

Saul and the Medium

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[0 : 00] Well, chapter 28 verses 3 to 25, the story that we just read is actually an interjection. It's an interruption in the middle of a different story.

And if you have a Bible, you can see in just the first two verses of chapter 28, it's actually a story about David and the fact that he has become a partner with the Philistines.

And what the writer is doing originally is he's telling the story of how David's going to get out of this sticky mess that he's made being in league with the Philistines. And that picks back up at the beginning of chapter 29.

And the contents of chapter 29 are actually chronologically before the story we just read. And so, see, this is chronologically all out of order.

And there's a reason for that. The Bible writers do this all the time. The writer is trying to say, let me interrupt this programming for something more important or more significant. And what's significant here is that David has a problem, and that's that he's in league with the Philistines.

[1 : 04] But the interruption is all about the fact that somebody else has a much bigger problem than David. And that's Saul. Saul's issues are much more significant here in the story. And so, there's a persistent compare and contrast between David and Saul throughout all of First Samuel.

That's the thread that weaves through the whole book between the current king and the future king. And why one of them has been rejected and one of them has been accepted.

And that's really the big motif, the big storyline of the book of First Samuel. And here we've got tonight a difficult story and a sad story, a story that is actually a warning passage, essentially.

And there's lots to say here, but the real question of this passage is why, why is Saul rejected? Because this is actually the capstone story of Saul's demise, of Saul's doom.

And at the very end, you heard that Samuel says, you know, you and your sons are going to die. That's about, that's going to happen next week. And this is a sad story. It's Saul's doom story.

[2 : 12] It's this demise story. And so, we've got to ask why is it that Saul is rejected? And there's lots we could say to that question, but the answer from this passage, and I think from the book of First Samuel, is that Saul is rejected because he is religious.

And so, let's think about that together. And so, we'll see two things. One, the problem with mere religion, first, and secondly, the mark of true religion. Okay, so first, the problem with mere religion. All right, at the very beginning of the passage in verse three and four, the writer gives a very clear context in three things that you've got to know to get the picture of this story.

And the first thing is that Samuel has died, and that's a critical flashback to a few chapters before in chapter 25. So it's just reminding you, don't forget the prophet is dead.

He is not speaking on behalf of God. The second thing is, it says Saul expelled the mediums and the necromancers. So Deuteronomy 18 says that anybody who tries to conjure up the dead, that's an abomination to God.

[3 : 23] And so, we learned very quickly, Saul had actually cast out what people sometimes call witches. Technically, that's different. But the mediums and the necromancers have been pushed out of the land.

That's what Saul did. He was actually obedient. That's the second aspect of the context. And then the third thing is the immediate circumstance, which is really bad, and that's that Philistines, the Philistines are attacking them again.

And if you pay attention and work it all out, the geography, where the Philistines have come to attack is the dead middle of the land of Israel. And so what they've done is they've actually cut off the southern half of Israel from the north.

And so Saul cannot get to the northern tribes. And so he knows he's in big time trouble here. And that's why in verse five, it says that he was trembling with fear. And that he reverberated there is actually that he's literally shaking. He is scared to death. He is timid. He is very afraid. He's afraid like he's facing a monster.
[4 : 27] And that's why in verse six, God, he doesn't hear anything from God. God gives him no way out of this. And so what we have is that when God does not speak to him, he goes to the necromancer.

He goes to the medium. All right. The interpretive key, it's in a different book. It's in 1 Chronicles. And in 1 Chronicles chapter 10, verses 13 and 14, there's a question from the writer. It says, why was Saul rejected by God and were given the answer? And this is the answer that we're given. It says that Saul died for his treachery because, quote, he did not keep the word of the Lord.

He consulted a medium. So two things. He did not keep the word of the Lord and he consulted a medium. And that's why Saul was rejected. And what this is saying is that this is actually a capstone story.

There are three instances in the book of 1 Samuel where it says, where Samuel comes to Saul and says, you've been rejected because you didn't keep the word of the Lord. And this is the third one. The first two are in 1 Samuel 13.

[5 : 35] He disobeys a direct command. God, Samuel comes and says, you've been rejected. And then in 1 Samuel 15, he disobeys a direct command and Samuel says, you've been rejected.

And in 1 Samuel 28, he disobeys a direct command by going to this medium at indoor and Samuel comes up from the ground and says, you've been rejected. Now, I hope that you recognize tonight, just like Derek said last week, that this is a tough text to preach on.

And I listened and looked at the ways different preachers in the past have dealt with this text this week. And one of the things that's very common that people say is this, that the moral, the message of 1 Samuel 28 and this very strange story is that if you persistently disobey God's word over and over again, God will reject you.

