

The Weight of the Crown

An Exile and a Witch

1 Samuel 27-28

Mark Vroegop

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 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." 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." Then 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." 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 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. 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." And Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done to you as he spoke by me, for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. 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." 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 (1 Sam. 28:5-20, ESV).

We started our journey through 1 Samuel in January, and we'll hit pause during the summer before starting 2 Samuel in August. From the end of June through July, we'll be taking a look at our church's six Core Values—the foundational building blocks that define and shape who we are. We'll have six of our pastors sharing the Word each week. Apart from a few weeks for camping in July, I'll be here to receive the Word as I start to work on 2 Samuel.

We're coming to the end of 1 Samuel, and chapters 27-28 feature an increasing intensity and complexity. In January, I described 1 & 2 Samuel as a "gray zone" moment in Israel's history. . That phrase comes from Mark Sayers' book *A Non-Anxious Presence*. Here's what he says:

"Gray zones exist in the overlap of two eras. They contain the influence of both the passing and the forming era; this makes gray zones confusing and contradictory."¹

Confusing and contradictory. Those are important and uncomfortable words. Confusing means that you look at a situation and say, "What is going on?" Contradictory means that you say, "I don't know what to do with that." I don't know about you, but I've found myself saying that (either out loud or in my head) a lot over the last years, and I think it's going to continue because it seems that we are living in a gray zone.

Do you know what's helpful about that description? It means that instead of being emotionally upset by the confusion and contradiction, I can embrace them as part of my experience. I can see them as a part of God's plan for the world and for me. In other words, instead of reacting to the presence of confusion and contradiction, what if we accept them as part of God's will?

Let me press this further. Have you ever thought about reading the Bible that way? Now, I'm not suggesting that the entire Bible is confusing or contradictory. But there are parts of it that certainly seem to fall into those categories. There are straight lines, things that are clear. And there are jagged lines, things that are less clear. And the greater the intensity, the more likely it is that things are unclear.

1 Samuel 27-28 are two chapters where the intensity is increasing. There are multiple tension points in this text that require you, as the reader, to lean into the narrative. We find two portraits here. One is about David as he embraces a questionable solution. The other is about Saul and his terrible solution. Let's look at them and see what we can learn together.

David: A Questionable Solution

Chapter 27 is the record of David's decision to flee to the Philistines to protect himself from Saul. There are multiple challenges with this text:

- Why is there no mention of God?
- What is the narrator's intention in including this story?
- What should we do with David's deception and brutality?
- What lessons (if any!) are we meant to learn?

None of this is clear or obvious.

Chapter 27 begins with an intriguing statement by David:

¹ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers: 2022), 23.

Then David said in his heart, “Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand” (1 Sam. 27:1).

How does this verse land on you? I couldn’t find another reference in 1 & 2 Samuel where the Bible refers to David saying something “in his heart.” What’s more, the word “perish” (“I shall perish one day...”) is the same verb used by David in 26:10, but he uses it to describe what will happen to Saul.² Remember that the previous chapter ended with Saul praising David, “You will do many things and will succeed in them” (1 Sam. 26:25).

A few weeks ago, we looked at the account in 1 Samuel 23 where the Ziphites betrayed David, and he barely escaped. Here’s what he wrote in Psalm 54 in response:

*TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A MASKIL OF DAVID, WHEN THE ZIPHITES WENT AND TOLD SAUL, “IS NOT DAVID HIDING AMONG US?” O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth. For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves. Selah **Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.** He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them. With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. **For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies** (Ps. 54).*

Doesn’t it seem like we’re a long way from that moment? What do we make of this? It appears that David may be weary and discouraged. Words like “nothing better for me than . . .” seem to point that way, don’t they? What’s more, it’s not just that he’s trying to escape from Saul. This plan means potentially (at least in perception) aligning himself with the archenemy of Israel.

In verse 2 we learn that David initially lived in Gath. Does that city sound familiar? It’s the city associated with Goliath (1 Sam. 17:4). It must have been a remarkable moment for the conqueror of Goliath to take up residence in this city approximately ten years after the short battle in the Valley of Elah.

Additionally, verse 3 helps us understand that it’s a sizable group of people who are with him. In previous chapters, his army was six hundred men, and this group includes their households along with David’s wives.

David’s strategy worked in terms of relieving the pressure from Saul’s pursuits. Verse 4 indicates that Saul no longer pursued him. Fleeing to the Philistines provided some relief.

² Dale Ralph Davis, [*1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 282.

It's interesting that the narrator simply presents this as a fact. There's no commentary on it. We're left to wonder if David's flight to Philistia is wise or if it's a lack of faith. It's possible too that the narrator wants us to consider that David is worn out, and he's making the best of a bad situation. But it's also possible that he intends for us to view David cautiously or maybe even critically, seeing his choice as a moment of exhausted weakness. Candidly, commentators are all over the map on this one. Hold this tension because it gets more complicated.

