



Are You Listening?

1 Samuel 28:1-25

Grace Church | 5.2.21

Pretty much all of my best literary illustrations come from my wife. Currently she is finishing up a course on the Inklings in her graduate program, so naturally we have been talking a lot about Lewis, Tolkien, and their society of friends. Allie has commented several times on the striking similarities between the narrative of 1 Samuel and *The Lord of the Rings*, which is certainly a book about hobbits first and foremost, but has a large part to do with a certain king coming out of the wilderness to take his claim on the throne.

But the themes in Tolkien's fantasy that have been sticking out to me the most recently as I study 1 Samuel are not related to the heroes, but to the tragic characters. First, I think of Denethor, the steward of Gondor, who is so influenced by Sauron's evil that he attempts to burn himself alive with his injured but still breathing son beneath him. His son lives, but Denethor perishes. Second, I think of Saruman, the wizard who is overcome by greed and the influence of Sauron and eventually is led to such a place of desperation that he attacks the Shire, the place where hobbits live, and is overcome by the hobbits and dies at the hand of his servant. It's really quite pitiable, how both of these once proud and powerful characters are ultimately given over to complete desperation.

And of course if you have not engaged with *Lord of the Rings* before, I may be missing you with my details and boring you with the names. But here is where I am going. Both of these characters are reduced to desperate acts, leading to their death, because of who they listen to. See, both Denethor and Saruman possess a stone that allows them to talk with Sauron, the greatest evil in the world. Originally they think they are just spying on him, but really he is controlling their paths, step by step, leading them to desperation and eventually self-destruction.

And today in 1 Samuel we have another story of a tragic king who seeks guidance in the pit of evil. He is brought to such pitiable desperation that he attempts to bring back the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel just to get a word guidance. And here is the contrast again we see between David and Saul. David is in a desperate place physically, haven given himself over to the service of the Philistines, but Saul is in a desperate place *spiritually*. And that makes all the difference. Saul has lost his contact with the light of the world, and so it is only the darkness that influences him now, leading him step by step, like our tragic characters in Tolkien's trilogy, to self-destruction.

So here is the main point of our text today, a rather simple and rather negative one, a tragic point: **God does not answer those who will not listen.** Now, you can write that down, and maybe it's very



sobering, but rest assured by the time you leave here today you will also hear some good news that you should write down too. I'm just saving it for later.

The Tragedy of Listening

Let's look quickly over verse 1-2, which wrap up David's story with the Philistines, and we will come back to them at the end. Remember David has given himself over to Achish the King of Gath, as a hired gun. Achish thinks David is attacking and making raids on the Israelites, but in reality David is making raids on Israel's ancient enemies living in Israel's territory, not his own people. So David gains Achish's trust by deception. Notice the cliffhanger though: Achish calls David out to battle against Israel, and David seems to respond in the positive. What will David do? Will he continue to be faithful to Achish and the Philistines, or will he turn against them? Well, we don't know, we are left without resolution.

This is intentional by the Biblical author, inspired by God's spirit. The events with Saul and the medium at En-dor here in chapter 28 most likely come *after* the events of David in chapter 29. So the author is intentionally inverting the chronological order of the story here. Why? I believe it is to set up for us another contrast: between the kind of trouble David is facing and the kind of trouble Saul is facing. See, David is desperate: he is forced to a place he would not like to be, a physically dangerous place. But Saul's place is much worse—again, it's a spiritual desperation. Let's examine what has led Saul to this point.

First, the text reminds us of two things in **verse 3**. One, Samuel's death. This is old news, but it's put here to remind us that Saul is lost, and Samuel can't intervene. Second, it reminds us that Saul has outlawed all the mediums and necromancers from Israel. This was what he should have done, since three different times in God's law he mentions this kind of practice. Mediums and Necromancers were in the business of trying to communicate with and bring back the spirits of the dead. According to God's law for Israel, these kinds of actions, along with fortune telling or omen reading, are punishable by death. The reason for this is that this kind of occult and dark practices are meant to undermine the guidance and the revelation of God. They inherently are attempting to find divine voices apart from God's self-revelation. So you need to see this a positive command: God is keeping his people from seeking out other voices that would cause them to stop listening to him. The reason this is so serious is because of our main point we will see: **God does not answer those who will not listen**. So in outlawing mediums and fortune tellers, God is graciously preventing his people from failing to listen, which leads to spiritual separation from God.

