

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 28

Saul and the Medium of En-dor

In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, "Understand that you and your men are to go out with me in the army." 2 David said to Achish, "Very well, you shall know what your servant can do." And Achish said to David, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life." 3 Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land. 4 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, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. 7 Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek out 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 medium at En-dor." 8 So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you." 9 The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" 10 But Saul swore to her by the LORD, "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?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." 12 When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul." 13 The king said to her, "Do not be afraid. What do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see a god coming up out of the earth." 14 He said to her, "What is his appearance?" And she said, "An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe." And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage. 15 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do." 16 And Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? 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. 18 Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. 19 Moreover, the LORD will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The LORD will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines." 20 Then Saul fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night. 21 And the woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, "Behold, your servant has obeyed you. I have taken my life in my hand and have listened to what you have said to me. 22 Now therefore, you also obey your servant. Let me set a morsel of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way." 23 He refused and said, "I will not eat." But his servants, together with the woman, urged him, and he listened to their words. So he arose from the earth and sat on the bed. 24 Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly killed it, and she took flour and kneaded it and baked unleavened bread of it, 25 and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

28:1 *understand that.* In the ancient Near East, to accept sanctuary in a country involved obligations of military service. (CSB)

Achish, certain he could trust David, incorporated David's small force into his own army as he prepared a major assault on Israel. (TLSB)

28:2 *you shall know what your servant can do.* Perhaps an ambiguous answer. (CSB)

David's words are deliberately ambiguous. Achish was willing to take the words as a promise of accomplishments on behalf of the Philistines, but the statement could just as well have predicted defection and turning against them. *your servant*. Indication of respect for a superior, though Achish put much more significance into these words (27:12). (TLSB)

I will make you my bodyguard. Very likely this was conditional on David's proof of his loyalty and effectiveness in the projected campaign. (CSB)

Lit, "the keeper of my head." Achish entrusts his personal safety to David. (TLSB)

28:3 *Now Samuel had died.* See 25:1. Saul could not turn to him, even in desperation. (CSB)

Loss of Samuel's leadership may have emboldened the Philistines for an all-out attack on Israel. (TLSB)

put out ... out of the land. Possibly a euphemism for "put to death," in agreement with Pentateuchal law (see vv. 9, 21). (CSB)

Action against religious malpractice recalls the time of Saul's faithful adherence to Yahweh (11:13). Now the king was desperate for any kind of guidance. Mediums consulted the spirits of the dead, and necromancers spoke with the deceased familiar to them, thereby supposedly discovering the secrets of the future. (TLSB)

28:4 *Shunem.* The Philistines assembled their forces far to the north, along the plain of Jezreel in the territory of Issachar (see Jos 19:18). (CSB)

Northern city near Megiddo, indicating definite incursion of the Philistines onto Israelite land, thereby forcing Saul to meet their challenge away from the concentration of his power and more favorable conditions in Judah. (TLSB)

Gilboa. A range of mountains east of the plain of Jezreel. (CSB)

String of hills provided a vantage point from which to observe the enemy's advance. Between Shunem and Gilboa was the Jezreel Valley, a level arena for battle that would favor the Philistines' chariots. (TLSB)

28:5 *was afraid...heart trembled greatly.* Because he is estranged from the Lord and is not performing his role as the true theocratic king. (CSB)

Size of Philistine armies was frightening, and they had chosen favorable ground for this fight. But Saul could not ignore their invasion, which threatened to cut Israel in half. (TLSB)

28:6 *He inquired of the LORD.* Presumably through the agency of a priest. Saul seems to sense disaster in the approaching battle and seeks divine revelation concerning its outcome. (CSB)

dreams. Direct personal revelation . (CSB)

Urim. Revelation through the priest (see note on 2:28). Since the authentic ephod and its Urim were with Abiathar, who was aligned with David (see 23:2, 6, 9), either Saul had fabricated another ephod for his use or the author used a conventional statement including the three visual forms of revelation to underscore his point. (CSB)

prophets. David had a prophet (Gad, 22:5), but after Samuel's alienation from Saul (15:35) no prophet served Saul. (CSB)

