



## **Do You Really Know the King?**

### **A Study in Samuel**

*A Medium Crisis*

*1 Samuel 28:1-25*

*Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith*

*on Sunday, August 28, 2022*

### **Foxhole Prayers and Let it Be**

A long time ago Paul and John wrote, “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom: ‘Let it be.’” Of course, I don’t mean the apostles, I mean Lennon and McCartney. Paul McCartney is actually referring to his mother, Mary, who had passed away when he was a young teenager. He turned to family and music to deal with loss and pain. Who do you turn to in times of trouble? Do you turn heavenward at some point? Pray some prayer of desperation for help?

“There are no atheists in foxholes.” Maybe you’ve heard that phrase before? It speaks of the commonplace occurrence called “foxhole prayers.” These are commitments tossed heavenward in desperation. Soldiers certainly prayed these. I bet from time to time, we have prayed these prayers. Typically they are followed by rash commitments to piety or Christian service that are seldom followed through.

I bet you have prayed some sort of foxhole prayer. “God, if you will get me out of this, I promise that I will \_\_\_\_\_” (you fill in that blank). How do you manage crises when you come upon them or when they fall on top of you? Who makes up your “crisis management team?” Who do you go to when times are bleak and when things are desperate?

Who are you first, second, and third calls or texts when it all hits the fan? Where do you turn in the darkest hour? And how you answer that question is revealing. It reveals a lot about our faith. How far down the crisis management team do you go before you are throwing up that hail Mary, foxhole prayer to God? Is he your first priority or your last resort? Or is he somewhere there in the middle?

Sadly, many Christians turn a lot of places that are not at all heavenward in their darkest hours and times of trouble. In today’s text, we see the dangers of stepping outside of faith in God to deal with our troubles.

We also see how far Saul has fallen as he goes to horrible extremes to seek out help. I invite you to turn to 1 Samuel 28 for one of the most unique texts in Scripture. (read text)

### **Focus Shifts from David to Saul**

After the interaction between the two anointed kings of Israel in 1 Samuel 26, David continued to fear for his life and run from Saul. That fear would send David behind the Philistine lines and into their camp and cities for protection. We get a few verses of this in 1 and 2 but for the remainder of 1 Samuel, David is hiding among the Philistines, who were well aware that Saul was trying to kill David. So, it was one of those, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” situations here. However, David’s story is suspended here to make room for Saul’s last night.

We are reminded of some information here and also presented with new information. We are reminded that Samuel is dead, meaning that Saul has lost his prophetic voice and source of divine guidance. However, Saul believes that Samuel rests among the shades of the underworld, which Saul assumes means that Samuel can still be consulted<sup>1</sup> through the practice of necromancy.<sup>2</sup>

The additional information provided here is new. Saul at some point earlier in his reign had banished all “mediums and spiritists” from Israel. While this helps us to anticipate the witch’s objections (28:9). More significantly, this phrase will focus on an important detail which casts Saul’s actions here in a very bad light.

Perhaps under Samuel’s direction, Saul had forbidden the use of necromancy. He expelled all mediums and in doing so was obedient the Law (Leviticus 19:31; 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:10-11). However, we will soon see that driving out those who practiced the sin from the land did not remove the roots of the sin from Saul’s heart.

It is similar to purging your house from all tobacco, alcohol, or bad food but that won’t take away the desire or the inclination to be self-indulgent. It just makes the action more difficult. But you and I know the truth about human beings. If I want something bad to eat, for example, I can find a tator tot.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (HSM 39; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p.112

<sup>2</sup> Necromancy is the practice of magic involving communication with the dead either by summoning their spirits as apparitions, visions, or raising them bodily.

You can flush all the cigarettes, you can pour all the booze down the drain or disconnect the wi-fi, but the root of the sin that leads to the physical acts remains and you and I still have to deal with that. Because, like Saul, one day we will be desperate enough to run back to it. What was it the apostle Peter wrote in such startling and honest language? “Like a dog returns to its vomit, like a washed sow returns to the mud,” so people will return to the folly of their sins. Unless we deal with it on a spiritual, root level in our hearts.

The text here is exposing Saul’s inner life. He takes a look from his geographical observation deck on the Gilboa Ridge and sees the massive Philistine army and “he was afraid, and his heart pounded” (28:5). Terror filled his heart. He throws up his own “foxhole prayer” in 28:6 but the Lord did not answer him. Not in any of the expected and typical ways that the Lord would speak to his people. No dreams, no prophecy, no Urim or Thummim.

