9. Asking but not obeying

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0:00] But we're going to turn now to our reading for this morning, and Bob is resuming his studies in 1 Samuel. And we're going to read this morning 1 Samuel chapter 28.

You'll find it on page 250, if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles. And it's a rather strange and chilling chapter that we read together.
1 Samuel chapter 28, verse 1. 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.
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. Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city.
[1:06] And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land. The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunam. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa.

But when Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets.
Then Samuel 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 Endor.
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.
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?
But Saul swore to her, by the Lord, as the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.
[2:26] And the woman said, whom shall I bring up for you? He said, bring up Samuel for me.
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. Saul, 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.
He said to her, what's his appearance? And she said, an old man is coming up, and he's wrapped in a robe. And Saul knew that it was Samuel. And he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage.
And Samuel said to Saul, why have you disturbed me by bringing me up? Saul answered, I'm 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've summoned you to tell me what I should do. And Samuel said, why then do you ask me?
[3:28] 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.

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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. And Paul fell at once, full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel.
There was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night. 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. 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.
[4:42] 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. 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. And then they rose and went away that night.
Amen. May God bless to us this solemn word. And now if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 250. And before we look at the passage, let's ask the Lord's help in a word of prayer.
God our Father, I ask now that you will take my human words, in all their weakness and imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. One of the very odd things about the age we live in is that on one hand, it's an extremely scientific and technological age.
[6:05] Everything is done at the touch of a button. Everything can be brought up on the screen. There appears to be no limit to human technology. And yet at the same time, we are an enormously superstitious age.

We seem to be governed by all kinds of superstitions. Go to Watterson's. Unfortunately, you can no longer go to Borders. But if you go to Watterson's and look at the mind, body and spirit section, you will find there a whole range of non-rational books, essentially.
Books that range from fairly harmless things to really sinister things. Books with titles like how to practice witchcraft and so on. A week or two ago, when we were in America, I was amazed to see outside large houses, very elaborate and rather terrifying displays making ready for Halloween. Witches, warlocks, obviously a tremendous amount of time had been expended on these. And there they were in the midst of one of the most civilized nations in the world.
Now, this is not going to be a sermon on the occult. I've not called this sermon Visiting a Witch, and I'll come to that in a moment or two. But nevertheless, it's a very good story.
[7:23] There's suspense, there's fear, there's suspicion, there's darkness, and there's unexpected twists. But that's not finally what the story is about. So let me try to put the story in context.

You'll notice we begin with David still in Philistine land. In our series on David, and this series on David, God's flawed but faithful servant, we've seen how David, in desperation that he was going to be killed by Saul, has gone down to take refuge with the Philistines, with Achish, the king of Gath, who is now mustering his forces to attack Israel.
He's in a real jam, and we're going to have to wait until chapter 29 before we see how he gets out of this jam. But this story here is actually an insertion, rather like a newsflash.
You know how when there's a normal program on, and then a newsflash comes. I'm sure many of you will remember the newsflashes about 9-11, and perhaps other episodes where, and this is what's happening here, as if the Spirit is saying, look, before we leave David in this dilemma, we're going to see something hugely important that happens.
As I say, a brilliant and eerie story, and the unexpected twist. So that's the setting of the story. We set aside David for a little while, and see what happens to Saul.
[8:49] This story, of course, is important in David's story, because this is the end of Saul, and the removal of the obstacles to David becoming king. Well, what is it about?

If you look, I think, at verse 3, you'll find the clue. Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him, and buried him in Ramah, his own city.
This is a flashback, of course. We've already read of Samuel's death. But if you read the whole of the book of Samuel, you'll discover in chapter 3 that Samuel was called, Samuel was commissioned when he heard the Master's voice.

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Samuel's whole ministry is about opening our ears to the Lord, obeying the Master's voice. And he had been put there to turn the nation, and in particular to turn Saul, back to God, hearing the Master's voice.
And Saul initially had listened. Saul put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land, essentially those who consult the dead, in order to manipulate the future, in order to manipulate lives.
[10:00] Saul had obeyed the Master's voice. Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 18 had said to get rid of such people. Bogus guidance. Bogus guidance through consulting the dead.

But here, Saul is no longer listening to the Master's voice, and he reverts to his own ideas and to his own opinions.
And the word that runs through the story is inquire, verses 7 and 8. Divine, in other words, divine by the Spirit. And ask, in verse 16.
This is a story about asking, but it's not a story about obeying. That's why I've called the sermon today, asking but not obeying.
Inquiring but not listening. Because, you see, the occult and so on distances it from us, doesn't it? You may say, well, this is an exciting story, but it's not relevant to me. I don't go and visit witches.
[11:02] I don't attend seances. At least I hope you don't. I don't do any of these kind of things. But here is something that's totally irrelevant to us. Are we listening to the Master's voice?