God's will was regularly conveyed in OT times through dreams and their interpretation; the Urim and Thummim were attached to the breastpiece that was part of the ephod worn by priests; prophets were seers or visionaries (TLSB)

28:7 *seek out for me woman who is a medium.* In his desperation Saul turns to a pagan practice that he himself had previously outlawed (v. 3) in accordance with the Mosaic law (see Lev 19:26). (CSB)

Lit, "a possessor of a pit"; apparently a pit was used in the ritual, for making offerings to those dead and buried. Despite the ban on consulting such people, with little apparent difficulty Saul's servants got information about such services. (TLSB)

Endor. Located about six miles northwest of Shunem (see v. 4; Jos 17:11). (CSB)

C 10 mi N of Saul's camp, requiring a perilous night journey, a measure of Saul's desperation. He longed for the Word of the Lord, as he once received it through the prophet Samuel. (TLSB)

28:8 *disguised himself.* Served double purpose of escaping detection by the Philistines and concealing his identity from the medium. (TLSB)

bring up. Claiming to communicate to and for the dead, mediums would enter a trance and speak with a demon, which would impersonate the dead person and speak through the medium. (TLSB)

28:9 *Why then are you laying a trap for my life . . . ?* The woman is very cautious about practicing her trade with strangers lest she be betrayed to Saul. (CSB)

The woman, no stranger to deception, could easily see there was something amiss and feared she was caught in a trap. (TLSB)

28:10 Both ironic and telltale, since consulting the dead was expressly forbidden by God. (TLSB)

As surely as the LORD lives. Oath formula frequently used by Saul. (TLSB)

28:11 *Bring up Samuel.* Another measure of Saul's desperation: no ordinary spirit would do. Saul attempts to force the faithful prophet to do in death what he swore he would no longer do for Saul—bring a message from God. (TLSB)

28:12 *When the woman saw Samuel.* The episode has been understood in many different ways. The two most likely explanations are: 1. God permitted the spirit of Samuel to appear to the woman. 2. The woman had contact with an evil or devilish spirit in the form of Samuel by whom she was deceived and controlled. Whatever the explanation of this mysterious affair, the medium was used by God in some way to convey to Saul that the impending battle would bring death, would dash his hopes for a dynasty and would conclude his reign with a devastating defeat of Israel that would leave the nation at the mercy of

the Philistines, the very people against whom he had struggled all his years as king. And this would come, as Samuel had previously announced (15:26, 28), because of his unfaithfulness to the Lord. (CSB)

Or, “Then.” Perhaps even before the woman could attempt to call up Samuel’s spirit, she saw a vision of the prophet. (TLSB)

why have you deceived? you are Saul! By whatever means, the medium suddenly becomes aware that she is dealing with Saul. (CSB)

The shock of the moment of revelation caused the woman to realize she was involved in something more powerful and threatening than she had supposed. (TLSB)

28:13 *a god.* Spirit’s appearance impressed upon her its authority and dignity. (TLSB)

28:14 *What is his appearance?* Saul could not see what the woman saw and depended on her description. (TLSB)

An old ma...wrapped in a robe. Saul remembers Samuel as customarily dressed in this apparel (see 15:27). (CSB)

Vague description, but more than sufficient for Saul. Mention of the prophetic robe, the tearing of which had become the symbol of Saul’s downfall, was key (15:27). (TLSB)

bowed ... homage. Saul prostrated himself as before the Lord. (TLSB)