That is Saul’s fault. The Lord withdrew his Spirit from Saul after Saul had messed up concerning the Amalekites. Further, there aren’t any priests left for Saul to access. Only one priest named Ahimilech lives, however that guys on the run from Saul and camped with David. Saul cannot access any priests to wear the ephod and cast the Urim or Thummim because he killed all of them at Nob (22:6-23). And there aren’t any prophets to speak of since Samuel died. Saul has forfeited any means by which to hear from God.

Before we shake our heads condescendingly against Saul, understand that believers do this same thing all the time. Christians cut themselves off from God’s presence and from God’s people all the time. What do you do when it all falls apart, but you haven’t been in God’s presence in ages – no prayers to speak of, the Bible hasn’t moved from your shelf in months – and you’ve been too busy to really get to church? What do you do when it seems that God is silent? Do you then rely on other methods by which to deal with your issues? What do you do when, like Saul, you inquire but don’t hear any answers?

For Saul, it is too late. God has long since stopped answering Saul. Besides, Saul is more inclined to make up his own mind and do whatever he wants to do anyway. So, when his “foxhole prayer” doesn’t bring him the satisfaction he requires, he becomes desperate to discern God’s plan and he makes a choice that will be the lowest point of his troubled reign as king.

## **The Witch of Endor**

It will also mark the last night that he lives. Saul gets someone to help him locate a medium who claims to communicate with the dead. The text here indicates what some Israelites believed about ancestor worship and cults of the dead. There were specific death rituals connected to ancestor worship.<sup>3</sup>

As David is ascending new heights of faith and trust, Saul is stooping to new lows. Saul is not mentioned much in 1 and 2 Chronicles. What we do read is that “Saul died for his unfaithfulness to the Lord because he did not keep the Lord’s word. He even consulted a medium for guidance, but he did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.” (1 Chronicles 10:13-14)

The Old Testament preserves other instances of necromancy, revealing that this was an issue that Israel dealt with for centuries. David’s son Absalom apparently engaged in some sort of cult of the dead in a funerary ritual for his deceased sons (2 Samuel 14:27; 18:18). The Bible condemns Manasseh’s evil as including consultation with mediums (2 Kings 21:6), and Josiah’s reforms specifically targeted forms of divination, including necromancy (2 Kings 23:24).

Israel’s ban on magic was counter to all of the other nations in the Ancient Near East. They believed that chanting phrases and repeating acts could manipulate and exploit the powers of the gods and secure benefits for themselves. Their gods were viewed as subservient and easily manipulated. Since Creator God is not subservient to any manner or force beyond his control and God will not be manipulated. Israel’s theology made this use of magic forbidden.

Biblical writers were strictly monotheistic. Thus they believed that magic was human rebellion that tried to unlock divine secrets, manipulating God and making humanity equal with God. Saul turns to illegitimate usage of magic as a means of seeking guidance while closing his eyes to the word of God.

Saul’s visit at night may have been a military necessity. It also could have been the approved time for such seances, the darkness of night being the

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<sup>3</sup> Bill T. Arnold, “Religion in Ancient Israel,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 414-415.

appropriate time to communicate with those who “live in darkness.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently Saul believed in the concept of Sheol as a place for the dead beneath the earth’s surface, to which a person would descend at death. He asks the medium to “bring up for me” a spirit to consult.

The medium hesitates. The guy who eliminated necromancy from the land is now here with the exact request. She who communicates with the dead is now concerned about joining them. Saul promises her safety. He calls for Samuel. This reveals how desperate Saul is to hear from God. It reminds us of what we read in Amos 8:11-12, that on the day of God’s judgment, when people who have rejected His Word will endure a famine of prophetic word and search everywhere for that life-sustaining power but not find it. Saul so longs to hear it again from his one-time spiritual mentor, Samuel – who’s voice was silenced by Saul’s ongoing rebellion.

Much to the surprise of the medium (not to mention the modern reader), she successfully conjures up Samuel. It reminds me of the scene in the movie *Ghost* in which a huckster medium played by Whoopi Goldberg actually sees and hears the ghost of the character played by Patrick Swayze. She is shocked in actually hearing from a ghost. The witch of Endor shrieks at actually seeing Samuel. She then realizes that it is Saul himself.

This leaves us with unanswered questions. Why did she shriek or be shocked by actually seeing an apparition of she had been experienced in such occurrences? Is she shocked at her own success? Perhaps her alarm indicates her own lack of control of this situation? Without becoming further sidetracked with questions that are ultimately unanswerable, there are some clear essentials here that we should instead focus on.

It is clear that Samuel appears to Saul to communicate to him one last time, although Saul is unable, at least at first, to see Samuel, asking the medium to describe the man she is seeing. Saul summarized his situation succinctly and accurately. Philistines are threatening and God has withdrawn (1 Samuel 28:15). Saul reveals his desperation and hopeless condition here too: “I’ve called on you to tell me what to do.”

