

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

1 Samuel 23:3-25

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, April 11, 2010

Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? 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" (1 Sam. 28:16-17).

In mystical strands of Christianity there is a phenomenon known as "the dark night of the soul." This term was coined by the 16th century Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross, who wrote a famous poem and treatise on this theme. The "dark night of the soul" describes a person who endures a night or longer period of spiritual torment which is usually followed by an experience of God's blessing and peace. Shortly after the death of Mother Teresa, famous for her decades of service to the orphans of Calcutta, her memoirs revealed a dark night of spiritual struggle that lasted from 1950 until her death in 1997. "The silence and the emptiness is so great," she stated, "that I look and do not see, – Listen and do not hear."¹ Mother Teresa records how her unrelieved spiritual struggles fueled her drive for achievement and good works.

1 Samuel 28 discloses Israel's king Saul in a briefer but more deadly night of darkness, one in which he found no redemption and from which his hardened soul produced no good deeds. Saul's dark night was a prelude to the longer, endless darkness that would come to him in death because of his hardened unbelief and unforgiven sin.

¹ Cited by David van Biema, *TIME*, Aug. 23, 2007, accessed on-line at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html>.

WITHOUT A WORD

In preparing to tell us about Saul's night of darkness, chapter 28 first reminds us of the prophet Samuel's death: "Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city" (v. 3). It had been Samuel who anointed Saul as Israel's king and brought him messages from the Lord. These messages had ceased prior to Samuel's death, yet the great judge and prophet's death gave a sense of finality to Saul's alienation from God. Secondly, we are told that Saul had previously removed "the mediums and necromancers out of the land" (1 Sam. 28:4). This was in accordance with God's Word, which declared, "There shall not be found among you anyone who... practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead" (Dt. 18:10). It was for these occult "abominations" that God was judging the Canaanites (Dt. 18:12).

The significance of these two facts is found in Saul's suddenly pressing need for divine help, as the Philistines assembled to launch a massive invasion of Israel. Mobilizing his forces at Gilboa to meet the threat, Saul "was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly" (1 Sam. 28:5). This statement is a commentary on the general state of Saul's soul. There is little doubt that he was faced with an overwhelming Philistine host. Yet Saul possessed no faith with which to take courage. The Philistines had approached Saul in a region where some of Israel's greatest victories had taken place by God's intervening power. Nearby, Barak and his hastily gathered militia had overthrown the host of the Canaanites (Judg. 4) and Gideon's tiny band had years before overthrown the Midianite host (Judg. 7). Nonetheless, Saul was gripped by the unbelief of his spiritual and moral darkness. Suddenly, he became aware, as seems not to have happened in years, of his need for a word of hope from the Lord.

If Saul's first problem was the Philistine invasion, his second problem was that God refused to answer Saul when he called. "When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets" (1 Sam. 28:6). These were the three means by which God typically communicated with his servants in those days, and none were available to Saul. Most noteworthy is the

reference to the Urim, the lot held within the high priest's ephod by which divination could be received from God. The problem was that Saul had slain all the priests, except Abiathar, who had taken the ephod to David. (David would successfully appeal to God around this same time by means of the Urim, receiving vitally important direction from the Lord, see 1 Samuel 30:7-8.) It seems likely that Saul had appointed his own high priest and had another Urim made, but God refused to honor Saul's self-serving religion. Having earlier been repudiated by Samuel for disobedience, and then having wickedly slain the Lord's holy priests, the silence of God's refusal to speak must have been deafening to Saul's heart.

God's refusal to answer Saul presents an interesting question in light of the Bible's frequent promise that God will answer those who call on his name. Did not the prophet Joel declare, echoed by the apostle Paul, that "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:13)? The evident explanation is that while Saul went through the mechanics of an appeal to the Lord, his heart never opened an inch towards repentance and true faith. In years to come, some of Israel's most wicked kings, Ahab and Manasseh, would find God's mercy through even a small expression of true contrition (1 Ki. 21:29; 2 Chron. 33:12-13). So why not Saul? The answer is given in 1 Chronicles 10:14, which explains that Saul "did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the Lord put him to death." Saul sought comfort but not guidance, and his unyielded heart was met by God's unyielding rejection.

