

David's Rise, Saul's Demise, II

We are doing a thematic survey in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. We spent a bit of time dealing with King Saul, so we are moving much more quickly now over some of the remaining material. When we stopped last time, we had just been talking about 1 Samuel chapters 24, 25, and 26. The procedure that we are following is looking for the themes that emerged from these chapters as we read through them. There are so many points of the tale that would be fun to mention, but I will only mention a few that I think are interesting and fun.

In chapters 24, 25, and 26 of 1 Samuel, the title I gave was simply, "Adversity, Leave it in God's Hands." You may want to have your Bible open as we work through here because I will point to various things as we move through.

In 1 Samuel 25:1 we read that Samuel has died. It begins very simply, "Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah." We will later read in 1 Samuel 28:3 another reference to the death of Samuel, "Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ramah." When we have repetition like that in biblical narrative, often we are to ask, what is the significance of that? Why is that repeated in those two locations? Does the narrator assume that we have forgotten that Samuel is dead or is there some far greater significance to it than that?

Let us talk about why the death of Samuel might be mentioned in these two places, at the start of 1 Samuel 25 and at the start of 1 Samuel 28. Perhaps in chapter 28 the death of Samuel is mentioned because that is the chapter that recounts Saul going to consult a witch or a medium. Perhaps this is to alert us to the fact that Samuel is no longer an option, although strange things happen in chapter 28, as we will see in a minute. Maybe it was appropriate at that point to mention the death of Samuel because the spokesman of God was no longer living and available to Saul.

It is possible that Samuel's death is mentioned in 1 Samuel 25 because that is when it happened. I think this would be the appropriate juncture to mention it. Maybe it was about this time that it happened, but, again, it is mentioned twice. The fact that it is mentioned twice makes us think maybe there is a little bit more to it than that.

Another possibility for the repetition of Samuel's death is that it is a trigger to make us think of the decline in the moral state of that particular time. In chapter 25 we read about David's attempt to take revenge on Nabal. He set out to do that. In chapter 28 we have Saul going off to consult a medium. I think we are probably moving in the right direction now. I do not know for sure. The text does not tell us for sure why it is mentioned twice here. I think it may be mentioned in these two instances to cause us to ask the question in chapter 25 of how David will get along now that Samuel is gone. What will he do? People often change when they are out from under the oversight of their mentor, parent, close friend, or whoever it may be that is overseeing them. Sometimes when someone very significant in your life is no longer there, your behavior changes, either out of fear or out of a sense of freedom. It may be that in chapter 25 we are meant to wonder how David is going to respond to the death of Samuel. Samuel has been the man to whom he sometimes runs to take refuge. Samuel was undoubtedly the man from whom David would occasionally receive counsel. How is David going to respond? David responds in chapter 25 by setting out to take revenge, as was pointed out. But that is not what ultimately transpires. Abigail, that wise woman, comes out and stops him, and David praises God that He has sent Abigail to prevent him from bloodying his hands and from sinning in this way. David realized that this was a personal

offense that he had suffered, and to exact a personal revenge would have been the wrong thing to do. So David, ever ready as the sinner, as indeed all human beings are, upon the death of Samuel was on the brink of doing something that he would later have regretted and that would have been wrong. God, through Abigail, prevented him.

Maybe the same kind of dynamic is involved in 1 Samuel 28 in which Saul is now without Samuel, and Saul sets out to find a witch. We will talk more about that later when we come to chapter 28. I think that might be the reason that the death of Samuel is mentioned two times. It makes us think about how David will respond and how God intervenes. We also think about how Saul responds, a man without God. I have stressed before that I do not think there is any indication in the books of Samuel that Saul was what we would call a believer. I think he was someone who knew a lot of the right answers, but had no real vital relationship with God. Thus, he is a man without God and responds differently to the death of Samuel.