It is a matter-of-fact tone here that seems to imply that Saul wants to turn the clock back to a time before Saul had rebelled against God’s direct word and commands.

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<sup>4</sup> Job 10:21-22; see Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, p.114.

Also, Saul might as well say, “By the way, please ignore the medium here and the illicit and sinful and blasphemous way that I have contacted you. Also, please ignore all of your previous rebukes of my character and actions in the past and how I recklessly sought to kill David while neglecting the Philistines all these years. Please tell me what to do now.”

And much to Saul’s chagrin, the deceased Samuel’s message to Saul was the same as the living Samuel. Because God’s word does not change. Samuel reiterates the divine judgment against Saul. God is no longer with Saul. God has torn the kingdom from Saul and given it to David. Samuel tells Saul nothing more than Saul already knows. And there is no advice concerning the Philistines. But there is this: “God will hand Israel over to the Philistines along with you, Saul. Tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me.”

Samuel doesn’t make any long speeches rebuking Saul’s shameful disregard for God’s word. He only speaks of today and tomorrow. The time has come for Saul’s judgment.

### **Please Ignore**

How often do we do that too? We ask God to please ignore all of our transgressions. Please, ignore all the baggage of our sins, let’s move forward, God. Plus, we ask God a LOT of questions that, honestly, He has already answered and questions that we know the answers to.

And it is challenging too as we consider who we turn to in a crisis. We see David turn to God, inquire of God, and then also David seeks out help often, from people like Samuel, Jonathan, and Ahimelech. But in Saul’s darkest moment, he departs from faith completely. And God cannot be manipulated to bail us out because we don’t like what we are facing.

I can repeat the same prayers, words, songs over and over and over again. God won’t be manipulated. I can try to “speak things into being,” but it won’t work. I can name and claim a lot, but that doesn’t mean God is going to snap to attention. He’s not a genie, Aladdin. He is not Santa Claus, Virginia.

Over the course of my life, I have seen so many people abandon Biblical Christianity, there has certainly been a rise in a hunger or desire to experience something supernatural or metaphysical. And there is no shortage of New Age tomfoolery to help people do just that.

People get involved with channeling, crystals, horoscopes, paranormal psychology, and even reincarnation. So many people have turned their backs on legitimate sources of relating to God and have come to rely instead on illicit ways of trying to manipulate God. And even the church has distorted communication with God into some sort of transactional quid-pro-quo in which we can manipulate God.

We do all sorts of good things in distorted, sinful, magical-type ways. We pray, attend church, give money, all in an effort to force God to do good things for us out of obligation. Our relationship with God will not and cannot be reduced to some arranged agreement. This is not some bargain in which God is forced to act because we first kept our end.

God does not owe you or me anything because we gave, or we prayed, or we came to church. We do those things to experience the grace of God's presence and that is how we express our love and adoration and thanks to God.

One final thought. Jesus was, is, and always will be Christ in our crises. Crises have a way of bringing what we really think and believe about Jesus to the surface. And a severe crisis heightens the sense of what a Christian really believes. We cannot manipulate God by any of those ways mentioned earlier. In fact, we have to get rid of all of that New Age mess. We must replace it with proper replacements according to the Bible.

Not only that, but we also have to nurture and strengthen those replacements consistently. We must develop legitimate means of communication with God through the Word and the Holy Spirit in prayer and in worship.

Where do you turn in times of trouble? Are you lobbing up foxhole prayers? Are you working through some distorted means to try to manipulate God to do what you want? Or are you developing, nurturing, strengthening legitimate ways to communicate with God through appropriate prayer and in study of the Scripture and yielding control through worship?

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:**

What are some crises that you have been compelled to pray for in your or others' lives? What types of prayers did you pray and what did you specifically ask God to do?

What are some common "foxhole prayers" Christians pray?

Saul's consultation of a medium revealed his failure to nurture his relationship with God during his lifetime. This means that Saul was unprepared for his life to end. Have you seen that in your life or in lives of others? When things get near the end, people are unprepared? How can someone be prepared?

David returned to his childhood faith consistently in dealing with "giant" problems. That did not mean David was free from fear or problems. How can we respond to problems like David did? What is your first response to problems? Is it prayer? What is your crisis management system? What is the process you go through when in crisis?

Have you ever, like Saul, purged "bad things" from your life, without ever dealing with the root issue of sin in your heart? What did Jesus teach about the root issues of sin? (Matthew 5:21-30) Thoughts that are not acted upon can still be sinful. How do we deal with these deeper root issues of sin?