As such, Saul is a dreadful reminder of the reality of apostasy. An apostate is not a true believer in Christ who later falls away. Instead, an apostate is a professed believer, an outward member of the believing community, who instead of engaging the Lord in true faith hardens his heart in sin. The ultimate result is not merely unbelief but a seared conscience and a heart hardened to a point of no return (see Heb. 6:4-6). William Blaikie explains Saul's plight in this condition:

Saul was incapable of that exercise of soul which would have saved him and his people. Most terrible effect of cherished sin! It dries up the fountains of contrition and they will not flow. It stiffens the knees and

they will not bend. It paralyses the voice and it will not cry. It blinds the eyes and they see not the Savior.²

Saul was willing, in his despairing terror, to engage in outward motions intended to manipulate aid from God. But the Lord's ear is open only to those of a broken heart and contrite spirit. What a dreadful thing it is to harden the heart against the Lord and his Word! Ultimately, time runs out for the apostate and even the opportunity of repentance is gone. So it was for Saul, as later it would be for all Israel: God responded, "I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble" (Jer. 11:14). Blaikie comments: "How infinitely precious would one tear of genuine repentance have been in that dark hour! It would have saved thousands of the Israelites from a bloody death; it would have saved the nation from defeat and humiliation."³

Saul's hardened obstinacy is made clear in his response to God's silence: "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'" (1 Sam. 28:7). Earlier, Saul had rightly prohibited mediums and necromancers – those who sought divination from the dead. Now he wrongly turns to these occult diviners, seeking to replace from the dead the voice of the living God.

Perhaps because the mediums had come to fear him, or perhaps because of his guilty conscience in fear of God, Saul put on a disguise for his journey to Endor, where a woman was known to speak with the dead. Arriving there, Saul asked her, "Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you" (1 Sam. 28:8). The "Witch of Endor," as she has been known, replied in fear: "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?" (1 Sam. 28:9). How remarkable it is that Saul comforted the woman by swearing in the name of the Lord – Israel's God – "As the LORD lives, no punishment will come upon you for this thing" (1 Sam. 28:10). Here is yet another sign of Saul's hardened spiritual condition: in order to

² William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 406.

³ *Ibid.*, 407.

violate God's law and assure protection for an occultist under God's condemnation, Saul vows in the Lord's name!

Granted this assurance, the woman asked Saul, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" Saul answered, "Bring up Samuel for me" (1 Sam. 28:11). Here is yet another twist in the contorted plot. Though Saul breaks both God's law and his own prohibition, it is yet God's servant that he seeks. Saul knows and believes the truth that salvation can only come from God – the God to whom he has hardened his heart – so if God will not speak to Saul, Saul will seek to raise the spirit of one to whom God does speak, Samuel. What a dreadful state to recognize the need for truth from God while being too hardened to come to God himself! We see this today in people who do not and cannot pray to God but who seek out the prayers of believers. What should such a person do to gain your own right of access to the mercy of God? The answer is to heed the call of Jesus Christ in faith, bringing the burden of your sins to his cross, and there gaining confidence to "draw near to the throne of grace," and thus "receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

GOD'S PROPHET RAISED?

After Saul had identified Samuel as the spirit to be summoned, the text says that "the woman saw Samuel," and then "cried out with a loud voice." At this point, she realized that her client must be none other than king Saul: "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul." Saul asked her what she saw and she answered, "I see a god coming up out of the earth." "What is his appearance," Saul urgently inquired. "She said, 'An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe'" (1 Sam. 28:12-14).

