

King Saul and the Witch of Endor

1 Samuel 28

1 Samuel 28 – “Now it happened in those days that the Philistines gathered their armies together for war, to fight with Israel. And Achish said to David, “You assuredly know that you will go out with me to battle, you and your men.” ² So David said to Achish, “Surely you know what your servant can do.” And Achish said to David, “Therefore I will make you one of my chief guardians forever.” ³ Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. ⁴ Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, 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, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets. ⁷ Then Saul said to his servants, “Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.” And his servants said to him, “In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.”

⁸ So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, “Please conduct a séance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.” ⁹ Then the woman said to him, “Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?” ¹⁰ And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, “As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.” ¹¹ Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” And he said, “Bring up Samuel for me.” ¹² 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!” ¹³ And the king said to her, “Do not be afraid. What did you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.” ¹⁴ So he said to her, “What is his form?” And she said, “An old man is coming 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 down. ¹⁵ Now Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?”

And Saul answered, “I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.” ¹⁶ Then Samuel said: “So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? ¹⁷ And the LORD has done for Himself^{bl} as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. ¹⁸ Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. ¹⁹ Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.”

²⁰ Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, and was dreadfully afraid because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day or all night. ²¹ And the woman came to Saul and saw that he was severely troubled, and said to him, “Look, your maidservant has obeyed your voice, and I have put my life in my hands

and heeded the words which you spoke to me. ²² Now therefore, please, heed also the voice of your maidservant, and let me set a piece of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.” ²³ But he refused and said, “I will not eat.” So his servants, together with the woman, urged him; and he heeded their voice. Then he arose from the ground and sat on the bed. ²⁴ Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she hastened to kill it. And she took flour and kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread from it. ²⁵ So she brought it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

Background Notes

1 Samuel 27 records one of the low points in David's walk with the Lord. Instead of trusting the Lord for his security, David went down to the land of the Philistines and joined the pagan king, Achish. This was not a step of faith in David's life. David didn't consult the Lord about this move, and the Lord certainly didn't direct David to turn to a pagan king for security.

Hebrews 11:32 says, “*And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets...*” What acts of faith would be listed here for David? Well, think of his acts of righteousness (v33) in twice sparing the life of King Saul. Think of how he was mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight: “*quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to fight the armies of the aliens*” (v34). But notice that there is nothing in Hebrews 11 about walking by faith in the land of the Philistines, or by faith submitting to the pagan king, Achish!

1 Samuel 28 records one of the results of David's lack of faith: David was expected to go with Achish into battle against Israel, David's own people. What could David do, but agree to go with the king whom he had chosen to join? What a mess David had gotten himself into. And Achish decided to keep his eye right on David by making him his personal bodyguard! David was facing a dilemma of his own making.

Meanwhile, King Saul was shaking in his boots because of the Philistine threat, and the Lord would not answer Saul's request for direction (v6). Remember, the Urim and Thumin were two precious stones that the high priests used in some way to determine “yes and no” answers to certain questions. Saul had turned away from the Lord, and the Lord had turned from him - so Saul turned to the world of the occult to get some kind of answer.

Doctrinal Points

1. Spirit mediums cannot contact departed spirits.

Occult practice was banned under the Law (Leviticus 19; Deuteronomy 18). One of the good things that King Saul had done was to cleanse the land of mediums and spiritists (v9). But now Saul himself wanted to consult a spirit medium because the Lord would not answer him by dreams, by Urim, or by the prophets (v6). But Saul had turned away from the

Lord, so it's no wonder the Lord wouldn't answer him. We can't expect the Lord to give us answers if we're unwilling to obey Him – then or today.

Now comes the big question: when Samuel appeared, was it really Samuel or was it a spirit that took on the appearance of Samuel? In this case, we believe that it was really Samuel. But this case was unique, and that is why the witch of Endor was very surprised. Normally mediums contacted what the Bible calls “familiar spirits” - that is, demonic spirits that are familiar with the departed person. These familiar spirits can even mimic the voice and the appearance of the dead person. It can be very deceptive – then and today - because these familiar spirits know a lot about the life and habits of the departed person. That's why they are called “familiar spirits.” The familiar spirits can communicate that information through the medium, so they can be very deceiving. Even the mediums themselves are deceived. The point is that spirit mediums don't contact the actual spirit of the dead person, but a familiar spirit.

However, this case was different. God allowed Samuel to actually come back from the dead to pronounce Saul's judgment and death. But this case was unique. Normally the evil occult practice of “contacting the dead” or “calling up the dead” involves contacting spirits that are not the spirits of the dead persons at all, but the familiar spirits that are part of the evil, demonic spirit world. The fact that these spirits communicate nice thoughts about the hereafter is all part of Satan's master plan to make sure that people don't learn about Hell and judgment after death. The Bible says in Hebrews 9:27 *“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment...”* Spirit mediums cannot contact departed spirits.

2. Spirit mediums are under God's sovereign control.

In this unique event, God allowed the actual deceased prophet, Samuel, to communicate with King Saul. 1 Chronicles 10:13 says, *“So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the LORD, because he did not keep the word of the LORD, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance.”* So, one of the reasons for Saul's death was this very act of consulting a medium. It's very clear that God considers involvement in the world of the occult is not a minor matter.

Notice that God was ultimately in control in all aspects of this event. The spirit medium thought that she was in control, but in actuality God controlled her and the familiar spirits. Her usual powers of contacting and consulting with familiar spirits didn't work that day. God controlled exactly what the results would be. Spirit mediums today think that they have certain powers, and can pronounce curses on people, or foretell the future, but it is only as God allows. There are many cases in foreign mission situations, as well as in this country, where the power of prayer of believers overcomes the powers of spirit mediums.

Some years ago, I was involved personally in a situation with a group of Christian teenagers who were confronted with a high school teacher who claimed to be a witch or a spirit medium. She was getting a number of unsuspecting kids involved in séances and witchcraft. To make a long story short, the Christian kids prayed her out of the high school! Spirit mediums are under God's sovereign control.

Practical Application

Don't turn to the occult when God doesn't answer!

Have you ever felt that God was not listening to you and that He didn't care, because it seemed like He wasn't answering your prayers? Listen - there are many good reasons why God is silent at times, but it is not because God doesn't care! It may be that we, like King Saul, are disobedient and unwilling to repent.

Whatever the case, don't turn to the occult when God doesn't answer. Even believers are vulnerable when they think that God doesn't care, and some have even turned to the occult for answers, just as King Saul did. Don't! Stay away from witchcraft, astrology, fortune telling, and hypnotism. Don't let your kids even play around with "games" like Ouija boards or tarot cards. These things are open doorways into the occult world of the enemy. Don't turn to the occult when God doesn't answer.