

# David | The Once and Future King

## The Witch

First Samuel 28.3ff

9.26.21

Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had removed from the land those who were mediums and spiritists. <sup>4</sup> So the Philistines gathered together and came and camped in Shunem; and Saul gathered all Israel together and they camped in Gilboa. <sup>5</sup> When Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly. <sup>6</sup> When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. <sup>7</sup> Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek 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 woman who is a medium at Endor."

<sup>8</sup> Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, "Conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you." <sup>9</sup> But the woman said to him, "Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?" <sup>10</sup> Saul vowed to her by the LORD, saying, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." <sup>11</sup> Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" And he said, "Bring up Samuel for me." <sup>12</sup> When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, "Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul." <sup>13</sup> The king said to her, "Do not be afraid; but what do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up out of the earth." <sup>14</sup> He said to her, "What is his form?" And she said, "An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe." And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and did homage. <sup>15</sup> Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" And Saul answered, "I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has departed from me and no longer answers me, either through prophets or by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I should do."

<sup>16</sup> Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has departed from you and has become your adversary?" <sup>17</sup> "The LORD has done accordingly as He spoke through me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, to David. <sup>18</sup> "As you did not obey the LORD and did not execute His fierce wrath on Amalek, so the LORD has done this thing to you this day. <sup>19</sup> "Moreover the LORD will also give over Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines, therefore tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. Indeed the LORD will give over the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines!"

<sup>20</sup> Then Saul immediately fell full length upon the ground and was very afraid because of the words of Samuel; also there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day and all night. <sup>21</sup> The woman came to Saul and saw that he was terrified, and said to him, "Behold, your maidservant has obeyed you, and I have taken my life in my hand and have listened to your words which you spoke to me. <sup>22</sup> "So now also, please listen to the voice of your maidservant, and let me set a piece of bread before you that you may eat and have strength when you go on your way." <sup>23</sup> But he refused and said, "I will not eat." However, his servants together with the woman urged him, and he listened to them. So he arose from the ground and sat on the bed. <sup>24</sup> The woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly slaughtered it; and she took flour, kneaded it and baked unleavened bread from it. <sup>25</sup> She brought it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they arose and went away that night.

Today we take a little detour from the biography of David and return to David's predecessor, King Saul.

We're now in a position to conclude a few things about this man. We can now survey Saul's life and see what motivated him to act way he did: this is the eve of Saul's death. What drove him? What did Saul want? What desires moved him to such extremes and finally drove him to this tragic ending of his life?

I'd like to propose... and then defend the proposal by looking back on Saul's life, that Saul was driven by a longing for approval? We could call it desire for affirmation, a yearning to be accepted/approved and secure that Saul believed came from people.

Then I want to show that Saul's desire for love and security could not come from people but has to come from another Source, a Word of approval that can't come from another human being or a group of human beings (even a whole stadium of human beings) but a Word from Beyond (*extra nos*).

Finally we want to see how to get this pledge of approval/security and how the hearing of this powerful affirmation happens in our daily living:

- 1. The Insatiable Thirst for Approval**
- 2. The Only Word of Affirmation that Satisfies**
- 3. How To Hear the Word You Need**

When we first met Saul, he was very promising. Handsome and physically impressive, he seemed to be humble, spiritual, a family man, gifted, strong, courageous...everything you'd want in a king.

Immediately he had military victories over the arch-enemy of the Israelites. From today's passage we learn that Saul rid the land of religious con artists and spiritualists ... Saul had convictions. People liked him. (11.15)

And then maybe...he started to like the attention and when the applause of the people started to wane... when the priest failed to show up on time to offer the sacrifice before a big battle...and the people scattered from Saul...when Saul couldn't wait for the Lord's priest any longer...Saul offered the sacrifice himself. His source of security was drying up.

And that episode (CH 13) was a foreshadowing that this man was very, VERY fond of power, popularity approval. In his mind people are big... God is small.

Apparently, Saul had come to believe that he was king because the people made him king – the people approved of him. And because he believed that, ultimately, his kingship depended on the people's support. He assumed that if he lost the people's approval, he'd be worthless. Popularity, significance recognition and approval: Saul longed for these things.

Now let's be clear: we're all fond of approval – we all long for recognition and affirmation and appreciation. Everyone has some group or other person whose approval is very important. It could be a colleague, a fellow teacher, a fellow real estate agent, another church member, the cool kids. It

could be a parent; a supervisor. We've all heard of the adult who has never sensed the approval of his father or mother.