In 1 Samuel 24, 25, and 26 we have the two instances of David sparing Saul's life. In Chapter 25, appropriately, we have an instance where David was setting out to take the life of someone who was not the Lord's anointed. There was nothing protecting Nabal, the fool, and David set out to take his life. Yet God prevented him through the agency of Abigail. David learned a lesson in adversity that he should leave it in God's hands. God eventually took care of the problem; He took care of Nabal.

Moving on to the next section, I have entitled this section simply, "David Takes up with the Philistines and Saul Eventually Takes His Own Life." That is a vain effort to try to capture some of the contents of all of chapters 27-31 together.

In 1 Samuel 27:1 we read something that I think is quite ominous. It says, "But David thought to himself, 'One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand.'" I think that verse is ominous because it does not express itself in a way that would suggest David is trusting the Lord. It says, "He thought to himself." The Hebrew says, "He said in his heart," which is a way of thinking to oneself. He said in his mind, he said in heart, he thought to himself, "One of these days, I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul." Why would he think that? He had been protected by the Lord. He had seen the Lord take care of his enemy, Nabal. David twice had opportunities to kill Saul and had refrained. Maybe he was thinking to himself, "Did I blow it? I had two golden opportunities. Maybe I should have taken them." At any rate, this is atypical for David. Normally as we read about David making decisions about whether or not to go up against the Philistines, protect the city of Keilah, or stay in the city of Keilah, we hear him inquiring of the Lord. But here David thought to himself, and thus he fled to take up a place with the Philistines. This, we will see, gets David in trouble. I think it is important to constantly remind ourselves that David was a human being with feet of clay. We should expect that sometimes even David's faith falters. If I were to entitle these several episodes relating to David, beginning in chapter 27, it might be "When Faith Falters," or "When the Faithful are Faithless." We see that David gets himself in some considerable trouble as he flees and takes up with Achish, who was the King of Gath.

In 1 Samuel 28 it is David and Achish who are center stage at first before we get to Saul. Look at verses 1 and 2. "In those days the Philistines gathered their forces to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, 'You must understand that you and your men will accompany me in the army.' David said, 'Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do.' Achish replied, 'Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life.'" There is a lot of irony in these couple of verses. There is irony in the sense that David makes this comment, "Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do." Of course,

David is an Israelite and Achish is a Philistine. The question is whether David will ultimately, if he goes into battle with the Philistines, turn on his Philistine benefactor, Achish. Will David begin fighting for Saul, or is he meaning that he will fight for Achish? That point is undecided. It seems to pass Achish by, and he says in the next verse, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life." I mentioned earlier that the word for bodyguard is a rather curious one. It is not the standard word for bodyguard or armor bearer; it means literally "keeper of my head." That would have brought a chuckle, I think, from an Israelite audience. Goliath was also from Gath, so David was already in possession of one giant Gathite head. For the king of Gath to say, "You shall be keeper of my head," would suggest a matched pair. I think the original audience would have heard that phrase and chuckled slightly at the way in which Achish was willing to play right into David's hands.

Chapter 28 stops there dealing with Achish and David and moves on to the mention of Samuel's death. Then it moves right into a focus again on Saul. We read in 1 Samuel 28:4 that "the Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. Saul then said to his attendants, 'Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her.'" It is interesting that the Lord did not answer Saul. It says he inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer Saul. Is that troubling to you? How do you construe that? Sometimes in human communications when we are at odds with one another, we fall silent and give the other person the silent treatment. Is that what the Lord is doing to Saul here?

The Lord had withdrawn His spirit from Saul. Saul was rejected. Again, I would stress that I do not think Saul really ever had a relationship with God. For us to expect that God will hear us we need to come to Him in repentance first. I think we can assume that Saul is simply after information. He is desperate. He is really trying to solve his problem. It is not an issue of God being unwilling to receive a repentant sinner. You do not get the impression that that is the way Saul approached it. He just needed information. He needed to get it however he could get it. Samuel warned the people earlier in 1 Samuel 8 when the elders had demanded a king. They requested a king from Samuel and the Lord said, "Concede to that request, go ahead and do what they ask, but warn them that they will not be pleased with what they have. When they cry out to me, I will not answer them." In the midst of continuing sin, we do not expect that our prayers will be heard and answered by the Lord unless they are prayers of repentance.