This raises a question on which expositors of Scripture have differed: did the witch really summon the spirit of Samuel from the grave? Most commentators in the course of church history have denied that Samuel was truly summoned. A popular view of the early church was that the evil woman had summoned Satan to appear in the guise of the prophet Samuel. Tertullian wrote, "God forbid we should believe that

any soul, much less a prophet, could be called forth by a demon.”⁴ In the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther argued, “Who could believe that the souls of believers, who are in the hand of God and in the bosom of Abraham, were under the power of the devil.”⁵ John Calvin added that “God would never have allowed His prophets to be subjected to such diabolical conjuring . . . , as if the devil had power over the bodies and souls of the saints which are in His keeping.”⁶ On these grounds, Luther asserted that the supposed appearance was a deception of Satan, whereas Calvin suspected a delusion in the mind of Saul and the abominable woman.

The problem with this denial is that there are elements in the text that cannot be so easily dismissed. First, not only did Saul and the woman describe the spirit as Samuel, but the inspired writer agrees. Verse 15 states, “Samuel said to Saul.” Moreover, the summoned spirit replied to Saul with the very message that Samuel had given him in life: “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” (1 Sam. 28:17). A deluded Saul seeking comfort would not likely have conjured these words, and if Satan had appeared to deceive Saul it is not obvious why he would have spoken such truth. Moreover, the spirit uttered a prophecy that came true: “tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The LORD will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 28:19). Speaking from the realm of the dead, the spirit expected to see Saul and his sons there on the very next day.

Does this mean that a servant of Satan actually succeeded in raising the soul of a prophet, one who had entered death in God’s saving care? The answer of most commentators today is that the Bible does seem to state that Samuel was summoned, yet it could not have been by the demonic power of the medium that this happened. Therefore, it is most likely that Samuel came not at the command of the witch but at the unexpected will of God. This would explain why the woman cried out in shock when she saw the spirit, who she initially

⁴ Cited in John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT vol. IV (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2005), 321.

⁵ Cited by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson, 1996), 2:544nl.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:544-5, nl.

identified as a “god”: “When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice” (1 Sam. 28:12). This suggests that her regular occult activities were fraudulent and that she was just as shocked as Saul when an actual spirit from the dead appeared. Matthew Henry comments: “God permitted, on this one occasion, the soul of a departed prophet to come as a witness from heaven, thus sending him to confirm the word he had spoken on earth.”⁷ Keil and Delitzsch add that Samuel’s appearance “was of such a character, that it could not fail to show to the witch and the king, that God does not allow His prohibitions to be infringed with impunity.”⁸

We should remember that Samuel was not the last of God’s dead servant to appear on earth in spirit form. The Gospels record the spirits of Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:3). This reminds us that souls of those who die in Christ yet live in glory. While the two Old Testament greats, Moses and Elijah, appeared to rejoice with Jesus in the gospel, Samuel appeared to apostate Saul prior to the coming of Christ with only the grim condemnation of the law.

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD

I noted earlier the wretch state of a hardened and apostate heart in Saul’s inability to commune with God. This lamentable reality is only amplified when Saul hears the message that Samuel came to deliver. Saul greeted the spirit of Samuel with reverence: “he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage” (1 Sam. 28:15). Matthew Henry suggests that Saul acted this way at the witch’s direction, pointing out the irony that the very king who would not submit to the Word of God was all-too-ready to obey the word of the witch.⁹ This reminds us that those who refuse to serve the Lord in faith cannot avoid the bondage of cruel obedience to Satan.

Samuel spoke to Saul, demanding, “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

⁷ Cited by Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 272.

⁸ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 2:546.

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:337

and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do” (1 Sam. 28:15).

Samuel responded with surprise: how did Saul expect a word of God through Samuel when the king was forsaken of the Lord: “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy?” (1 Sam. 28:16). Samuel was, after all, a servant of the Lord, and thus would have no aid to report for an enemy of God.

