

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 28 (p. 234, pew Bible). Last week, millions of NFL fans were anticipating the Monday Night Football (MNF) showdown between the Buffalo Bills and the Cincinnati Bengals, who had the most combined wins ever for a Monday Night Football game. The Bills needed to win this game to clinch the #1 seed in the AFC.

The Bengals scored a touchdown on their opening drive. The Bills' offense then went to work and almost scored a touchdown but had to settle for a field goal instead. You could feel the intensity as both teams were going hard at it. Then, with 5:58 remaining in the first quarter, after what appeared to be a routine tackle, the Bills' safety Damar Hamlin stood up but then staggered backwards and collapsed to the ground.

A medical team rushed onto the field, followed by an ambulance. Hamlin was given CPR for nearly 20 minutes, then placed on a stretcher, and taken to Cincinnati Medical Center. Later, the Bills announced that Hamlin had suffered a cardiac arrest. His heartbeat was restored on the field before he was taken to the hospital. For a couple of days he remained in the ICU in critical condition. Thankfully, he has made remarkable progress these last few days and was able to FaceTime with his teammates on Friday.

Like many of you, Ruthie and I were watching the game when this crisis occurred. And, like many of you and countless others, we prayed for Damar and his family as the medical team fought to save his life. It was amazing and sobering to see how quiet the stadium got ... how players from both teams stood side by side weeping and praying together ... how tenderly the coaches interacted with one another afterwards to decide how they might best minister to their players.

As the ESPN commentators discussed the situation, one of them described the scene:

*It's chilling to watch it. ... You can see it on social media: Every single team, every single player, every single person offering up their prayers for Damar Hamlin right now. Players are sent to their locker room – and the game doesn't matter. The game is so secondary to everything else. No one cares about the game right now. Everybody cares about this young man, his family, and finding out how he's doing, which is all that is on anybody's mind right now. And it's just one of those moments that is chilling. There's no other way to say it. It's chilling. It's heart-breaking.*

This scary incident during the MNF game serves as a helpful analogy for the transition we see in 1 Samuel 28 as the narrator shifts from what's going on with David to what's happening with Saul – a situation that is far more urgent. Please follow along as I read this portion of Scripture.

<sup>1</sup> 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." <sup>2</sup> 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."

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. <sup>5</sup> When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. <sup>6</sup> And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. <sup>7</sup> 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."

<sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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?" <sup>10</sup> But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." <sup>11</sup> Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." <sup>12</sup> 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." <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> And Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy?" <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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."

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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." <sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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,<sup>25</sup> and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

- 1 Samuel 28:1-25

When preaching on 1 Samuel 27, Pastor Mike described David’s situation as “the pits.” Yet Saul’s situation is far worse. David is in the pits, but Saul is in despair. He has lost all hope because God had rejected him and refused to answer him. Ralph Davis wrote,

Nothing is so utterly miserable than finding in the hour of greatest need that you had long ago placed yourself beyond the sound of God’s voice and that you are totally alone.<sup>1</sup>

The apostle Paul reminds us that whatever was written in the Scriptures long ago, including the characters and events of the Old Testament, was written for us. Such is the case with the account here in 1 Samuel 28. It was written to instruct us so that we might not lose hope. Saul’s example stands as a warning to us. Don’t be like Saul.

***Listen to the Lord  
before it’s too late.***

Saul’s stubbornness, disobedience and resistance to God’s word put him on a path that led to despair and eventual destruction. What a terrible way to live and then die. As you observe Saul’s tragic, downward spiral, resolve that your life, your story, your destiny will be different. That’s what God wants for you. So, pay attention to his word!

Setting the Stage

The narrator begins the chapter by describing an epic battle that is about to take place between the Philistines and the Israelites, a battle that will bring about Saul’s death and clear David’s path to the throne.

But for more than a year, David has been living among the Philistines while on the run from Saul. Achish, the king of the Philistines, thinks David is now on his side and tells David he’s counting on him and his men to join him in battle. David responds somewhat ambiguously, saying to King Achish, “Very well, then you’ll see what your servant can do.” Then Achish says, “Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life.”