The point has been made that there are no atheists in foxholes. This would be an example from the life of Saul. He is in a desperate plight; his life is at stake, so he cries out to anyone who will hear him, to anyone from whom he can get information.

It is ironic that we read in 1 Samuel 28:7 that Saul said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." It is ironic because he is willing to replace the Lord, God Almighty, rather than continuing to pray to the Lord. He does not ask, "What is wrong, why do You not hear my prayer?" He is willing to turn to plan B, thinking it sounds just about as good. He will consult a medium. It is also ironic that he expects his servants to be able to turn up a medium fairly easily, and indeed they are able. It says earlier in verse 3 that Samuel is dead and all of Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his hometown in Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land. The fact that Saul then turns and asks to find a medium suggests that perhaps that had not been done very thoroughly or consistently. There was at least a compromise of whatever conviction it was that led Saul to expel the mediums in the first place.

It is not recorded that Saul had consulted a medium before, but certainly this is the extremity to which someone without God is driven. This may be spiritualizing the text a little too much, but look at our society today. In some quarters, and in large measure, our society has turned its back on God, the Word of God, and hearing what God has to say. Yet the human soul cannot exist without something that is greater than itself, something that is wiser than itself. We now have the psychic hotline and all kinds of other new-age manifestations by which people hope to gain some knowledge about their future or even about their present. It is not that vastly different from consulting a medium, and in many cases it is very much the same. It is the same kind of thing. Saul is a man without God and he is driven to this extremity of consulting a medium. She is a medium whom he should have, and apparently had, expelled from the land. The fact that he expelled the medium should not be interpreted as a piece of evidence that Saul was, in fact, a godly or pious individual. It is known from the ancient Near East that other kings who had no knowledge of Yahweh often expelled mediums and spiritists from the land. Gudea, for instance, is one of those kings who is on record as having done this. A king might want to do that for pragmatic reasons: the king is the boss and his word goes unless there is a higher authority who is somehow being channeled into the popular consciousness. If you have mediums who say they speak the words of the gods, who cares what the king says. That is competition. Saul's expulsion could be something as sinister as that; he did not like the competition.

Saul seems to be moving in the certainty that he will get an answer somehow. I do not know; it is hard to get inside his head and know just what he was feeling. It may simply have been one last desperate attempt to find out what to do in this extremity. Let us look at what happens here. In 1 Samuel 28:8, Saul goes to this medium and disguises himself. He puts on clothes and he and two men go to the woman at night. "'Consult a spirit for me,' [Saul] said, 'and bring up for me the one I name.' But the woman said to him, 'Surely you know what Saul has done.'" There is a little irony there. Saul is speaking to her, and she says, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" She as much admits that she is a medium, but she is kind of hedging her bets. She is saying she would not do that because Saul has expelled the mediums. She let her credentials lapse because she is not supposed to continue practicing as a medium. Why do you set this trap for me? Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this." Again, a very strange oath to take since it was something that the Lord had expressly forbidden. Look back at Deuteronomy 18 and you will see that spiritists and mediums were to be expelled from the land; they were not to be consulted. To swear by the Lord that nothing is going to happen is a bit out of place. "Then the woman asked, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' 'Bring up Samuel,' he said. 'When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!'" Why would she cry out at the top of her voice, and why would she suddenly recognize that this is Saul?

Maybe she was crying out at the mere fact that he really appeared, that Samuel really appeared. Some may say this was the real Samuel, but others think this was an apparition. They think it was an impostor, a spiritual impostor of the real Samuel. Let us see if there is textural evidence that could tip us one way or the other.