And there is a problem with that problem, with that being the problem. And that's that the real issue here is not Saul's outward disobedience.

Yes, what he did was an abomination. What he did was wrong. He went to the medium at indoor. Absolutely. But there's something more than that. And the real issue across the book of 1 Samuel for why Saul is rejected is not about outward disobedience.

[7 : 03] It's more than that. It's about something going on on the inside. It's about his heart. And you know the way that we know that. The way that we know that is if you were to go through 1 and 2 Samuel and make a list of all the ways that David directly disobeys a command of the Lord, then the list would be just as big as Saul's list.

David does some of the similar things to Saul. He rejects the word of the Lord multiple times in the direct command of God multiple times throughout the story. And yet David is accepted.

And the difference in the story of Saul and the story of David, why Saul rejected and David accepted and the issue that the writer is pointing us to is the issue of religion. So let me say something about that for just a couple minutes.

Two things here about Saul's religion that makes it different than what we see in the life of David. And the first thing is that Saul's religion is mere religion.

And mere religion is mechanical and dead. Another way to say it is that it is the lowest common denominator of any type of religion.

[8 : 12] That's what Saul's religion is. And the Bible has a word for that, the Old Testament, and that word is Baalism. The worship of Baal.

We also commonly call it paganism, paganism or Baalism. And this is how it works. In Baalism, paganism, it starts with a need.

We as human beings, we have a need. We have something that we want, something that we desire. And that's something that we want and we desire is something in the creaturely realm. It's something that we begin to feel like we could not live without if we were to lose it.

We want to achieve it. We don't want to lose it. So then what happens is we divinize that need and we make it into our own little Baal, our own little God. Baal is just the generic word in Hebrew for a small G God.

And so across the Old Testament, we see that people have rain bales and crop bales and gold bales and power bales and money bales and wealth bales. And you can have a fulfillment bail and a status bail and a family bail and wealth and anything in the creaturely world that you can take and divinize and make it into your small G God, that's Baalism.

[9 : 24] But what happens in the ancient world is that actually the ancient Near Eastern religions posit what they conceive of as a real God behind that thing they worship.

So if they're desperate for crops more than anything, then they turn and believe in a deity that provides crops because they need crops and they go to the temple and they do mechanical sacrifices and they do whatever they need to do to make sure that that God gives them what they need.

And you see Saul's problem, Saul's problem, if you look carefully at the stories of Saul throughout is that Saul has a Baal.

He's religious. He's basically religious. He's ultimately like a pagan and Saul's Baal is victory, dynasty, power and glory.

Saul is desperate for his lineage to carry on, for his son to be made king, for him to be the man that finally defeats the Philistines.

[10 : 29] And if you look across the book of 1 Samuel, you'll see that almost every single story where Saul messes up, where Saul directly disobeys, it's in the context of him almost about to lose battle.

And he's desperate and he's hungry and he has a Baal in his life, a victory in dynasty. We watched this week at my house with my parents were in and we all sat down one night and we watched the live action Aladdin film.

And I don't know if you've seen it, but many of you have probably seen the cartoon Aladdin. If you've seen the cartoon, then don't waste your time on the live action.

The cartoon is so much better. But one of the best character, the best character in Aladdin, everybody knows who it is. It's of course in both live action or the old one, it's the genie, right? You were going to say that, the genie. And how does a genie work, the genie in Aladdin, you get the lamp and then you, whenever you need the genie to save you, you need the genie to give you your greatest desires, you rub the lamp and the genie comes out and you make your prayer, your wish.

[11 : 43] And that's religion. That's Baalism. And that's exactly how Saul thinks of the Lord. He saw, to Saul, the Lord is his genie.

And whenever he needs him, in the moments where the Philistines are at his doorstep, he rubs the lamp in whatever way he needs to do it in order to get the thing that he desires more than anything else.

And that's victory and glory and a great name on a long dynasty. And that's Saul's bill. Now remember, I mentioned earlier that Saul was rejected because of three big moments, three big events.

First Samuel 13, first Samuel 15, first Samuel 28. And let me just tell you about each of those very quickly. And you can see this. You can see Saul's religion in each of these instances.

And first Samuel 13, Saul is losing to the Philistines and his army has actually left him and scattered. And God says, Samuel says, go to Gilgal, wait seven days and I will come and I will make a sacrifice to the Lord.

[12 : 50] And the Lord has said it, if you wait seven days and you make the sacrifice, I will say, I will speak through Samuel and tell you what to do. And what happens, Saul waits till the seventh morning and Samuel's not there.