But just because Saul has rightly outlawed these divination practices doesn't mean they aren't going on. **Verse 4**, the Philistine army comes together at Shunem, so they have advanced well into Israelite territory and are trying to cut off the valley of Jezreel here, and important trading route for Israel. Saul and his men are camped about 7 miles away.



This is not looking good for them. Saul is not confident or competent enough to handle this. **Verse 5** introduces a major theme here: *fear*. Saul is afraid of the Philistines, so much so that his heart trembles. Samuel is dead, here is Saul at the end of his rope, and he needs guidance. So, **verse 6**, maybe he will hear from God in a dream? Revelatory dreams are common for kings in the Scripture. Nothing. Maybe God will provide for him by way of the Urim, those special revelation stones carried by the priests? But wait, Saul has already slaughtered all the priests save one, who lives with David, not him. No kingly revelation, no priestly revelation. Well, what about the prophets? Samuel is dead, Saul is not counted among the prophets any longer, and no prophetic voice comes. No kingly revelation, no priestly revelation, no prophetic revelation. God is silent and does not answer Saul.

This is far far more serious than you think. Saul realizes he needs God's guidance. He is afraid, and needs to know what to do. He is in a desperate situation. But God does not answer. There is nothing more worth pitying, no spiritual situation so dark or so damning, than for God not to answer. As one commentator puts it: "The most hopeless misery in all of life is to be abandoned by God."¹ We should feel sorry for Saul, but this should also make us question. What is this text teaching us about God? Is it saying that he might abandon us, that we might seek him one day and not find him? Doesn't Jesus promise: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"? Why is God not answering Saul? Let's read on to find out.

Saul is desperate, so in **verse 7** we find him turn to an unlawful and rebellious act against God to get what he needs: a way to defeat the Philistines. Apparently, Saul was lax enough on the whole "no medium's" thing that not only was there one nearby, but his soldiers knew about it. So **verse 8**, Saul disguises himself, like the mad King Lear put on beggar's clothes, and steps out into the wilderness by night. God has not answered him, so Saul tries to hide. But the medium will not have it at first: she knows that if she does what Saul says, she could be put to death. She suspects that this suspicious person may be laying a trap for her. Notice what Saul does next in **verse 10**: he swears to her *by the Lord*. Saul is invoking the protection of the name of the Lord against an action the Lord has specifically said is antithetical to his name. This is blasphemy, a sheer disregard and failure to listen to and obey God. It's a religious plaster over a wicked motive.

Verse 11 brings to us the theme of fear again, as the medium is shocked when she sees Samuel. Perhaps she doesn't believe that her divination will work, and is shocked when it does. More likely is that when she sees Samuel, she knows who she is dealing with here—a prophet of God—and she knows that this prophet is not coming up for anyone—he is here to speak to the king. Now she looks more intently and sees the situation rightly. It's Saul who she is performing this unlawful action for. But look what Saul says to her in **verse 13**, "do not be afraid." How ironic—this woman is disobeying the righteous law of God, and Saul tells her not to fear. His heart is showing. He fears the Philistines, but has no fear of God and his commands.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel*, 293.



Verse 14 gives us a picture of Spirit Samuel. He is wrapped in his prophetic robe, which last time we saw was being grasped at by Saul. So Saul recognizes Samuel—he sees the robe and is taken back to when he was rejected as king. Commentators debate as to what is going on here: is this a demonic spirit summoned by the medium, is it simply a trick of the mind? I think it's most likely that this is a real spirit, summoned not by the medium but by God: similar to how we see Jesus talking to the spirits of Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration.

What this means is that while God did not answer Saul before, he is answering him now. He is showing his divine power over all things: material and spiritual. God is not condoning the use of divination, he is overturning it. There is no need for the medium to do anything—this is not here work, and she does not act as a means of communication between Samuel and Saul—no, God is speaking now. But Saul is nevertheless oblivious. Samuel demands to know what Saul is up to, and Saul is naive here. There is no repentance over past wrongs, there is no mention of God in reverence or fear or awe, his reply to Samuel in **verse 15** is simply: I need you to tell me what to do. Saul's request is so man-centered, so self-focused—he is so deceived he cannot see straight. For years he has been listening to anyone but God, and now he thinks he can circumvent his need for God by summoning up God's prophet.