By his equivocal answer, David avoids backing himself into a corner while keeping up Achish’s expectations. David is thinking one thing, Achish is thinking another.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*. Focus on the Bible Commentary Series (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000, reprinted 2008), p. 295.

It reminds me of the pastor who was given an apple pie on his birthday from an older lady in his congregation. He thanked her and said it was one of his favorite desserts. That evening after dinner, the pastor and his family were excited about eating the pie. But as soon as it was in their mouths, they spit it out. It tasted horrible! Nobody wanted it, so they pitched it. The next Sunday, the sweet old lady who had made the pie asked the pastor what he and his family thought of it. Not wanting to lie, the pastor replied, “Well, let’s put it this way: Pies like that don’t last long around our house!”

The pastor’s ambiguous answer got him out of a pickle. The same was true of David, at least temporarily. The narrator will resume the account with David in chapter 29, but for now he focuses on Saul because his situation is far more urgent.

As the scene shifts to Saul, we find him in a state of *desperation*.

### **Desperation (vv. 1-15)**

In verse 3, the narrator repeats what he had stated at the outset of chapter 25 – that Samuel had died and all Israel mourned for him and buried him at his home in Ramah.

Samuel’s death was a low point for Israel, and the Philistines sought to take advantage of it. They mustered their troops and camped at Shunem. Saul gathered all Israel and camped at Gilboa, a mountain about ten miles southeast of Shunem.



The Philistines goal was probably to gain control of the Jezreel Valley. Verse 5 says, “When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly.” The death of Samuel had emboldened the Philistines but had the opposite effect on Saul. He became so frantic with fear, that he began experiencing violent heart palpitations.

Last week our three grandchildren stayed with us. Our seven-year-old granddaughter Ivy loves scary stories and movie clips. After I showed her one on my phone, Ivy said, “Grandpa, feel my heart!” Sure enough, it was beating like crazy. Such is the physiological effects of fear. After experiencing this rush of adrenaline, Ivy calmed down quickly, knowing that what she had seen was all pretend. But Saul was facing a real-life crisis, a matter of life-and-death, and was terrified.

Verse 6 says, “And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets.” By his sin, Saul had robbed himself of all godly courage and counsel. Having disobeyed the Lord, did Saul think that God would speak to him through a dream? Having murdered the high priest Ahimelech and all the priests in Nob, did Saul now think that God would give him direction through the Urim (“light”), the priestly device used to determine God’s will in a given situation? Having rejected God’s word, did Saul now expect a revelation from God through the prophets?

Scripture says, “Don’t be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7 CSB). Because Saul had rejected the word of the Lord, the Lord refused to answer Saul. As Samuel would soon say, God was now his enemy.

David was in the pits, but Saul had hit rock bottom. And sometimes those who hit rock bottom dig themselves even deeper. That’s what happened to Saul. When he couldn’t get an answer from God, he consulted a medium. A medium is an intermediary between the spirit world and ours. Sometimes mediums are called channelers since they allegedly “channel” communication from the dead to the living via séances or some other means.

Saul compounded his sin by consulting a medium in a desperate attempt to communicate with the prophet Samuel, who had died. Back in verse 3, after the narrator reminds us of Samuel’s death, he immediately goes on to say in the second half of the verse, “And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land.” This was a good thing that Saul had done, since God prohibits witchcraft or sorcery or attempting to communicate with the spirits of the dead. Long ago, the Lord had forbidden his people to seek out mediums and said that he would set himself against anyone who did. Further-more, God said anyone who practiced divination or sorcery or witchcraft or held séances or channeled with the dead were to be put to death, because people who practice such things are an abomination to God.<sup>2</sup>

We can’t tell by the text when exactly King Saul had gotten rid of these wicked people. Perhaps it was early in his reign, thanks to the godly influence of Samuel. Or maybe it was when Saul was tormented by an evil spirit. Perhaps he thought he was bewitched and so wanted get rid of everyone who dabbled in the occult. Matthew Henry wrote,