Notice in 1 Samuel 28:15 that the inspired historian, as he is rightly called, or the omniscient narrator by virtue of his inspiration, says very simply, "Samuel said to Saul." He does not say, "The spirit that looked like Samuel," or "The spirit appearing as Samuel said to Saul," but simply "Samuel said to Saul." Likewise, you could find other evidence like that. In verse 14 Saul asked the woman, "'What does he look like?' 'An old man wearing a robe is coming up,' she said." Remember how significant robes are in the life of Samuel? His mother made him little robes when he was in the house of Eli. Later he was known for wearing a robe when he rejected Saul in chapter 15 and turned to go. Saul apparently

grasped his robe and tore it, and Samuel used that robe as a symbol of the tearing of the kingdom from Saul. Samuel, apparently as a prophet, was associated with a robe. Even that simple mention of a man wearing a robe was enough for Saul to recognize that it was Samuel. The narrator says, "Then Saul knew it was Samuel." Not "Saul thought it was Samuel," or "Then Saul mistakenly believed it was Samuel," but "Then Saul knew it was Samuel." I want to argue that what we have here is a reappearance of the real Samuel, who had departed. There is another piece of evidence related to what Samuel says. What he has to say to Saul on this occasion is completely in keeping with what he had said to Saul while still alive. Usually when you get a spiritual counterfeit there is some kind of twisting of the truth. You may pick up on things that sound like that individual or some of what that individual had said, but there is almost always some kind of Satanic twisting that goes on. Here, Samuel's words are all on target, completely in keeping with what he said before.

What does this teach us about necromancy, about the raising of the dead? What do we learn from this encounter about going to a medium in order to consult the dead? It must have been possible. There is evidence for the supernatural. What do we learn about magical arts? Perhaps the Lord's hand is in this. Perhaps if the Lord chooses to allow this to happen, then someone can be raised up from the dead. I would argue that this tells us nothing in answer to the question about what this teaches us about necromancy. I do not think it necessarily has anything to do with necromancy in that the woman seems surprised at what she encounters. As soon as she sees Samuel you do not hear that the hocus-pocus had really even begun. She had just received the request, to bring up Samuel, and as soon as she sees Samuel, she cries out in a loud voice. That may have been part of her performance, but it seems like she was encountering an unfamiliar spirit. Necromancers deal with what are sometimes called familiar spirits; I think these are demonic spirits with which they are familiar and that are able to impersonate the departed. I do not want to get into too much of that because I do not know a great deal about it. One has heard stories and anecdotes. I think that kind of thing probably happens as far as demonic impersonation, but that does not seem to be what happened here. I think what we learned from this story is that God is sovereign, and God can choose whatever time and whatever place He wishes to send back one of the departed saints. On the Mount of Transfiguration you have the return of Moses and Elijah. That was not through the magical arts of any necromancer. That was simply by the authority of God and under His sovereignty. I would say this is probably what we are dealing with right here. We really should not credit necromancy with anything, nor should we have any hope of ever making use of a necromancer to make contact with the dead. That is just not the way I think things work, and I do not think we would want to use this story to prove that it would.

The argument has been made that for God to be involved in any way in this particular episode would seem to mean that He is participating in what He has expressly forbidden elsewhere in the Bible. Therefore we would deduce that this is not the true Samuel, not the real Samuel. That is an argument that is often made, and it is an argument that has some considerable force. I still would tip the balance the other way and say that God is not really working through the necromancer. He chooses this point in time, perhaps not to only teach Saul a lesson, but maybe to teach the necromancer a lesson. We do not know how she ultimately responded to this experience, but it may have awakened in her a knowledge that there are powers with which she is not dealing. She had nothing to do with what happened there. It is curious timing, but the points were made earlier about the narrator saying, "Samuel said to Saul," and then "Saul recognized that it was Samuel," and the fact that Samuel's words were in keeping with what he had earlier said. These seem to suggest that the real Samuel appeared but not through the power of the necromancer. It just happened to be at that point in time. I do not think we can ultimately decide that. It is the kind of thing that we could debate and write a nice paper about.