Samuel, God's mouthpiece, will have none of it. And here in **verses 16-19** we find the reason that God did not answer Saul when he cried for guidance. God will not give Saul the answers he seeks, because Saul has failed again and again and again to listen. God will not be mocked by continuing to shout his revelation to rocky hearts. Sooner or later he will grow silent and the consequences of disobedience will come.

This is hard news to hear, friends. **Verse 20** we see Saul respond like we would expect. He has no fear of God, but Samuel's words make him tremble. The only compassion we find is in the medium, who kills her fattened calf and bakes unleavened bread, a feast for a king. Notice several more features that show us Saul's disposition. **Verse 21**, the medium calls Saul to obedience. At first he refuses, but after they urge him, notice what **verse 23** says: Saul "listened" to their words. The only time Saul is described in this way. He listens to the words of the medium and his servants, but still has not really listened to the words of God.

Also notice the nature of this feast. Here we are, at night, and a fattened calf is killed and unleavened bread baked. It should remind you of a similar meal: the passover meal. There is a sacrifice that is about to be made, the angel of death is coming. But it won't pass over Saul and his house this time. This time it will fall on him and his sons. It's an anti-passover, with an old kind of antichrist. Before Judas ate the bread of Christ's passover and slipped into the night to his own death, Saul, the betrayer of God's people, ate the bread and slipped into the night to his.

Let's consider the significance of Saul's tragedy a moment. To go back to our original example in Lord of the Rings, both Deneathor and Saurman listened to the wrong sources. But our prevailing other literary examples, King Lear, his demise also came from listening to the wrong daughters and the wrong voices. Saul's problem is the same, a problem of listening.



So our question is a simple one: who are we listening to?

See, we typically see listening as a *passive* action. But I believe our text today is showing us something striking: listening can lead to death. Why? Because all listening leads to actions. Consider the warning of Saul—he did not listen to God, and his heart was hardened to death. The blame here is not on God, we don't look at God and say: "why didn't you speak!". The blame is not on the speaker, but on the listener. Because he did not listen to God, he couldn't hear even if God was speaking. And God is always speaking to us, in the revelation of creation, in the revelation of his word, in the revelation of his people, he is making known his attributes and bidding us to hear.

So the reality is that as Christians, there are many times when we feel God is giving us the silent treatment. Have you ever felt that? You just aren't as intimate with God as you once have felt? Perhaps you have experienced great pain, some sort of trauma or suffering or circumstance. This could be the result of your sin or the result of someone's sin against you, or simply the result of a fallen world and a creation groaning for renewal. But you feel God is not as tangible, not as knowable, not as clear. Your prayers seem to go unanswered, your spiritual affections are dormant. Well, maybe the problem is not that God has gone silent, but that we have forgotten how to listen and obey the words of God.

There are two reasons we may have trouble hearing God. We can see these when we compare David and Saul. See, both had trouble at times hearing God. David notoriously struggled, particularly in the desert of the wilderness at this time, with feeling like God did not hear him. Look at this from Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

See, every Christian has trouble hearing God. We are men and women of little faith, with cloudy, earthly vision. So what is the difference between Saul and David? It's not the difference of hearing, but the difference of listening. It's a difference of faith and of fear. Look at how David responds right after this in Psalm 13.

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

Instead of turning to other means, like the medium at En-Dor, David turns further into the Lord. He brings his complaints to God. He doesn't pray for more signs, he prays for better ears. Christian, when you struggle to feel like God hears, don't turn to other voices to listen to. Double down on your trust in God. Notice in Psalm 13 David needs God to hear him, and needs to see the light of God. If he doesn't, he knows that he will sleep the sleep of death. In other words, there is a link



between failing to listen to God and death, as we see in Saul, and listening to God and receiving life. If you are not yet convinced of the link between listening to God and receiving life and death, consider these texts:

Proverbs 19:20 ESV / Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.

Proverbs 19:27 ESV / Cease to hear instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge.

