose that he will receive ANYTHING from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

God generously gives wisdom to those who ask, but not to those who are not willing to follow that wisdom. Saul has demonstrated again and again that he does not take the word of God seriously. He is double-minded. Therefore Saul is receiving nothing from the Lord. And he will have to face this battle without the Lord. No wonder he is overcome with desperation. He must face the battle without God.

We will also face battles in life. We battle with sin, the world, and the devil everyday. Those battles are bigger than we are. But we don't have to face them alone. The Lord is with his people. The angel of the Lord encamps around those that fear him and delivers them. The ones that fear the Lord are those who tremble at his word. In Isaiah 66:2, the Lord says, "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." This tragic portrait illustrates for us the importance of trembling before God's word. Value it. Revere it. Obey it. For if we reject God's word, he will remove it from us. And to face life without the wisdom and power of God's word is to face life without God himself. And that will lead us to absolute foolishness such as Saul's decision to resort to consult with one who communes with demons. Saul himself had run the mediums out of the land, but now he is joining with them.

III. The Terror of Being Abandoned by God.

Saul is going to have to face the battle without the Lord and without his word, but God's rejection of Saul meant something even more ominous. Samuel points us to it down in verse 16. Samuel points out to Saul that the Lord has turned from him and has become his enemy. In verse 18 Samuel says to Saul that it is the Lord who has brought this battle upon him. And not only that, by the next day, the Lord will give Israel and Saul into the hand of the Philistines and Saul and his sons will join the realm of the dead. Now Saul's terror is even greater. Verse 20 says that "Saul fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel."

When God abandons a man, when God rejects a man, it is unto judgment. And he abandons those who having great privilege turn their backs to him. Think about it, Saul is like Israelites in the generation alive in the days of Jesus. Jesus pronounced woes upon the cities who were graced with his preaching and ministry. Great was their advantage, but they rejected him. Jesus said to them that it would be worse for them in the day of judgment than it would be for Sodom and Gomorrah. Saul's privilege coupled with his resistance and now the abandonment of God makes us mindful of one Judas Iscariot. Think how great was Judas' privilege. And yet he turned his back on Christ and through betrayal rejected him. There is in this text an interesting parallel between Saul and Judas. They both rejected the Lord's Christ. They both ate and went off into the night. Here in 1 Samuel, Saul ate the meal prepared by the witch. Verse 25 says "they ate. Then they rose and went away that night." Meanwhile, the gospel of John reports that Satan entered into Judas and "after receiving the morsel of bread [from Jesus, Judas] immediately went out. And it was night." As Jesus is the greater David, Judas appears to have become the greater Saul, who like Saul rejected God's messiah and suffered the abandonment of God as a result.

Jesus said of Judas, it would have been better for that man if he had not been born. Certainly the same could be said of Saul. This statement actually pertains to everyone who rejects the Lord and who at last is rejected and abandoned by him into judgment. The judgment of God reflects his holiness, righteousness, and justice. The wages of sin is death. It is separation from God; it is abandonment by God; it is turning one over to the second death which is eternal punishment.

Saul's abandonment unto judgement together with the turning over to Satan of Judas warn us each and every one of the tragedy of being privy to the word and blessing of God but rejecting that word. Think of Saul's privilege. He was chosen to be king. He was anointed by God and gifted for service. He experienced the power of God as he prophesied and as he led Israel to a number of victories. But he thought it a trifle to fail to take the word of God seriously, and he never repented. Human beings take sin against God lightly, but God takes it personally. Every violation of his word is an assault against his holiness. His judgment is righteous and just. But there is good news. In his mercy God has provided for redemption from the wrath we all deserve. To this point we turn next.