It is interesting that we have a prediction about the future that does, in fact, take place. First Samuel 28:19 says, "Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me," that is, in the grave, and that is indeed what happened. Do demonic powers have the ability to predict the future in that way? I think they can guess. I think they can make some astute predictions, but not predictions that are certain to come about. That may be an additional argument on the side that this is the real Samuel. God did send him back. God did impart a message through him, a message that was true and fulfilled.

I suggested earlier that the woman was surprised when she recognized Saul. Why did she suddenly recognize that Saul had deceived her? It may be that rather than dealing with her familiar spirits, those with whom she was normally in cahoots in her magical arts, something out of the ordinary happens. The real Samuel begins to appear, and she realizes that only Saul could precipitate that. Saul is one for whom the Lord might return the real Samuel. That is the best I can do in terms of her suddenly figuring out when she saw Samuel that this must be Saul. She knows of the breach between Samuel and Saul, and Saul is an individual of significance such that God might send Samuel back for such a confrontation as they had in life. I do not know. The text is very oblique at that point and does not explain it to us very much.

Samuel is not saying that Saul, by virtue of his power, brought Samuel back from the dead. In 1 Samuel 28:15, Samuel says, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul is the one who precipitated this event. Samuel, not the witch, is speaking to Saul here. He is probably saying, "Why have you precipitated this whole situation?" He is not at all making a comment about on whose power he was actually returned.

The question is asked, how could Samuel be in the grave when Samuel should be with the Lord? We need to be very careful in the Old Testament when comments like this are made: "Tomorrow you shall be with me." A similar thing is quoted from the life of David after his sin with Bathsheba, and the Lord pronounced that the child that had been conceived through that adulterous relationship would die. David's servants are distressed by his behavior. Once the child died David said, "He will not come to me, but I will go to him." I have heard preachers that I highly respect use that to argue that young children who die in infancy before the age of discretion automatically go to heaven. They say this because we know David was going to heaven, and David said he would go to join the child. We need to be very careful because what they are talking about is the divide between life and death, between walking this earth and being in the grave unspecified. David is really saying, "He is not coming back to life to be with me. He is dead. He is not going to come to me. I will go to him. I will join him in the grave, in death." There is no proof that that child is necessarily in heaven. We can get into my opinions and your opinions about what happens to children who die in infancy. I am firmly convinced that some of those are with the Lord. I am not firmly convinced that all of them are with the Lord. The mystery of election, God's sovereignty, and His right of ownership come into play. This would get us into a very difficult discussion that really belongs in a different class. But I would say in this instance Samuel's point to Saul is simply that he is in the grave, and Saul will join him there. Samuel is not really talking about his particular estate in the grave. The Old Testament is rather mysterious about that anyway. When it talks about the grave, about Sheol, it seems to be a shadowy existence, kind of a shadowy half existence. It is not fully articulated for us in the Old Testament, though there is a hope that the estate of the righteous will far exceed the estate of the wicked. Something greater and better is anticipated for those who die in God. They "anticipate joy in His presence forever," as Psalm 16 says. There is an anticipation of something good, but it is not as fully formulated as in the New Testament where we read more about heaven and hell. Even still, we wish we could know a whole lot more about heaven and maybe a little less about hell.

I did not mean to get too distracted into the topic of mediums in 1 Samuel 28, but it is an interesting question. It is one that sometimes comes up when people look around them and see necromancers at work. The bottom line is that necromancers are not used by the Lord. I think that point is very well taken. We should not expect that God will work through a necromancer. In this case, I think He happened to work at a moment when Saul had gone to see a necromancer in such a way as to surprise her. But we would never dream of going to a necromancer with any hope of communicating with a departed individual or that God would condone it. God is bound by His character, and His laws are an expression of His character. God would be bound by laws of justice, righteousness, and holiness, as we are. I guess the point is that God does not need a medium or a witch. There would be no point in His consulting one, and I do not think He would ever actively work through the agency of a medium to accomplish His will. In 1 Kings 22:23, He does send “a lying spirit into the mouths of the false prophets.” That may be as close as we could come to God using what we would regard as a negative spirit in the mouths of the false prophets. That is simply an expression of God’s sovereignty in control over what happens.