And so he gets up and he makes the sacrifice himself. And he acts as a priest. And this time, underneath the Lord's command, a priest and a king cannot mix offices.

The king cannot be the priest and the priest cannot be the king. And that's because unlike every other religion, every other people group in the ancient Near East where the king was also the priest, the king was the closest one to God.

In the Israelite religion, under God, the king needed a mediator just like everybody else needs a mediator. The king was a sinner just like everybody else is a sinner. And so he violates that command.

Why? Because he needs an answer. He needs to put the inputs of grain down, pull the lever, rub the lamp and get the God that he worships to give him what he really wants.

[13 : 54] And that's victory. That's a way out. He doesn't care about the rules. All he cares about is the religious practices he needs to do to get the outcome he ultimately desires.

All right, if you jump to 1 Samuel 15, it's similar. It's the story of Amalek, the Amelokites. And he's told to go and to destroy the Amelokites because they rejected God outright.

And there's a lot to talk about there in relationship to holy war and conquest and all those difficult topics. But what happens in the passage is that Saul does not do what God says and he actually takes the king of the Amelokites into his own household and he keeps all of the goods of the Amelokites.

And you see what he's doing. He's saying, look, the word of the Lord is not important to me. What I need is anything that's going to strengthen my position because his God, remember, is victory. His God is power. His God is his dynasty. And so he'll do whatever it takes to strengthen his position. And then the third instance is the one that we're reading about tonight. Now he goes to indoor in 1 Samuel 28 and his back is against the wall.

[15 : 04] He knows he cannot defeat the Philistines. And you can see in verse seven here that when he turns to his servant, he says, we need to go see a medium, his servant immediately says, well, I know where there is one.

And so he had commanded all the mediums and necromancers have to leave the country. But immediately his own administration knows exactly where they are. And you get the sense that this was never serious, that it's been a two-faced command all along.

His administration has kept hold of some necromancers, some mediums, some witches, as some people call them. And so they needed him and so Saul goes because he needs him. And then verse six, just before that he says, you know, I can't get the word of the Lord I need from a dream, from Umim, from Samuel.

Samuel's dead. God won't speak to me in a dream. And the Umim was a way that God would speak through one of the priests by saying yes or no.

And the reason that Saul cannot get a word from that is because he killed all the priests, just a couple of chapters ago. And why? Because he didn't like the answers that they had given to him about an impending war.

[16 : 18] And you see what's happening here. If he doesn't like the message of the priest, he'll dance. If he doesn't like what happens in the dance, he'll do magic. If he doesn't like the magic, he'll go to see the sorceress at indoor.

Whatever it takes, whatever religious practice he needs to do to get the outcome of victory that he desires, he will do. He even in verse 10 swears to her in the name of the Lord that he will not hurt her for calling up Samuel for practicing witchcraft.

In other words, he has no regard for the covenant name of God at all. He swears to this necromancer in the name of the Lord, his Lord, that he will do her no harm by the name of the God who forbids the very thing he's doing.

You see, God is nothing to Saul but his puppet and his genie. And he practices religion. He knows nothing about gospel.

And that means, secondly, that in mere religion, in mere religion, if you talk about what is the relationship with God when we practice basic religion, our relationship with God in basic religion is one of mere appeasement.

[17 : 34] It's mechanical, it's mathematical. It's simply this, if I give God what he requires of me, then I expect to get the inputs I seek, the outputs I seek. It's pulling a lever, it's rubbing the lamp, it's a get out of jail free card type of relationship.

And that means that he treats the Lord like an idol. Now, as we wrap up this first point and go to a much briefer second point, one of the great examples of this is in 1 Kings 18.

In 1 Kings 18, it's the famous battle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on the mountain. And the battle is about how do you get your God to come down and answer by fire and speak by fire. And what do the prophets of Baal do when they're on the mountain? First, they shout and cry out magical incantations and their gods do not come.

And so when their gods won't respond and give them what they desire, they begin to dance and their gods do not come. And when they dance and their gods do not come, they begin to cut themselves and then their gods do not come.

[18 : 43] And Elijah says exactly what Saul needs to hear. He says this, that the real God does what he wants.

The real God cannot be appeased, the real God, the Lord cannot be controlled by saying the right words, by going to the right worship service just enough times, by pulling the right levers, by going to the confessional booth.

He cannot be controlled by religious practices. And that's exactly what Baalism doesn't understand is that the Lord is free. He's all powerful. He can't be appeased. And he can't be pacified.