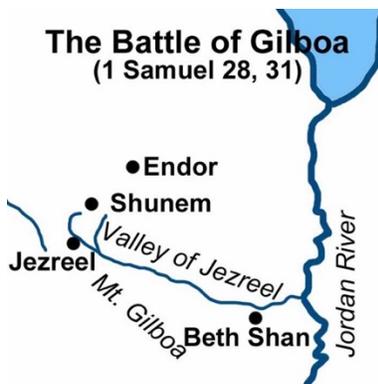
Many seem zealous against sin, when they themselves are any way hurt by it ... who otherwise have no concern for the glory of God, nor any dislike of sin as sin. However it was commendable for Saul thus to use his power for the terror

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19:31: “Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.” Leviticus 20:6-7: “If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people. Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.” Leviticus 20:27: “A man or woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them.” Deuteronomy 18:9-12: ““When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, 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, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you.”

and restraining of these evil-doers. Note: Many seem enemies to sin in others, while they indulge it in themselves. Saul will drive the devil out of his kingdom, and yet harbor him in his heart, by envy and malice.

Who would have thought that King Saul would stoop so low to consult a medium – and go to such lengths to do it? Look again at the map we showed earlier.



Saul and his troops were gathered at Mount Gilboa, whereas the Philistine forces were encamped at Shunem. And Endor was a few miles northeast of Shunem. So Saul and the two men who accompanied him had to skirt the camp of the Philistines to get to Endor. It's been said that "desperate times call for desperate measures." Desperate people will sometimes go to great lengths to turn to any resource that they think will give them a sense of relief, a measure of hope, a way of escape. Such was the case with Saul.

I chose Psalm 102 for our Scripture reading earlier in the service because the Psalmist is clearly afflicted, in desperate straits. And at that moment, God seems absent. Yet in his desperation, the Psalmist continues to cry out to God, because he has nowhere else to go. Like Peter, the Psalmist says in essence, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). In his season of desperation the Psalmist keeps crying out to the Lord, knowing that "he regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer" (Ps. 102:17).

That's the difference between David and Saul. David was a man after God's own heart. He was desperate for *God*, not for mere guidance. But Saul, like so many people today, wasn't seeking the Lord but a solution to his problem. We know this because of the divine commentary recorded in 1 Chronicles 10, which says,

Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.

- 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 NIV

I realize that Saul's encounter with the medium at Endor and the appearance of Samuel raises certain questions, like: (1) Did the medium utilize dark magic, the power of Satan, to conjure up the spirit of Samuel? (2) Was it really the spirit of Samuel, or was it a demon impersonating him? (3) Was the whole thing a farce – a trick played on Saul? Throughout church history, Bible scholars have been divided on this issue. The most prevalent view

seems to be that this was a genuine appearance of Samuel brought about by God himself. For one thing, the narrator refers to the spirit as Samuel. Second, the medium “cried out with a loud voice” (v. 12), which seems to indicate that she did not expect Samuel himself to appear. Furthermore, he appeared in his prophetic robe which Saul had torn back in chapter 15, at which time Samuel declared that the Lord had torn the kingdom away from Saul. Plus, Samuel’s message to Saul not only reiterates God’s judgment on Saul but also includes an additional pronouncement that Saul would die the next day, which he did. Only God would know that, and he predicted through his prophet what would happen. As one Old Testament scholar, Walt Kaiser, affirms, Samuel’s message “was God’s final word to a king who insisted on going his own way.”<sup>3</sup>

This is the crux of the issue that demands our attention. So, instead of giving ourselves to speculation, let’s focus on application. When you find yourself in desperate circumstances, where do you turn? If God seems absent and doesn’t answer, do you turn to another source for guidance, or do you keep turning to God, knowing that you have nowhere else to go?

### **Dread (vv. 16-20)**

In verses 16-19, Samuel rebukes Saul, saying, “[If the Lord didn’t answer you],

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. 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. 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.”