Curiously, one other motif that recurs in 1 Samuel is the issue of eating. Throughout 1 and 2 Samuel, eating seems to have more significance than just the consumption of food. In the case of Hannah, when she was very distraught and had a problem, she wanted to do serious business with God. She could not eat; she refused to eat. Later, in this instance that I just mentioned of David’s sin with Bathsheba, the child was ill and was going to die, and David refused to eat. He refused to eat and bathe when the child was still living, so his servants were concerned about what David would do once the child was dead. But David did not eat because he was intensely praying that God might spare the child. Once it was clear that the child’s life had been taken, David got up and washed himself and ate. Eating seems to carry some significance in Samuel. In 1 Samuel 28:20, I think it is not without significance that once Saul hears the pronouncement that he and his household will die, he “fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel’s words. His strength was gone for he had eaten nothing all that day and night.” There is almost a sign of hope here. Maybe this means that finally Saul is going to do serious business with God. Maybe finally this will bring him to a point of real repentance. In verse 21, the woman came to Saul and saw that he was greatly shaken. She said, “‘Look, your maidservant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so that you may eat and have the strength to go on your way.’ He refused and said, ‘I will not eat.’ [He still hopes] But his men joined the woman in urging him, and he listened to them.” Or in the Hebrew it could be translated, “and he obeyed them.” Same old Saul, same old problem. Remember, he had listened to the voice of the people in chapter 15. He was constantly listening to the voices around him other than the voice of God. So he got up from the ground and sat on the couch, and the woman prepared the food in his sight and he consumed it. Thus, Saul’s final meal is sort of a festal meal, which is very curious and is to be contrasted with that meal he had taken with Samuel himself in 1 Samuel 9. Samuel had prepared and set aside a special portion for Saul. This is a marker of how far Saul has come downhill. This is the experience of a man without God. It should not surprise us, though the decline may at times be sudden or gradual; this is where life without God does eventually lead.

We have come to 1 Samuel 29. We learned in chapter 27 that David’s faith faltered. It began to get him into trouble. We had this brief interlude, which shows us where Saul is now that Samuel is dead, and Saul is at wit’s end. In chapter 29 David gets himself in a tight spot. He is going to be asked to go and fight against Saul. This is, of course, very, very awkward for David because he is going to have to turn on somebody. Yet he is delivered from this because the rest of the Philistine lords are perhaps not as gullible as Achish. So they say, is not this the king of Israel? In other words, they seem to know something about David’s future, so they have him returned to the land of the Philistines. In 1 Samuel 30

we discover that upon his return David finds out that Ziklag, his city that Achish had given him, has been destroyed. David is greatly distressed and with good reason. In 1 Samuel 30:6 it says, "David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters." I would link this back with chapter 27 when David said in his heart, "One of these days Saul is going to get me." His faith faltered and he began to make his own plans, go his own way, try to secure his own existence, and make himself safe. Not only was Saul a problem, but his own men now wanted to kill him. He was in a very, very difficult position, but at the end of verse 6 we read, "But David found strength in the LORD his God."

We have heard that phrase before when David had met with Jonathan. First Samuel 23:16 says, "And Saul's son Jonathan went to David in Horesh and helped him find strength in God." We talked then about the importance of true friendship. Friendship does not minimize the difficulties in a person's life, but points them to the answer, points them to the source of strength. Here we see that coming to fruition in the life of David. He is without Jonathan right now. Jonathan is not around, but he has been encouraged, he has had that experience before of finding strength in God. Here, when he needs it, when his own men want to kill him, he is able to do that. We do not know exactly what form that takes, but surely it would take the form of prayer and casting himself upon the Lord and saying, "Lord help me. I am in big trouble now." God intervenes and, as you see, they are miraculously able to rescue their families and their property. No one has been harmed. No one has been killed. This is atypical for ancient Near Eastern warfare. So you see the providential hand of God even in that preservation.