That is the point. Asking but not obeying. And so it has relevance for us. Remember we sang at the beginning that version of Psalm 95. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.
So that's the way we're going to look at the story. And as we look at the story, I think there are three main themes running through it. First of all, we have deadly disobedience.
Verse 18. You did not obey the voice of the Lord. Samuel had been put there, as I say, so that people would hear the voice of the Lord.
One of the interesting things, isn't it? There's never been a day when there's been more versions of the Bible, more helps to understand it. And yet, the abysmal ignorance of the Bible in the church, as well as in the world, remains appalling.
[12:11] You did not obey the voice of the Lord. Now look back at verse 6. When Samuel inquired of the Lord, these chilling words, the Lord did not answer him.

Now, these are all legitimate ways. Dreams. God did speak through dreams in Old Testament times. He spoke to Joseph. He spoke to Daniel. And indeed, into New Testament times, the dream given to the wise men in Matthew 2.
The dream or vision that Paul saw of the man of Macedonia. So that's a legitimate way. The Urim and the Thummim, as they're sometimes called, this was inquiring of the Lord through lots that the high priest carried in his garment, in a pocket in his garment.
And lots were legitimate as well. Because we find David, in a later stage, consulting the Lord through lots and the Lord answering him. By the way, that does not mean, if you want to get guidance in your life, you get out a dice and throw it and say, if it lands on this square, then I'll do that.
What it means is that everything, however trivial, is in the hands of the Lord. Verse in Proverbs, the lot falls where it will, but every decision is in the hand of the Lord.
[13:30] And then by prophet, Samuel had a kind of corn hill around him. These prophets who traveled around with him, he asked them, why did the Lord not answer?

The Lord didn't answer because Saul had ceased to listen. He was asking out of curiosity. He had disobeyed the Lord. And as we will see, the Lord had nothing more to say to him because he had persistently disobeyed.
And in this chapter, there's a kind of mirror image of the early chapters of the story. In chapter 16, David had been called and Saul rejected.
Then in chapter 17, the great story of David and Goliath. Saul had been terrified before Goliath. And David, with the Lord's help, had destroyed Goliath and got rid of the Philistine threat.
But here again, at the end of this particular part of the story, the end of Saul's story, the Philistines are there again. And at the end, as at the beginning, verse 5, when Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid.
[14:38] And his heart trembled greatly, just as at the beginning. The reason Saul had been appointed was so that he could deal with the enemies of the Lord's people.

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Give us a king, he said back in chapter 8, that he may lead us against our enemies. And if you look at the map, they camped at Shunan.
That's at least 25 miles north of the usual sphere of influence. The Philistines had become bold. The Philistines felt they were invincible. And Saul is terrified.
And Saul throws a last desperate throw of the dice, so to speak. He goes to consult a witch, a medium. And here we have the deceit of the occult, of course, in this story.
The occult is essentially an attempt to manipulate the future, to discover God's will by illegitimate means. We're back in the Garden of Eden, aren't we?
[15:36] You will be like God, knowing good and evil. Now, Peter tells us in his second letter that in Scripture we have everything we need for life and godliness.

Saul did not have the whole of Scripture, but there were these other means which God used before the prophetic canon was fulfilled. Don't dabble in the occult.
It is deadly, it is deceiving, and it is eventually destructive. Don't dabble in what some people see as harmless, Ouija boards, seances and so on.
They're all deadly. They all open the door to unreality. And more seriously, they open the door to Satan. The other thing is, this is an exceptional situation.
This woman, who I think was a charlatan, was accustomed to people coming to her. You know what happens in spiritism. People crushed with grief, burdened with a great load, go to these people who claim that they can put them in touch with their dead loved ones.
[16:45] They manipulate people's grief. They manipulate people's vulnerability. And so often, it's pure charlatanry. But there's always the danger, when you dabble with these matters, that you will open the road to Satan himself.