And this thirst for approval and recognition is a universal desire AND (this might surprise you) it's a desire that God has instilled in us. God made us for glory (Psalm 8). God made humanity to reign and God gave us all an insatiable desire for recognition, significance and glory.

BUT the story of humanity is the story of these God-given desires becoming misdirected and warped.

Human history is the story of the sad consequences of these bent, misdirected cravings for glory and recognition and security. Saul's life personifies this – what happens when these desires for recognition, acceptance, security, approval and significance, what happens if these desires don't get filled in the way God intends?

And what results IS: brokenness in the entire person – what do we mean by that?

Well, look at Saul and you'll see a real, vivid, 3-D picture of these misdirected yearnings AND a portrait of their results. Here's a man desperately thirsty for approval and affirmation and security and glory.

"How thirsty is he?" you ask. Well, he's so thirsty that he'd get disguised and go to consult a witch... an outrageous extreme. Saul himself had expelled all these psychics and sorcerers – he apparently had, at one time, a deep conviction against this stuff but now he acts contrary to his former principles.

He's THAT horribly thirsty. He's facing the big difficulties of life and yet without the inner resources to cope. There's no peace, no shalom, no inner well-being, no place to stand - just a big vacuum inside of Saul and no hope, no encouragement, no security, no sense of approval. Like the song says he's "looking for love in all the wrong places."

There's a quote that's been (probably wrongly) ascribed to G.K. Chesterton: "*The man who knocks at the door of the brothel is looking for God*". A lot of Christian writers have expressed the same thought in perhaps less shocking ways but the idea is: human beings long for God, long for glory, long for intimacy, transcendence, greatness and if they do not get God, they'll be internally driven to strange stuff in order to quench this thirst.

And the driven-man compelled by his inner craving, when he turns to these outrageous alternatives, he'll find them to be not only ultimately unfulfilling, but that realization will leave the man in the deepest, darkest experience of death and despair.

He will lose his appetite – he'll lose his desire to go on. He'll become more and more inhuman. He will live in what the philosophers call existential despair or angst or Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death." This person may find a little relief in shopping, wine, food, sex, entertainment, work, exercise or hobbies.

She may use *things* to numb the pain or to divert her attention...but eventually we become hollow people.

Here's Saul, turning to outrageous extremes; he shows up at this spiritual brothel, a house of witchcraft, but it leaves him with no hope, no shalom, no sense of significance or security. He leaves feeling even more alienated and deeper in despair; no appetite; he's sick unto death.

As an aside: people still look in this direction today and you may wonder what this passage teaches about having contact with the other side. Well, this is a unique situation but as a whole, the Bible doesn't teach any possibility of contacting the dead and in fact strictly forbids it.

My own sense is that card-readers, mediums and psychics are mostly simply swindlers, sometimes with great intuition. And yet, fooling around with this *is far from harmless* and can be a fast-track into deep evil and is NEVER a road to good.

People who insist on knocking at the door may find what Saul/witch found – i.e. something horrific and shocking (v. 11, 16) and a sense that God is against them.

The British scholar Joyce Baldwin said about verse 16 (to have God as adversary) "It is hard to envisage a more terrible situation in which to find oneself" (end quote) I think I'd change that to say, "it's *impossible* to envisage a more difficult situation."

And I realize that to the modern ear there's something jolting or primitive sounding in verse 16 (God becoming one's adversary) we tend to think that God is everyone's friend and to say that God is against someone sounds like a fundamentalist scare-tactic.

I mean, what would a person have to do to get into that situation? You'd have to be an ISIS member or a serial killer or drug kingpin or an abuser or terrorist. But the Bible NOT only presents this as a real possibility (that God IS opposed to some people), it also offers a surprising explanation for how people get into such an adversarial relationship with God.

Here's what it says: "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*". (Pro 3.34; Jam 4.6; 1Pet 5.5)

You see this in Saul, pretty early in the going, love of applause – love to be popular, recognized, liked and in control. When he repents, it's motivated by a desire for respect and honor by people. His life was characterized *by what we often think of* as a little character flaw: pride. But it's not really so little: God is opposed to the proud.

C.S. Lewis, in his very famous little intro on the Christian life *Mere Christianity*, he includes a whole chapter on this little character flaw and the chapter's famous title is "The Great Sin." Well what is it, Mr. Lewis? Rape? Murder? Blasphemy? Bigotry?