The true God wants relationship, not religion. The true God wants relationship and not religion. Now the outflow of this is three possibilities.

And tonight, every single one of us, we have to examine ourselves here because three possibilities come from living a life of mere religion.

[19 : 50] And the first one is this. Right here in the text, mere religion will produce a life of fearfulness. Fear is the most common description that is given to Saul throughout this book.

It's all over the place. It says multiple times throughout the book. Saul was afraid. He was afraid. He was afraid. He was deathly afraid of Goliath. He's deathly afraid before the Philistines.

And in verse five, he's literally shaking in fear. And the reason for that is because religion always produces fearfulness, a life of fearfulness. And that is not the fearfulness of all in reverence, the fear of the Lord.

It's scared timidity. It's the type of fear that we experience when we're in utter darkness. Religion produces fearfulness. And this is why. This is why.

Because when you're a God, you're a bale, is your own name, your own success, a certain relationship, your own dynasty, your wealth, your beauty, your family, your health, your power, you know that you can lose it at any time.

[21 : 01] You know, if you're if you're a God is your own health, then you know that ultimately one day your God will fail you. And if you've built your entire religious scheme around that ultimate idea, then you live a life in constant fear.

And because Saul's God is his own name and his own status and his own dynasty, he lives a life of constant fearfulness, knowing that he can lose it at any time. You see, your future can actually only be as sure as the surety of the God you truly worship.

If the God that you really worship is not ultimate and sure and absolute and unchanging, then you can only live a life of fearfulness. Because the God that you truly serve can always leave you at any time.

And so it produces a life of timidity and scaredness and constant fear. The second outcome of baleism is this, that mere religion always produces consumerism.

Or we could say it the other way, consumerism produces mere religion. And it's very simple, we've already said it multiple times and it's simply this. Consumerist religion is when we conceive of our relationship with God as mechanical.

[22 : 14] And so when we have a bad circumstance, the way we think about God is that we throw up a prayer in order that God would get us out of that bad circumstance.

And that's baleism. That's consumerist religion. You see, God wants relationship, not appeasement. And the third outcome is this, a more Christian form, a more Christian form.

And that's mere religion basically ends in nothing but works righteousness. If I'm religious at the right times and in the right ways, then God will accept me. I'll be accepted because of my religious practice.

Religion, whether it's worshipping a bale in your life and divinizing some idol that you know is really deeply burning at the altar of your heart down below.

Or whether it's consumerist religion or whether it's living a life of works righteousness, trying to be accepted by God by the things you do. All of us, all of us are prone to being mere religionists.

[23 : 25] We are religious by instinct. We are born in relationship with God no matter what we think about God. And therefore, we're religious to the core.

And because of our broken hearts and our disposition and our original sin, we're born into this world as religious people, merely religious as bale worshipers, as pagans.

As Calvin said, we produce idols where our heart is nothing but a factory of idols. This is our natural disposition as human beings. And Saul is the great testament to it.

It says ultimately this, I do not exist for God. God exists for me. Now, briefly, secondly, the mark of true religion.

Let's sum it up like this. Saul is rejected because he never gave God his heart. And David sinned as big a Saul did.

[24 : 23] If you made a list of David sins, it's as big a Saul, but there's a difference. And the difference comes in 1 Samuel 15:24. In 1 Samuel 15:24, whenever Saul had sinned and not done what God had commanded him to do in the case of the Amalekites, Samuel comes to him.

And Derek mentioned this last week. And Saul says, look, I know I've done wrong. Don't reject me, Lord. And he says, you know, I'm sorry for what I did. I'm sorry for what it's produced.

And in the very next story, he turns around and disobeys in a very similar way. And multiple times, time and time again, across the book of Samuel, Saul sins.

And he says, I'm sorry. And he turns around in the next story. And the writer even reorders the chronology to show you this, that it never was repentance. It was only regret. He only regretted his circumstances.

He never repented. In other words, he never gave God his heart. You see, the difference in David and Saul is not sin. David was a huge sinner, like every single one of us.

[25 : 31] And the issue was that when God came to Saul and said, I've condescended to you to show you mercy, Saul never said, Lord, I need mercy. He never cried out for mercy.

And look, this is very important. It is not the gravity of your sin that will keep you away from the kingdom of God. It's not the gravity of your sin that will keep you away from the kingdom of God. Sin, sin, don't hear me wrong. Sin is so bad, but it is not the gravity of your sin that will keep you away from the kingdom of God. It is when God comes to you in the gospel message and he says, I've come to show you mercy.