28:15–19 The medium apparently fled (cf v 21). The spirit spoke directly to Saul without her, bringing a message that was almost identical to Samuel’s last words to Saul (ch 15). Samuel had given Saul the plain truth. Here the future is also foretold in precise detail, which has led some interpreters to conclude that the spirit was truly Samuel’s spirit (cf Dt 18:22). However, though Satan is the father of lies (Jn 8:44), he and his minions are perfectly capable of speaking the truth (cf Mt 8:29) and can even mouth God’s Word (Mt 4:3–10). Saul’s sins are denounced as the reason for God’s anger and rejection. Missing is the prophet’s usual appeal for change of attitude, perhaps because it was too late (cf Mk 3:28–30). Nothing would avert Saul’s doom and that of his sons and many of his soldiers. The long-standing issue with this text is whether the spirit was truly Samuel’s spirit or the work of an evil spirit, which the Lord compelled to speak the truth (see note, 1Ki 22:20–22). Hipp: “Saul did not actually see, but only, on being told by the woman that the figure of one of those who ascended was the figure he desired, and taking it to be Samuel, he consulted it as such, and did it obeisance. And it could be no difficult matter for the demon to conjure up the form of Samuel” (*ANF* 5:169). Luth: “We may easily see that the bringing up of Samuel from the dead, I Samuel 28[:12 ff.], was trickery and deceit; the whole event is against this commandment of God. Accordingly we may not assume that the real prophet Samuel was brought from the dead by the medium. But when the Scriptures are silent and do not tell us whether this was the real Samuel or not, it demands from all of us that we should well know that through Moses God has forbidden necromancy. And he never recants what he has said, as Job says, and Balaam in Numbers 24 [23:19]. How should the sorcerers have power over the saints who rest securely in the hands of God?” “Evil spirits have produced many wicked tricks by appearing as the souls of the departed [1 Samuel 28], and with unspeakable lies and tricks demanded Masses, vigils, pilgrimages, and other alms” (SA II II 16). (TLSB)

28:16 Saul looks for a word of assurance that everything is going to be all right, but the earlier words of Samuel are only reinforced (15:28) and are about to be fulfilled. “Whenever the Law alone exercises its

office, without the Gospel being added, there is nothing but death and hell, and one must despair, as Saul and Judas did [1Samuel 31; Matthew 27:5]" (SA III III 7). (TLSB)

28:18 *His fierce wrath.* Saul had failed to carry out God's specific command to destroy the Amalekites and all their property (15:3). (TLSB)

28:19 *Israel also.* If a king leads badly, the people suffer. Saul's sin would bring judgment not only upon himself but also upon the nation. (TLSB)

be with me. On the next day, all of them would be dead. (TLSB)

28:20 *filled with fear.* Saul falls into still deeper fear. "The contrition of David or Peter [2 Samuel 12:13; Matthew 26:75] helps because faith, which takes hold of the forgiveness of sins granted for Christ's sake, is added to it" (Ap XIIA 36). (TLSB)

eaten nothing. Ironic. Cf 14:24. (TLSB)

28:21–22 Knowing that Saul could not otherwise be encouraged to eat, the medium offers an argument, that he owed her for her risking her life (cf v 3). (TLSB)

28:21 *When the woman came to Saul.* This statement suggests that the woman removed herself from the direct view of Saul while she gave her oracles. (CSB)

The medium had apparently fled in fear (v 12). (TLSB)

a morsel of bread. As if assuring that it will be no trouble, the woman minimizes what she will offer. The morsel of bread becomes a fattened calf (v 24). (TLSB)

28:23–24 *He refused.* Only when two of his companions also urge him does Saul agree to eat. (TLSB)

fattened calf. Veal calf, held in a stall. The woman prepares a special meal for him who will be king for yet a few more hours. (TLSB)

in the house. Ground floor typically held animals. (TLSB)

28:25 *that night.* Events apparently went on all through the night. Both literal and spiritual darkness enveloped Saul and his servants as they made their way back to the Israelite camp. (TLSB)

Ch 28 Despairing from fear and desperate for reassurance, Saul turns to the occult for relief, having forsaken his relationship with God. When a spiritual vacuum exists, lost souls are drawn to the occult, despite warnings. Yet no genuine assurance will be found there. Do not use this tragic episode as a justification or validation of wicked spiritual practices. Instead, acknowledge and rejoice that God's grace and promise are as close at hand as His Word, which will guide you in the paths of life. • Lord, keep us close through Your means of grace, by which we are spared the desperation and darkness so tragically evident in Saul's life. When we are uncertain, grant us patience and comfort through Your Holy Word and the consolation of true brothers and sisters in the faith. Amen. (TLSB)