Here's what he writes, "According to Christian teachers, THE essential vice, the utmost evil is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that are mere flea-bites in comparison: ...Pride leads

to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind... As long as you are proud, you cannot know God."

Saul had learned the intoxicating rush of human applause and power and control. He became addicted to approval and it opened the door to evil.

Was it too late for Saul? It seems like Saul just wants to hear the word of God; he's desperately thirsty to hear God. But the point of this passage, maybe the point of Saul's whole life, may be that there is no second word spoken until the first word is heard.

God had already spoken His word to Saul. And that word was, "simply depend on Me; humble yourself. Stop seeking the paltry applause of people and instead receive the true glory that your heart craves from Me, the One Source Who can provide it."

God is saying, "Saul, I have made you for acceptance recognition, security, encouragement, hope and glory from the only Person who could give it in the measure that would fill and satisfy you now and eternally."

Even there, in the darkness of the witch's house, Saul could've been rescued from his despair, loneliness and sickness unto death. If he could've remembered the gracious character and the true majesty and holiness of the God with Whom Saul had trifled; if he could've seen... what we can see: that is - another Man in existential despair, loneliness, full of sickness and disease.

If Saul could only have had a glimpse of Jesus Christ, the promised Savior, absorbing our guilt and shame in that garden. Here is the truest picture of a human being completely stripped of glory and approval, utterly thirsty for recognition, encouragement, hope; insecure and abandoned. If Saul could, even then, had seen *not only his own desperate need, but also the ferocious love of God in Christ*, the God who gave His own Beloved Son to take my despair and guilt so that I could be recognized and received and hear the applause of heaven.

Saul was screaming "speak to me – speak to me speak... MY WAY... speak to me MY WAY!"

And Jesus Christ, God's great and final Word to this planet... Jesus is whispering, "I AM THE WAY... hear Me, hear Me – I am the Word you need! In ME is all you need for life and godliness...In Me, you are declared ENOUGH...righteous, adopted, affirmed, a man or woman or child with significance beyond what you've ever dreamed...God approves of you!"

And the way to HEAR and RECEIVE that word in the modern world is, again, maybe not what you'd expect – it's to humble yourself and trust.

I know, it sounds, to our sophisticated modern ears, so crude and even psychologically harmful. "Are you saying that to feel better about myself I have to think ...LOWER of myself?"

Yes.

It's what Saul wouldn't do... he really didn't trust in the love and goodness of God. He was always trying to DO... in order to get accolades from people. He even uses God to get approval from people... He swears by the Name of God to the witch – (v. 10) “As YHWH lives – no punishment will come upon you...”

He uses God to get the approval of people – just like after his failure (referenced in v.18) when he failed to destroy a deadly, highly contagious spiritually infected city...and when Samuel came and said, “Saul, now you're OUT!!” *“Then Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned; I have indeed disobeyed the command of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice.... Then he said, ‘I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel...”* (15.24, 30)

Saul was always ready to use God to get what he really wanted – honor and approval from people. Even when he repents, he never gets past the immediate failing down to the bottom, that, as David would later say, “In sin was I conceived...and against YOU alone have I sinned.” I.e. “I’m a flawed person. I need You!”

David met a woman last week who was beauty personified... Saul meets a woman this week *who is falsehood personified...* And still, on the eve of his death (though he doesn't know it) he's unwilling to look down into his dark soul and say, “I am a great sinner.” His repentance is a shallow effort to avoid God.

Was it too late for Mad Saul?

I think of that great promise from the end of the Hebrew Bible, Zechariah CH 8: "Thus says the LORD, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth..." (Zec 8.3)

Even in that spiritual brothel, God who left Saul, I think would've returned. Saul could have welcomed Him, “Search me, O God...” (Ps 139.23) and God would've led him in repentance... and He will lead YOU too...

Realize and see that the Word of affirmation and truth YOU need, the Word that IS Jesus Christ, says, “I love YOU and I died and rose for YOU and I've come to reclaim YOU for an eternal celebration...”

That word is received by faith (sometimes ...oftentimes... with no feelings... oftentimes despite the evidence you THINK you need).

It's an ongoing pattern – facing the dark stuff of our souls AND *the blazingly bright beauty of God's security and acceptance and love...*and we receive Him every day... repenting and believing....