Eventually David requests permission to move into the country. He's given the city of Ziklag, about twenty miles to the south of Gath. It would become his home for sixteen months. According to verses 8-9, David used his remote location from Gath to conduct raids against the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites. These are the Canaanite people living in the land. There's an important phrase "from of old" in verse 8, which is pointing to the historic command in Numbers 33:50-56 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5 to conquer and destroy these people since they are under the judgment of God.

David engages in calculated deception with Achish. When he is asked about his raids, he answers with the geographic area (v. 10). What's more, David's men left no one alive to inform Achish (v. 11). As a result, Achish trusts David because he believes that David is attacking Israelites: "He has made himself an utter stench to his people Israel; therefore he shall always be my servant" (v. 12).

This account bleeds into chapter 28. As the Philistines prepare to attack Israel, Achish enlists David into his service, making David his bodyguard (28:2). The narrator leaves this account right here and picks it up again in chapter 29. There are a lot of unresolved questions.

How do we evaluate David's actions here? To be honest, I'm uncertain and conflicted. On the one hand, we could be critical of David as this chapter records no prayer, seeking of God, or divine deliverance. You could make the case that this shows a lack of faith and trust on his part. Perhaps the text is showing us the frail humanity and weakness of David in this moment as he seeks protection from Israel's enemies.

But on the other hand, there's nothing in the text that records divine evaluation or judgment. Perhaps David is trying to care for the large group of people after years of running from Saul. You could argue that David is being prudent and wise. Sometimes we can over-spiritualize things when we have to make a decision that's really complicated and even morally uncertain.

When does a missionary leave the field? How do you help an abused spouse? What HR policies should be resisted, ignored, or embraced? When do you speak up, and when do you remain silent? When do you push forward with boldness, and when do you wait for a better time? What is faith? What is presumption? What is wise? What is foolish?

These are the kinds of questions with which we are left to wrestle. And it reminds us that the Bible is not a record of perfect, mythological heroes. Even the best people were flawed—just like you and me. God used them and worked through them. Uncertainty and complexity are usually a frequent part of gray zone moments.

In my conflation about this text, I'm grateful that the Bible doesn't offer overly simplistic solutions to a complicated world.

Saul: A Terrible Solution

While we are left wondering about David's choices, there's no moral confusion on Saul's choices in chapter 28. The weight of the crown is crushing his moral compass. There's no silence from the narrator this time.

In 28:3 we are reminded that Samuel is dead, and then we read that Saul put "all the mediums and necromancers out of the land." It may sound like he did this recently, but it was probably one of his good early decisions as king. Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy have clear and strong commands about seeking wisdom or information from the dead or from the "dark arts" (see Lev. 19:31, 20:6; Deut. 18:10-11). Mediums and seances with the dead were a major part of Canaanite culture.

In verses 4-5 we learn that the Philistine army has begun their march on Israel. And when Saul observed the Philistine army, ". . . he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly." The situation was deeply concerning.

However, it's verses 6-7 that show us how bad of a place Saul is in. First, Saul has been cut off by the Lord. "And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets" (v. 6). The text has a tone of desperation. Perhaps Saul sought all of these in this situation. Or maybe this was his experience over a period of years.

His desperate need is to seek out a God-alternative voice. Saul asks for a medium, and his servants know exactly where to find one. In verse 8 we have a dark picture of King Saul wearing a disguise and visiting the medium at night with two bodyguards. It's a bleak moment in Israel's leadership.

The medium is concerned that this is a trap, so Saul provides her assurance with these words, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing" (v. 10). It's meant to cause us to shake our heads in disbelief. Saul is off the rails.

Saul wants to talk with Samuel, the dead prophet. He says, "Bring up Samuel for me." Now, we don't know if this woman actually communicated with the dead or not because when she sees Samuel, she screams. Then she realizes who Saul is.

When Saul asks about his appearance, he knows it's Samuel. He falls to the ground. It may have been that a materialized spirit joins Saul and the medium. Or perhaps the woman is speaking for Samuel, like she is possessed. Samuel asks Saul why he has brought him up. Listen to Saul's words:

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" (1 Sam. 28:15).

Samuel's response is devastating:

And Samuel said, “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done to you as he spoke by me, for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. 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” (1 Sam. 28:16-19).

Saul just received news that tomorrow is his and his son’s last day on earth. It’s over. And our text ends with Saul receiving some food and then leaving in the night.

Saul got an answer, but not the one he was looking for.

How do we handle these two accounts? What do you think God is saying through them? There’s a lot I could say about these two accounts, and I’m tempted to draw out some concluding principles in order to bring some order to the chaos. But instead, my heart is drawn to the wisdom of Psalm 1.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Ps. 1)

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