

1 Samuel 28:3-25; 31:1-13
The Downfall of Saul

Introduction

1. As we come to the end of 1st Samuel we end on a rather solemn event: the death of Saul and his sons
2. We shouldn't be surprised because Saul had been warned that he was on a dangerous path with his constant sin and rebellion against God and His commands
3. He had been told by Samuel that God would rip the kingdom out of his hands and give it to David, a "better king" than Saul and a "man after God's own heart"
4. For a man that started out with so much humility and promise, it all ends tragically

A. Saul was a desperate man facing a desperate situation so he did a desperate thing (3-7)

1. The author gives us two pieces of information that help us understand the passage (3): "**Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had removed from the land those who were mediums and spiritists.**"
 - a. Samuel was dead—this is important because Samuel was God's mouth piece when communicating with Saul and explains why Saul turns to Samuel when the LORD refuses to answer him
 - b. Saul removed all the mediums and spiritists from Israel—this is important for at least two reasons:
 - 1) It demonstrates that Saul was familiar with the Law's prohibition against such things (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:9-12)
 - 2) It makes Saul's behavior below that much more egregious because it was an act of willful sin and deliberate disobedience
2. The Philistines were preparing a massive attack against Israel, and Saul was very afraid (4-5):
 - a. We learned in 28:1-2 that the Philistines were planning a major offensive (4)
 - b. When Saul saw the Philistine army he was filled with terror (5): "**When Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly.**"
 - c. This is quite the contrast to the Saul that we were introduced to earlier in the book (1 Samuel 14:47-48): "**Now when Saul had taken the kingdom over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, the sons of Ammon, Edom, the kings of Zobah, and the Philistines; and wherever he turned, he inflicted punishment. 48 He acted valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, and delivered Israel from the hands of those who plundered them.**"
3. Saul inquires of the LORD, but the LORD remains silent (6): "**When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets.**"
 - a. There's an aspect of desperation here in that Saul tries three different means of getting the LORD's attention:
 - 1) Dreams
 - 2) Urim
 - 3) Prophets

- b. But, as Saul should have learned previously (in 1 Samuel 14:37) that the LORD wasn't going to respond:
 - 1) The LORD had rejected him as king (15:23, 28-29; 16:1)
 - 2) Samuel had explained to Saul what God desired and required in order hear from him again (15:22-23)
 - 3) But, Saul continued in his rebellion so the LORD refused to answer him
- 4. So, in his desperation, Saul seeks out a medium (7): **"Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek 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 woman who is a medium at En-dor."**
 - a. A medium was someone who claimed to be able to conjure up or communicate with the dead
 - b. This is where the author's introductory comments in v. 3 come into play
 - c. The author wants us to see that what Saul does here is a deliberate, desperate, willful act of disobedience
 - d. And, will help us understand why God judges him so severely by the end of our passage today

B. Saul disobeys the LORD again by consulting with a medium (8-19)

- 1. Saul conjures up Samuel from the dead (8-14):
 - a. Something that isn't so easily noticed here is the lengths to which Saul went to visit the medium:
 - 1) The text says Saul put on a disguise, traveled with only two body guards, and made the trip in the dark of night (8a): **"Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; "**
 - 2) One of the reasons for the disguise seems to have been to deceive the medium
 - 3) However, there may have been another reason:
 - a) In order to get to Endor, Saul had to travel through the region where the Philistine army was based
 - b) The disguise may have been intended to hide his identify from any Philistine soldiers that he may encounter on the trip
 - c) This would also explain why he only took two guards, and traveled at night
 - d) How desperate must Saul have been to take such risk?
 - b. Saul convinces the medium to do what he asks (READ 8b-11):
 - 1) She initially objects, suspecting that her visitor might be one of Saul's men trying to entrap her (8b-9)
 - 2) However, Saul promises that no harm will come to her (10): **"Saul vowed to her by the LORD, saying, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing."**
 - a) Saul's promise is startling because he makes the vow by invoking the LORD
 - b) In this case, such a promise was blasphemy because the LORD Himself said that people who practice such things are detestable to Him (Deuteronomy 18:12)
 - 3) The woman relents and Saul asks her to bring up Samuel (11): **"Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" And he said, "Bring up Samuel for me."**
 - c. Samuel appears to the medium (READ 12-14):