This is an exceptional situation. And this region got more than she bargained for when Samuel himself actually appeared. So there's the deceit of the occult.
But there is also the deceit of Saul. Verse 8, so Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went. He and two men with him. He's stooping now to use agencies that he had once destroyed.
Unlike Paul, who preached the faith he once destroyed, Saul had gone back to the unbelief. And he is now stooping to inquire from these agencies.
In the days when he listened to the master's voice, he had expelled mediums and necromancers. Once again, it's a repetition of Eden, is it? Adam trying to disguise himself from God.
[17:54] Helplessly and futilely hiding in the trees and putting on a fig leaf. But the supreme irony in verse 10, Saul swore to her by the Lord.

As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing. We've noticed this already in the earlier studies in this book. That Saul is very clever at using the language of religion.
Saul talks the talk. Saul uses pious language. But his heart is totally dark and unbelieving. It's so easy to talk piously.
And our hearts are far away from God. Any pious talk too often guise of a heart that's away from God. And so it is here.
Deadly disobedience. Turning away from the source that he once listened to. And turning to the things he had destroyed. The second element as the story develops is decisive judgment.
[19:02] The drama increases. Verse 11. The woman said, Whom shall I bring up for you? He said, Bring Samuel up for me. When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice.

It's a mysterious part of the story. It's not at all clear how the woman recognized Samuel. Perhaps it's because he was wearing the prophetic robe.
We learn in the Old Testament that these prophets wore a distinctive robe. When Elijah was taken to heaven, for example, the mantle, the robe of Elijah, falls upon Elisha.
But there's a bitter little twist here in this story. If that's the case. Back in chapter 15, when Saul was rejected, Samuel tore his robe as a sign of sorrow.
But Saul kept on behaving as if the judgment had not happened. He kept on persecuting David. He kept on his career of sin and unbelief.
[20:04] And now, if you like, that torn cloak comes back to haunt him at the moment of decisive judgment. Why did she, and why does she recognize Saul?

Once again, it's not made clear. This is part of the drama of the story. Perhaps she thought that only Saul would dare to summon up Samuel because she obviously realized by now that this was

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something she couldn't control.
That's another thing that so often happens the manipulators of the occult. There is a kind of Frankenstein's monster that they are totally incapable of controlling.
Now, these are all interesting parts of the story. They're all details that build up the scene. But that's not the main emphasis here. The main emphasis is not on Samuel himself, but on what Samuel says.
And that's a common theme running through Scripture. It's not the prophet. It's the prophecy. It's not the preacher. It's the preaching. It's not the messenger. It's the message.
[21:08] And notice what's happening here. Even death cannot silence the master's voice. That's what Samuel says. Verse 16.

Why do you ask me since the Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy? Samuel had discovered nothing in the world to come which contradicted or set aside the message he had proclaimed all his life.
No doubt he saw it fuller and more clearly. Nevertheless, the message he had given in life remains valid. And that's why he says, why do you ask me?
The Lord didn't answer because the Lord has nothing more to say. The Lord has said everything he has to say. Heaven and earth will pass away said Jesus but my words will not pass away.
The prophetic word, the word of scripture is not silenced by the death of those who proclaim it. That's so important as said by Wesley, God buries his workers and carries on his work.
[22:21] This is the living word, the abiding word which survives death and the grave. And so decisive judgment is going to follow.

Verse 18, the Lord, verse 17, 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.
See, this is a significant point in David's story as well 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 to you this thing today. Going back again to chapters 15 and 16 where Saul disobeyed the Lord.
You see, Saul is not repenting. Saul is inquiring. He has no intentions of obeying. And that's the problem. People often inquire of the Bible, so to speak.
[23:21] they inquire of the Lord, but they've no intention of obeying. And when that happens, the Lord will take the word away. It happens to individuals.

It happens in churches. Or maybe not literally take the Bible away, but the power of Scripture no longer works. Amos the prophet speaks about a famine of hearing the word of God.
If you go around so many churches today in our land, you will find a famine of hearing the word of God. The Bible is not in the driving seat. Sometimes it's in the passenger seat and giving unwanted advice.
More often it's in the boot. People are no longer listening to the master's voice. And one of the commentators here says, Samuel speaks as a prophet, not as a ghost.
And the seance becomes the occasion for a sermon. That's what's happening here. Saul had gone to try and get supernatural guidance, to get occult revelations of what was going to happen.
[24:25] Instead, grimly, he hears the master's voice, the voice he had rejected. The detail is grim. Moreover, the Lord will give Israel with you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your son shall be with me.