Saul here pictures every man who forsakes God’s repeated appeals, who first declines to embrace the gospel and then hardens his heart against the whole of God’s Word, only to arrive at the day when a wrathful God is no longer willing to speak with words of grace. In life, such a person finds the idea of serving God annoying, desiring nothing more than to be rid of God and his Word. Yet he little considers that the worst thing that could happen is for God to fulfill his wish. If you are such a person, what would happen to you if God were to remove all his influence from your life, forsaking you as you have forsaken him in your pride and sinful desire? Blaikie notes: “O sinner, if ever thy wish should be fulfilled, how wilt thou curse the day in which thou didst utter it! When vile lusts rise to uncontrollable authority – when those whom you love turn hopeless wicked, when you find yourselves joyless, helpless, hopeless, when you try to repent and cannot repent, when you try to pray and cannot pray, when you try to be pure and cannot be pure – what a terrible calamity you will then feel it that God is departed from you!” He concludes from reflection: “Trifle not, O man, with thy relation to God.”¹⁰

Saul further learned that the God who refused him blessing was also working towards his overthrow. Samuel continued by informing Saul that it was actually the Lord who had brought the Philistine host to his doorstep. “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. 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” (1 Sam. 28:17-18). This refers to Saul’s disobedience to God’s Word in chapter 15, when the

¹⁰ Blaikie, *1 Samuel*, 411-412.

Lord instructed the king to annihilate his enemies the Amalekites. Saul had treated God's commands lightly but God treated them as matters of the greatest significance. Saul thought his sin to be a matter easily brushed aside, but God thought it deadly rebellion to his sovereign rule. Saul would not listen to God and now God would not speak to Saul, except to announce the arrival of his long-awaited judgment. The Saul who would not heed the Word of the Lord would face the shouts of the Philistine offensive.

In his riveting account of the fall of Berlin in the last weeks of World War II, Cornelius Ryan recounts a telephone call placed for Adolf Hitler from his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. To the west, the American Army had crossed the Rhine River and was racing for Berlin, while in the East the Soviet Red Army was crashing against the paper-thin German defenses. Nonetheless, Goebbels called the Fuhrer with jubilant news. He had recently informed Hitler of astrological predictions that foretold hard blows for Germany in early April but an overwhelming victory in the second half of the month. News had just arrived confirming the message in the stars, for the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt had just died. Yet how wrong Goebbels' divination was! Little did Hitler and Goebbels realize the complete destruction that must result from the great and wicked folly of their sins. By the end of the month the triumph foretold by Goebbels' horoscopes had not appeared and on April 30, Hitler committed suicide, followed on the next day by Goebbels himself.¹¹ Whatever the stars or other idolatrous deception may suggest, the inevitable result of sin is the judgment of a holy God.

Not only did Samuel remind Saul of God's judgment in the form of divine opposition, but he concluded with a third message. First, God had forsaken him in silence. Second, God was visiting Saul with judgment. Third, God was consigning Saul to the condemnation of death. Samuel concluded: "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" (1 Sam. 28:19).

¹¹ Cornelius Ryan, *The Last Battle*, cited in Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), page.

Here is the final calamity of divine abandonment. When man abandons God he desires only that God should leave him to his own devices. But when God abandons man, he assigns for him the judgment of death: “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Sinful man has violated God’s law and rebelled against God’s sovereign rule. The only result possible if God is to retain his justice, honor, and sovereign rights is the result foretold by Jesus in his parable of the ten minas. At the time of his coming, the sovereign Lord must issue his decree of judgment and death: “As for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me” (Lk. 19:27).

If we think this a dreadful picture of God’s justice and wrath, let us not forget his spurned offer of grace in the sacrificial blood of his own Son. If you have heard but refused the gospel offer of forgiveness through the atoning blood of Christ, your judgment will not only be for rebellion to divine authority but also for contempt of saving grace. The application from Saul’s plight is both urgent and insistent: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:6-7).