“The message of the deceased Samuel was the same as the living Samuel.”<sup>4</sup> Except in this case Samuel adds the pronouncement that Saul and his sons would be with him. This may simply mean that Saul and his sons will die, or it could mean that their spirits will join Samuel in the place of the dead (perhaps even among those whose sins are forgiven).<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case, Samuel makes no more speeches regarding Saul’s disregard for God’s word. “He speaks only of ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow.’ The time of Saul’s judgment has arrived.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, one-volume edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 and 2 Samuel*, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 375.

<sup>5</sup> ESV Study Bible, gen. ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), pp. 536-537. The ESV study note goes on to cite 2 Samuel 12:23, where “David says he will eventually go to his dead son. Sometimes the word “Sheol” refers to the place of the dead, which was pictured as being below the earth (the spirit of Samuel is “brought up”; cf. 1 Sam. 28:8, 13, 15). In such cases, no distinction is made between the pious and the wicked. In other cases, a distinction is crucial (see note on Ps. 49:15).”

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, 375.

Verse 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.” Saul is famished, exhausted, and finished. He’s as good as dead.

John Flavel applies the dreadful state of Saul to that of the impenitent sinner, saying, “And what will you do when you are in Saul’s case? Alas, where will you turn? ... [W]hat will you do, when you shall stand at the bar and see that God, who is your enemy, upon the throne?”<sup>7</sup> No wonder Scripture warns, “Prepare to meet your God...!” (Amos 4:12). The judgment of God is coming. It’s inevitable. It’s unavoidable. There’s no averting it. All you can do is get ready for it. “Prepare to meet your God!” *Listen to the Lord before it’s too late*. Because when Judgment Day comes, there will be no more time to prepare.

At age 24 and one of the world’s top athletes, Damar Hamlin had no clue that he would suffer a cardiac arrest during a football game. He could have easily died. He almost did. We don’t know what a day may bring forth. We have no guarantee that we’ll be alive by lunch time let alone tomorrow. That’s why the Lord says, “At just the right time I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.’ Indeed, the ‘right time’ is now. Today is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2 NLT).

Saul ran out of time. His desperation led to dread, and he walked away into darkness.

### **Darkness (vv. 21-25)**

Verse 21 says, “And the woman came to Saul, and ... she saw that he was terrified.” Apparently, the medium was not present when Samuel pronounces God’s judgment on Saul and he fell down in a state of dread. She had probably run out of the room after she saw Samuel and cried out. But when she came to Saul afterwards and saw that he was terrified, she urged him to eat. Matthew Henry wrote, “what a deplorable condition had he brought himself to when he needed so wretched a comforter.”

The woman urged him to eat, but Saul didn’t want to. Verse 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 and sat on the bed.” The woman killed a fattened calf, baked unleavened bread, and made Saul a feast fit for a king – like the last meal served to a condemned man before his execution.

Verse 25: “And she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they arose and went away that night.” Doesn’t this scene remind you of another last supper,<sup>8</sup> when “after receiving the morsel, [Judas] immediately went out. And it was night” (John 13:30)? The apostle John, in recounting this scene, isn’t merely telling us the time. He’s depicting Judas’ dreadful state. It’s like he is “entering the outer darkness itself.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Flavel, *Fountain of Life Opened Up*. Cited by Ryan Hoselton, “1-2 Samuel” in *The ESV Church History Study Bible*, gen. ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), p.432.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, 299.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

But there was someone else who entered the darkness.

At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. Then at three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

- Mark 15:33-34 NLT

There's a mistake we can make if we're not careful – and that's thinking that we're better than Judas, not as disobedient and rebellious as Saul. And we'd be dead wrong. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned, every one, to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). The glory of the gospel is that God's one and only Son went through the darkness and agony of God's absence for us. At the battle of Golgotha Jesus went into the outer darkness so that we could walk in the light of life.<sup>10</sup> He was forsaken so that we could be forgiven.

Do you love the One who endured the darkness for you? Do you look to Christ alone as your Wonderful Counselor, as your crucified and risen Savior? Do you seek the Lord and his presence continually?

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