IV. The Testimony of the Last Supper and the Darkness.

It was night when Saul and his servants arrived at the home of the necromancer. They came to the woman by night. And all these events transpired at night. The encounter with the spirit of Samuel was followed by the utter exhaustion of Saul. He had not eaten anything all day. Fear and anxiety no doubt had robbed him of his appetite. And now that he was filled with additional fear because of the words of Samuel, there was no strength in him. The medium and Saul's servants now convinced Saul to stay for a meal so he would have strength to be on his way. It was a meal to prepare him for battle. It was his last supper; it was a meal to give him strength to go out to the place of his death. And again we note that after eating, Saul and his men went out in the DARK of NIGHT. Saul went out to face judgment for his sins. The next day he would engage in battle and would die. Saul was enshrouded in the darkness of his own sin and hardened heart, and HE WAS FORSAKEN by God to experience the consequences of his sin. He would fight and he would lose.

Now consider Jesus in direct contrast to Saul. He also had a last supper before the day of his death. He too would go out to battle, and he would die, but he would not lose. Jesus went out from the supper with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed. Rather than consult a medium in his time of desperation, Jesus consulted his heavenly Father. There in the garden Jesus was betrayed. After overnight trials and negotiations, he was put on a cross. And while there, from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, there was DARKNESS as of night over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The unspoken answer to that question is striking. When we consider Saul departing in darkness, we see a man bearing the burden of his own sin. He was forsaken by God in judgment for his own sins. When we turn from Saul to consider the true King, King Jesus, we also see one enshrouded in darkness and suffering judgment for sin. But why is He forsaken by God? He committed no sin nor was any deceit ever found in his mouth. No. He is in the darkness of sins he did not commit. Indeed Jesus was forsaken and abandoned by God, but it was for OUR sins. All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. By his stripes we are healed. This is how God remains just while justifying sinners.

Jesus entered the darkness and fought the consummate battle with sin and judgment. He entered the darkness of death, but he rose from it triumphant. And through Christ those who believe in him escape the darkness of judgment of our own sin, for by his wounds we are healed. He is the propitiation, the wrath-satisfying sacrifice, for our trespasses. All who are united with Christ by faith, are credited with his death and enter into his resurrection unto life and glory.

Saul in all his tragedy helps us to glory in the wonder and beauty of God's merciful provision for those whom he will call to himself, those who will believe.

Those who refuse the gospel message of forgiveness of sins through the provision of Jesus Christ take the path of Saul. Saul displays for us every person who turns away from God's repeated appeals—those who refuse the tract or toss it in the garbage, turn the radio dial, scoff at the preacher, denigrate the message. The God whom they reject ultimately will also reject them. It is one thing to stand against the Philistine army without God, but it is quite another to stand before the judgment seat of God without God. In Christ, God stands with his people when they stand before his judgment. And the testimony of Christ is that the sin debt has been paid. IN FULL.

All you who are in Christ, let us bless our great God and rejoice in so great a Savior. Let us resolve afresh to tremble at his wonderful word and drink in the glorious fellowship that is ours in Jesus.

And if there be one in the building this day who is resisting the gospel message, be warned. You stand on shaky ground. At any moment the Lord could choose to abandon you in your rejection. May it not be said of you that it would have been better for you if you had never been born. Oh that you would call upon the Lord Jesus today while he may be found. Draw near to him right now while he is still calling out to you, summoning you to leave your hard-heartedness and repent and follow Christ.

Conclusion

As we have made note, the narrator has left us suspended in mid-air, it would seem, in regard to the dilemma of David to tell us about the predicament of Saul before resolving the tension in David's situation. It is a curious literary maneuver. But I think that one of his purposes is for us to be able to contrast the two against each other. Here David has definitely taken a step back spiritually. He has fallen into doubt regarding the care of God and foolishly gone into the land of the Philistines for refuge. And now he is in a predicament since Achish wants him to fight with the Philistines against the Israelites. That is a bad situation. But how much worse is the situation of the man who rejects God's word. We as followers of Jesus Christ may regress in our pursuit of Christian maturity. But if we love the Lord and his word, as bad as our circumstances become, they will never be as bad as the consequence for resisting the word of God altogether.