Proverbs 1:33 ESV / But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Romans 10:17 ESV / So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Mark 9:7 ESV / And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

Revelation 3:20 ESV / Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Luke 8:21 ESV / But he answered them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

So I want you to see what is happening here. Saul’s visit to the medium at En-dor confirms that he has spent his whole life not listening to God, and therefore not obeying God. So it is no surprise that Samuel gives him the sentence: without heeding the words of God, your end will be death. **God does not answer those who will not listen.** And when God is silent, how can there be anything but death? He is the one who spoke the universe into existence, the one whose Word upholds all things! To fail to fear God and listen by faith doesn’t just mean that we miss out on some great opportunities, it means that we are heading the way of death. This is the tragedy of all mankind: we are hard of hearing. This is bad news. But you didn’t come here to hear bad news. This is the church, where the doors of the gospel are how we enter and exit. You came here because you need good news. And so let’s turn there.

The Comedy of the Gospel

A comedy is not just funny, traditionally it is also hopeful. Traditional comedies always end in marriage—they are the good news. So again, let’s see the difference here between Saul and David. David is our good news. Look at **verse 17**. He struggles to hear from God at times, but God has not rejected him! Instead, he is the inheritor of the kingdom of God. How do we know our end is not Saul, but is more like David?



Here is how we know. Let's go back to Psalm 13. David ends the psalm like this:

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Ah, here is the difference. David struggles to hear God, just like Saul. BUT when he does, what does he remember? He remembers the salvation of the Lord, the steadfast love of God. Here is something Saul knows nothing of. He has never rejoiced in the salvation of God, only the salvation of himself. He has never reveled in the steadfast love of God. The way we know that our struggle with hearing God is not Saul's but rather David's is because we *know* and *rejoice* in our salvation, even when it's hard. What is separating you, if you are in Christ, from the demise of Saul is that your eyes have seen the salvation of God into the gospel of Jesus Christ, and you can't burn that out of your mind. If you struggle with assurance of your salvation, this is for you. When you think God is giving you the silent treatment, trust and rejoice in his work for you in Jesus Christ.

If you are in Christ, your end will not be Saul. God will not give you over to destruction, he will not reject you, he will not cut off his voice and words and life from you, no matter how it feels. Not because you are such a great listener, but because the grace of God has unplugged your ears by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is not silent. John 1 tells us "the Word [of God] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." The gospel of Jesus is God screaming out his grace for all who will hear by faith. Praise God the good news is that if you repent of your sin and trust Jesus, he bled and died so that you could HEAR God, so that the grace of God could be tangible and attainable and believable, even in your darkest, hazinest moments.

What Jesus felt on the cross was very similar to what you sometimes feel. He cried out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He felt like the Father had ceased to listen. He went through that agony so that in him you could always hear the good news of the gospel of grace. That passover meal that he presided over—he was the fattened calf killed and bled, he was the unleavened bread broken, he was the one betrayed in the dark of night—all so that your future may not be like Saul. So when you need direction, when you need to hear good news, when you need guidance, come to Christ. He is the king of dreams, he is the priest who holds the will of God, and he is the prophet who proclaims God fully to us.



What I'm trying to say is that the gospel of Jesus is the word that breaks through for us and allows us to really listen. It's a comedy, it ends in marriage. I love how the Scripture uses these metaphors of sight and smell for receiving the gospel. Christ is the aroma of God, but he's also the vision, the revelation of God. But here today, he is the voice of God. So again, are we listening? Are you listening with the gospel in mind? Are you filtering things you hear through the lifechanging news of the person and work of Jesus? Are we allowing the gospel really to seep into our bones, or are we drowning it out with loud voices, squibbling over secondary issues, over politics and preferences, turning up the volume of cultural and physical static so loud we miss this news: Jesus Christ died so that we might hear and receive and obey the Word of God in him, and we might live. You want life? Go to Jesus, he alone has the words. Listen to him, cry out to him, bring your complaints to him. He will soften your heart and your ears, and bring you out of your desperation. You can trust him, because his steadfast love endures even when you're struggling to hear it. After all, the comedy of the gospel is not dependent on your attentiveness—it's dependent on God breaking in, giving you new ears to listen and a new heart to obey.

