



The Devilish Vice Becomes the Lord's Device!

Considering 1 Samuel 28

The scene is a rock concert. A rock concert in a large city in Holland. A rock concert which seems like many others, except that it's in an old church building. There's the throbbing anticipation of the audience: they're packed like sardines into that hall. It's getting the usual warm up; the support act that no one wants to hear anyway, though they're going to make sure you hear!

Finally, they've finished. Now they're going to get what they have all come to see. In that old church building in Holland, the Australian band INXS stomped out their opening number. With brutal rough-edged throat, the late, well-known, lead singer cries out ... The devil's inside!"

Whoosh – A lightning bolt flashed! The building is struck with devastating force! All power to the concert is instantly cut! Not a note more is played. The devil inside wasn't allowed to get out that night.

The devil had also come inside Saul in 1 Samuel 28. This is a passage that shows the grimmest days for Saul, the king of Israel. The political tide is turning; the opposing-armies are gathering.

Twice, now, David – heir apparent to the throne – has humiliated Saul in front of his troops.

1 Samuel 28: Saul and the Witch of Endor

¹In those days the Philistines gathered their forces to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, "You must understand that you and your men will accompany me in the army." ²David said, "Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do." Achish replied, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life." ³Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land. ⁴The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem, while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. ⁵When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. ⁶He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. ⁷Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said. ⁸So Saul disguised himself putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." ⁹But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" ¹⁰Saul swore to her by the LORD, "As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this." ¹¹Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said. ¹²When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" ¹³The king said to her; "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a spirit coming up out of the ground." ¹⁴"What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. ¹⁵Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" "I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do." ¹⁶Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and

become your enemy? ¹⁷The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors – to David. ¹⁸Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. ¹⁹The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines." ²⁰Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and night. ²¹When the woman came to Saul and saw that he was greatly shaken, she said, "Look, your maidservant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. ²²Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so you may eat and have the strength to go on your way." ²³He refused and said, "I will not eat." But his men joined the woman in urging him, and he listened to them. He got up from the ground and sat on the couch. ²⁴The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she butchered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast. ²⁵Then she set it before Saul and his men, and they ate. That same night they got up and left.

N.I.V.

From outside and inside Israel, Saul doesn't, humanly speaking, have a hope. Before, there had always been the LORD. The God of Israel had been there in the past. He had given Saul guidance. But not now! The manner of guidance the LORD used with the leaders of His people then, by either dreams, or Urim (which the high priest had), or through the prophets, were all gone for Saul. Just as much as he had turned his back against the LORD, so the LORD had turned His back on Saul. Not only in human terms did Saul have no hope; there's now nothing divinely speaking either!

No wonder Saul is desperate. He must know what's going to happen. He is so terribly frightened by that Philistine army that he shows the extent of his rejection of Israel's God by turning to the very thing they had been told never to touch. Saul goes to a person who shouldn't be alive in Israel, let alone able to do the evil practice that she does! You see, Saul seeks a medium – also called a spiritist or a sorceress.

Whatever the name, the purpose is the same, for there is a connection with those the apostle Paul calls – in Ephesians 6 – the rulers and authorities and powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. As much as the Israelites under Joshua were meant to totally obliterate that evil out of the Promised Land, so it had to be always kept out because of the most ultimate threat it was to the LORD's relationship with His people. We read this in verse 3 of 1 Samuel 28: "*Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land.*"

Three Different Possible Meanings to 1st Samuel 28

Why three different meanings? Isn't there only one way that this chapter could possibly be understood? Of course, that's true. Sometimes, though, commentators can disagree about what's happening in a passage. That is what happens with these verses, for faithful Bible-believing commentators have come to have not one or even two interpretations of this scene of Saul with the witch at Endor, but three.

Let me call the first of these the Rationalist view. This is the way that S.G. de Graaf and Cornelius van der Waal and others look at these words. This view goes like this: In Saul's mind the figure of Samuel lived on because he had left such a strong impression, just as there may be people in our own lives who, though dead physically, still have a kind of sway over us. Perhaps that person was your spouse, a close relative, or a dear friend.

By way of telepathy, Saul transmitted that image to the mind of the medium. For example, it wasn't Saul who saw Samuel come up out of the ground the medium did. She gave shape to what Saul had transmitted to her mind. Notice, they say, that as soon as she "saw Samuel", she recognised Saul. At that moment she had contact with Saul's mind, especially with his self-consciousness over against "Samuel".

This view goes on to say that the conversation between Saul and "Samuel" was actually a conversation Saul had with himself. Saul asked and answered his own questions in his mind; the figure of "Samuel" and the answers given by "Samuel" were creations of Saul's own mind, which were then channelled through the medium. Since Saul knew the mess he was in, and kind of knew what was about to happen, he more or less gave his own answer to his questioning conscience.

S.G. de Graaf illustrates this by pointing out how we can create someone in our dreams who answers our questions, with those answers sometimes being amazingly true. That voice is said to be our own conscience. Van der Waal further suggests, in line with this rationalist view, that the witch was probably in a separate room, speaking to Saul through a hole in the wall, and so she may well have deceived Saul through ventriloquy.