The Lord will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines. And that points beyond Saul to the exile of Israel itself, which once again came.
Read the story as it continues in Samuel 1 and 2 Kings, the disobedience to the word of God. Now, this is not a comfortable message, but no one can deny it as a clear message.
Hearing the master's voice and not obeying brings a death sentence. Turning our back on the only source of authority and of guidance means there will be no guidance given.
See, if we're doing something we know to be wrong, pursuing a path that we know leads away from God, there's no point in asking for guidance, because the Lord will not answer.
[25:36] What we need to do if we're on the way away from God is we need to start obeying, not to inquire. We need to obey the message that we know the light we have been given.

And the end of the chapter of Saul filled with fear, verse 20, no strength in him for he did nothing all day and all night. And then there is this dinner which I'm sure Saul had no appetite for.

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Look at the last words of verse 25, then they arose and went away that night. It's impossible to read this without thinking of another last supper and a figure who went into the darkness.
Judas Iscariot went out and it was night, the night of judgment, the night of destruction. So, there is deadly disobedience which leads to decisive judgment.
judgment. Now, as I say, this is a clear but uncomfortable message and it needs to be heard. And the reason we are in the mess we're in today in the churches in this land is because this message has not been heeded.
[26:54] Because our leaders like Saul have listened to their own ideas and rejected the master's voice. And there's no, you can have all your discussions you like, all your consultations, all your commissions to decide what's to be done.

But none of this will alter scripture. The Lord has spoken and the Lord has spoken clearly. Deadly disobedience which will lead to decisive judgment. Is there then no hope in the story at all?
Is there no light that shines in the darkness? I want to suggest the third element in the story is divine grace, God's grace.
This is a story of terrible judgment. It's a story of deadly disobedience. There's also a story of grace. Look at verse 17. The last words, given it to your neighbor David.
When you see the name David, there is always a light shining. There is always hope. You can see how Saul has decisively shown himself to be unfit to be king.
[28:05] everything he's done since the moment of his rejection has led to that. Now, later in this series, we're going to be looking at David's terrible sin about Uriah and Bathsheba.

And we're going to see how the way that David reacted to that was utterly different, a world away from the way that Saul reacted. We'll come to that eventually. And that takes us back again to chapters 15 to 17.
There is hope for the future. I don't know what the hope's going to be if we've never read this story up till now. But we'll find out that while David is still in Philistine land, that God is working.
There is divine grace, your neighbor David. And I think that's underlined in verses 15 to 19.
As Samuel pronounces judgment, the judgment is terrible as we've seen. There's a word that he repeats, a name that he repeats.
[29:10] Verse 16, the Lord, verse 17, the Lord, verse 18, and verse 19. This is the covenant God who keeps his promises and is committed to his people by those promises that he will not break.

This is a story of dark judgment, but there's also the light of grace shining. This is the God of steadfast love who has chosen David, who is going to point to David's greater son.
And in a time like this, if we find ourselves, if we find ourselves appalled by the present and terrified of the future, where are we going to find hope?
We are going to find it in the Lord. We read in an earlier study some weeks ago, David encouraged himself in the Lord, his God. When everything was falling around him, he encouraged himself in the Lord.
And this story also shows us how we can escape. This judgment is inevitable if we disobey. This judgment will follow if we reject his grace.
[30:25] This story shows us that by opening our hearts and minds and above all our wills to listen to the master's voice, then we need not end up like Saul.

Saul ended up the way he did ultimately because Saul chose to end up the way he did. And as you read Saul's story, you can't help hearing the terrible words of Romans 1, the terrible divine hands off, the Lord gave him over, the Lord gave him over, the Lord gave him over.
Why did the Lord give them over? Because they had rejected him. Why was Saul given over? Because he no longer listened to the master's voice. Now, we mustn't jump to the happy ending. We can't start this story saying this is a story of divine grace. But nor must we leave. They arose and went away that night because the light of grace is shining.
As long as we are listening to the word of God, as long as our hearts are open, as long as our lives are willing to change, and even the stern words of Psalm 95 today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.
[31:47] And the author of Hebrews, picking up that passage says, as long as it is called today. Now, since there never is a day that is not called today, whenever we hear that message, there is the chance to respond.

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There is the chance to open our lives to his grace. There is the chance, once again, to hear the master's voice. Today, if you hear the master's voice, do not harden your heart.
Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Lord, this was a disturbing and powerful story, all the more so because we recognize Saul in each of our hearts.
We recognize how easy it is to turn away, to disobey, and to leave the right path. Father, we pray that each one of us here will indeed open our hearts, that we will not harden our hearts, but that we will open our hearts to the word as it speaks, and therefore enjoy your blessing in this world, and eternal life in the world to come.
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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