FEAR AND LOATHING

No longer possessing even the possibility of repentance, Saul was left to fear and loathing in this last dark night of his soul. He “fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel” (1 Sam. 28:20). It had been a wretched day for the king, in which he had not eaten all day and night. Seeing him in this shape, the woman came to Saul and spoke to him with kindness. Since she had obeyed Saul he should now obey her: “‘Let me set a morsel of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.’ 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” (1 Sam. 28:22-23). How much worse were things for Saul now that he had consulted the medium and heard from the spirit of dead Samuel. For not only was he faced with the dilemma of the Philistine onslaught,

but even worse was the dark specter of abandonment from God for judgment and death. At this point, we remember David and his many trials.

David had been harried by Saul for years and now had fled Israel for refuge among the Philistines. Yet David retained by faith his access to God and his grace. The true Urim of divine revelation had been sent away from Saul to David, so David could restore himself from folly by seeking light from the Lord, just as we who possess our Bibles may restore ourselves by appeal to God's Word. In light of Saul's sin-darkened plight, Dale Ralph Davis urges Christians to reflect on their situation in this context: "You may be exhausted from work. In fact, your employer may be giving you a raw deal... You have lost your health or family troubles are now cropping up. The text says there is something far worse. Do you realize what a solace it is in the face of all your failure to have access to the throne of grace and the smiling face of God in prayer? Do you realize that all that you have suffered is not nearly so tragic as someone moaning, 'God has turned away from me'?"¹² Just as there is no greater misery than to realize yourself abandoned by God in the hour of need, there is no greater solace than to remember God's gracious help for those who call on him in faith. Let us call on Jesus, believing his promise for all who belong to him through simple faith: "'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5-6).

Lacking any comfort from the Lord, Saul contented himself with such diversions as he could find. Perhaps understanding the import of Samuel's words of woe, the witch prepared a final meal fit for a king: "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, and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night" (1 Sam. 28:25). Perhaps Saul was able to forget what awaited him in the morning, and the eternity that would follow his death, just as unbelievers often seek to shrug off the ill-ease of their souls. This was Saul's last supper, in

¹² Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, 239.

the darkness of the night with the company only of his servants and a condemned witch!

OUT OF DARKNESS

Reflecting on Saul, we remember another Last Supper, when Jesus Christ gathered in the Upper Room with his disciples on the night of his arrest. Saul brings to mind one of the disciples who for all his privileges as one close to the Savior had nonetheless forsaken Jesus in his heart. John says of Judas Iscariot, “after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night” (Jn. 13:30). The apostle was noting not merely the time, but the state of Judas’ soul and the destiny to which he was turning in unbelief. Jesus’ words about Judas are true of all those who turn from his light to the darkness of sin and Saul-like self-rule: “It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Mt. 26:24).

Jesus himself would then head into darkness. Like Saul, Jesus bore the curse of a prophesied death upon his head. The only completely righteous man, the One who had perfectly obeyed the will of God every moment of his life, the Son of David who was far more unlike Saul than even David, was nailed to a cross to die for sin. There, Mark records: “When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice... ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mk. 15:33-34). As God’s Son prepared to die in the sin-cursed darkness, the words spoken by Saul to Samuel could be equally said by him: “God has turned away from me and answers me no more” (1 Sam. 28:15).

Yet how great – how infinitely great – was the difference between Saul in the darkness of his own sin and Jesus in the darkness for sins he did not commit. Saul, with his hardened heart and in his rebellion against God, spoke of a darkness that would last forever in hell. But the Savior Jesus Christ, in obedience to the saving will of the Father and in compliance with God’s covenant for our salvation, entered the darkness of condemnation in order that he might take its curse away forever from the people who belong to him in faith. Jesus entered the darkness of the cross that we might enter the life and light of his resurrection glory. Saul’s account ends with the words, “they rose

and went away that night,” with only the darkness of divine abandonment before him (1 Sam. 28:25). When Jesus rose it was in the light of the open tomb, and all those who place their sins on his cross may know the joy of eternal life in his grace. Of them, the gospel declares: “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).