It's when you don't give your heart to the Lord and cry out for mercy that will keep you away from the kingdom of God. So every single person has rejected God, but God came in the middle of history to show radical mercy from top to bottom of us in a way that we can't even possibly understand its love.

And that means that it is, it's not sin that will keep you out. It's rejecting God's condescension. It's rejecting God coming to you and saying, I'm here to give you mercy.

[26 : 41] I'm here to show you peace. This passage is a warning passage and let me sum it up in this way as we close.

Saul has all religion and no gospel and at the very end of this story, it becomes really clear. If you were reading along with me earlier, you would have seen this very strange ending to this story.

At the very end of the story, he is rejected, he hears the word of Samuel that he's going to die because he's been rejected. And in verse 20, it says that he actually falls down, he passes out in fear and then he gets up and he eats a meal with the necromancer at indoor.

And it's a very strange ending. And why, why is it here? All collapses and total condemnation and fear and then there's a meal. Now listen, the medium, the witch as some have called her, she is a conjurer of the dead.

And she says to Saul, I've done what you've commanded, now listen and do what I've commanded. And you see all across the Old Testament, this role, this abdivination of necromancy of mediums is a representative symbol of evil.

[28 : 08] She stands here like the serpent himself. And she says to Saul, now you're my servant.

And she says, take and eat and I will give you life. And you see Saul in the midst of his condom, he's been told you are about to go to your death.

And he hears this representative evil, this table of demons as one commentator put it, set before him and say, take and eat. This is bread that will give you life.

And at first we're told in the text, he tries to resist and then he gives in. You see what's happening here?

You know, David, David, we say, we've said this from the very beginning of the series, David is the great type of the true king, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 08] And there's a thread that runs all throughout the book of 1 Samuel. Why, why not Saul? Why David? And you see here, this moment tells you why this, this is the anti-pass over.

Three times in this text it says, and it was night, and it was night, and it was night. And in the gospels, another king is going to sit and break bread.

And then John tells us as soon as he got up from the table, and it was night. You see, Jesus would face similar temptation.

Satan would stand before him in the wilderness and say, take and eat. You can have bread, you don't have to do this in the Garden of Gethsemane. You don't have to do this.

You can give this up. And you see, this is the anti-pass over. Saul is going to his death and he is giving his soul away to ultimate death. And it's a warning, you see.

[30 : 08] And what it's doing is it's saying, God has come in the middle of history. You see what it's doing is it's saying that there is another, Saul is like anti-Christ, not in some end times way, but in this way, that he is the king that would never give himself for the people.

He is the king that when he had a chance to show mercy, he never showed mercy. He is the king that on the night before his death would not break bread and say, here is my body broken for you. He's the king who ultimately said, I lived my entire life, entirely for me. And I would do whatever it's take. I would swear in the name of the Lord to whoever I needed to, to get victory, to get the thing I worshiped most.

And here at the end of his life, he is the ultimate symbol of what it means to be anti the true king. That's religion. This is gospel.

This is gospel. On the night that he was betrayed, he took bread and he broke it. And he said, this is my body that is to be broken for you. You see, you cannot know what kind of depths of love are hidden in the midst of that statement.

[31 : 26] And that's why Jesus is the great David, David's greater son. And that's why Saul is a warning to us tonight. You see, what this text says, and this is the last thing, what this text says is that that God has come to you in great love in the middle of history.

Don't refuse your heart to him like Saul did. And if you do refuse your heart to him, the warning is that God will administer justice, the justice that we deserve.

But Jesus Christ has come and broken his own body for you in great depths of love. And he has come and he's shown you mercy. And so we need tonight, every single one of us needs gospel, not religion, not mere religion.

And that means that whether it's the first time tonight or once again, after you've been following this gospel for 50, 75 years, once again, every single day, every single week, don't just give your religious practices to the Lord.

Give your heart to the Lord tonight. To the true king, forsake the folly of Saul and look to David's greater son, the gospel.

[32 : 44] Let's pray. Father, we give thanks. We give thanks that even in hard passages like this, warning passages like this, you point us to our great need, our great hope, the fact that in the midst of our sin, you did not leave us to die.

You came for us. You didn't throw us away, Lord. We know that it's not just our sin that keeps us out of the kingdom, but our rejection of your mercy.

And so we come tonight asking that you would rend our hearts, that we wouldn't reject you, that we would seek you, that we would long for you, that you would open us to you, Lord.

And so I pray for anybody tonight here that's exploring the hope of the gospel, the fact that Jesus Christ has come to save sinners in the middle of history and ask for them and for every single one of us that you would open our hearts to you, that we would seek your face tonight.

And so send us out this week as Monday starts with love for Jesus. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.