- 1) Some question what happened here and whether or not it was really Samuel, and does this mean that people can communicate with the dead:
 - a) Everything in the text indicates that it really was Him:
 - The woman’s shock indicates that she was surprised, possibly suggesting that actually seeing the dead was something she didn’t expect (despite her role as a so-called medium)
 - The text specifically states four times that it was Samuel
 - Samuel identifies himself in v. 17: “**The LORD has done accordingly as He spoke through ME...**”
 - He repeats much of what He prophesied to Saul while he was alive
 - Lastly, Saul is completely convinced that it’s Samuel
 - b) So, does this verse teach that it’s possible to communicate with the dead:
 - There are only two examples like this in the Bible—this one and Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration
 - So, they certainly aren’t normative and instead extremely unique
 - While the OT Law prohibited divination, none of the passages clearly indicate whether such acts conjure up the dead, communicate with demons, or involve some other form of demonic deception (e.g. altered states of consciousness, deception, fakery, etc.)
 - What is clear, is that such practices are detestable to the LORD
2. Instead of receiving the guidance he had hoped for, Saul receives something quite different (15-19):
 - a. First, he received a rebuke (READ 15-16)—Samuel asks him two questions:
 - 1) Why did you disturb me?
 - 2) And why, if you knew God is no longer answering you, did you ask me (e.g. the LORD’s prophet)?
 - b. Second, he received a reminder of God’s rejection (READ 17-18):
 - 1) The LORD had simply done what He said he was going to do
 - 2) He tore the kingdom out of Saul’s hands and gave it to David
 - 3) It was Saul’s own fault—he had refused to obey the LORD and was now paying the price
 - c. Third, and finally, he received word of his impending judgment and death (READ 19):
 - 1) God would deliver Israel into the hands of the Philistines
 - 2) Within 24 hours, Saul and his sons would be dead
3. Saul despairs at the dire news (20-25):
 - a. Upon hearing Samuel’s words, Saul collapses to the ground (20)—partly from fear and partly from exhaustion from not eating over the past 24 hours
 - b. He refuses to eat and only does so after the woman and his own servants urge him to do so (21-25)
 - c. We once again get a glimpse into Saul’s heart—even when faced with his impending judgment and death there is no change, no confession, no turning to the LORD

C. Saul and his sons are killed by the Philistines (31:1-13)

1. The Philistines rout the Israeli army and kill the sons of Saul (1-2)
2. Saul is badly wounded by an arrow and takes his own life (3-6):
 - a. It's unclear if Saul is mortally wounded because the text simply says "**badly wounded**"
 - b. He was apparently wounded badly enough that he could not flee, and feared being captured by the Philistines and tortured, so he begs his armor bearer to kill him (4): "**Then Saul said to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword and pierce me through with it, otherwise these uncircumcised will come and pierce me through and make sport of me."**
 - c. When his armor bearer refuses, Saul falls on his sword and takes his own life (4b-7)
3. In a final act of loyalty to Saul, the men of Jabesh-gilead retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons and give them a proper burial (7-13):
 - a. When the Philistines return to Mount Gilboa the next day to "strip the slain" they discover the bodies of Saul and his sons
 - b. They cut off Saul's head, remove his armor and parade it through the region in victory
 - c. They then "**fasten [Saul's] body to the wall of Beth-shan**" as a final act of humiliation
 - d. When the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead hear of it, a group of "valiant men" walked all night long (about a 15 mile trek) into Philistine occupied territory and retrieved the bodies in order to take them back to Jabesh and give them a proper burial
 - e. When David became king, he praised and blessed these men for their kindness to Saul and his sons (2 Samuel 2:4b-6)

Conclusion

1. So, what do we make of all this?
2. There are a few principles I think we can draw out:
 - a. One is that desperation can lead us to do things we might not normally do, and even lead us to sin
 - 1) Saul knew consulting mediums was forbidden by the Law because he presumably kicked them all out of Israel
 - 2) Yet, he somehow found a way to justify it in his own mind when he became desperate

I once met a Christian woman who married an unsaved man even though she knew it didn't honor the LORD, all because she feared remaining single—it didn't turn out well for her and it's something she ended up regretting

- 3) When we make the same kinds of decisions it generally doesn't end well for us either
- b. A second principle we might draw from our passage today is that when we feel like God isn't listening, or answering our prayers, or that He's distant, we should examine our relationship with Him:
 - 1) The LORD refused to answer Saul because he continued to rebel against Him
 - 2) Jesus said in John 15:7, "**If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**"--There are two key principles to this promise:
 - a) We must abide in Him
 - b) His words must abide in us

- 3) According to 1 John 2:3-6 these two principles go hand in hand: "**By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: 6 the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.**"
- 4) So, when God seems distant we have to examine ourselves and ask the question:
 - a) Am I abiding in Him?
 - b) Am I seeking Him with all of my heart, mind, soul and strength?
 - c) Am I spending adequate time talking to Him through prayer, seeking His voice by studying the Word?
 - d) Or am I living my life on my own terms like Saul did, ignoring the commandments and Word of God?
- c. A final principle is that God is serious about his commands and what He requires of His people:
 - 1) Saul learned this the hard way having been first selected by God through no merit of his own, but then throwing it all away through sin and rebellion, and ultimately being rejected by God
 - 2) As Christians we know that God is gracious and patient with us, but if we are not careful He will discipline us (READ Hebrews 12:5-13)