A Rationalist View

I call this the Rationalist view because it interprets the text by what we can see and explain in so-called logical ways. And they are right to say that many charlatans operate with this type of mind-reading or ventriloquy, also with sleight of hand. Many fortune tellers tell you back simply what you have already told them, without you even realising what you've showed them; not just by your words, but your clothes, your mannerisms, and so on.

But I also call this the Rationalist view because it assumes that it can only be explained by what we can know. It is really a part of the same thinking that science will explain everything that there is to be known. But science has failed to do this. That whole sense of continual progress which came from the Enlightenment has come to a screeching halt. The 1990s have seen the recognition amongst scientists that the more we know, the more we realise how much we don't know. While there are so-called magicians and fortune tellers and card readers who operate on this basis, that is not what's going on in the text.

A Spiritist View

Then there is the Spiritist perspective. This has been a dominant understanding throughout church history. John Calvin was one recognised commentator who held to this view, as did also Matthew Henry. Henry points out that it was divination by the dead – which is called necromancy – by which Saul sought to find out the future. That Saul wanted to know the future like this already shows his lack of faith; there's no confidence or assurance of where he stands with the LORD here. It was a way specifically banned by the LORD. Moses had long before spelt out its detestability in the sight of the LORD, and how it was because of these detestable practices that God had driven out the previous inhabitants of Canaan. Although it was widely believed that souls existed after death, and that these souls possessed great knowledge, Saul knew well enough that they were evil spirits. The witch herself admits as much, in her fear concerning Saul's previous treatment of mediums like herself.

This Spiritist view further says that if it was really Samuel who appeared, and not the diabolical spirits she knew, then the witch would have been much more afraid of Samuel, who was a good prophet, than of Saul, who was a wicked king. They say that this spirit, looking like Samuel, was consistent with the type of devilish deceit Satan plays. He is the father of lies after all. Though Saul had come in disguise, Satan sees him. It's actually Satan's disguise as Samuel, they say, which fools Saul.

They point to the negative response of this spirit, as proving it to be an evil spirit, for here the devil does with Saul as he did with Judas a thousand years later, when he tells him everything is so lost and helpless, he best sell his master out, and then later he might as well kill himself. And to prove that it was definitely Satan, this view points to the affirmation from this apparition that it is the LORD speaking through him. As 2 Corinthians 11 says, since "*...Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light ... it is not surprising (that) his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness*" (vs 14f).

Just Like Today

Saul's wanting to know his future is also typical of much witchcraft today. It is made up essentially of people seeking to know their future and dabbling with the spirits, through such things as Ouija boards and séances. But that is one thing the devil cannot know – the future. So he puts on this great facade of knowing everything, especially the future, to suck people in.

But there is one thing that he does know, and he knows very well, and that is what has happened already. His spirits can well pretend to be people who have died in the past because of what they know of that past. Do not think that those spirits are the souls of the dear departed – those who have died are either in heaven or hell.

Let us not think either that we can somehow conjure up good spirits, like white witches will try to convince us that they're actually on the side of right. The LORD has said that He does not operate that way. That is why He banned this kind of thing altogether!

There are such things as ghosts and spirits who haunt this world. But don't think that any of them will convert men and women to the faith! Quite the opposite! Satan will do whatever he can to distract people away from the LORD and to become trapped into this doomed world of darkness. Just ask someone who has come out of it. A Christian friend of mine was suffering the most depressing nightmares years after she had been converted from that lifestyle! In this way Calvin and Henry and Luther were quite right! The devil is that close it could have been him that Luther threw his ink bottle at when he believed he was being tempted!

A Danger

There is a danger here, though. It's the danger some fundamentalist Christians came into during the late 1970s. These believers began to see everything in terms of an overt Satanic attack, from the names and lyrics of heavy metal rock groups – which, indeed sometimes were devilish – to the numbers stamped on credit cards. You certainly wouldn't have a personal computer if you followed their line of thought! They have begun to see something behind what is there, literally. With Scripture, that is wrong unless the text itself tells us so. That is why I want to propose here the Literalist view.

The Literalist View

Here we take the words at face value. This means we understand these verses to say that the departed prophet really did appear and announce Saul's destruction, not, however, because of the magical craft of the witch, but through a miracle worked by the omnipotence of God. The LORD used a crooked stick to point to the right way. That's certainly not the way it's meant to be for us: still it does prove that in all things God is working for the end of His purpose.

The accurate prophecy of the fate awaiting Saul and his sons proves it is from the LORD. For though it is true that the LORD does sometimes give to devils the power of revealing secrets to us, which they've learned from the LORD, the LORD also clearly indicates then that it is a devilish deception.

Consider also the reaction of the witch. She got the shock of her life to see Samuel! This wasn't any of the evil spirits she knew, but the very prophet who had exposed and deposed so many of them! You see, it was by God's own special command that Samuel's spirit appeared there. The appearance is so unique that it shows the witch and the king and everyone that God doesn't allow anyone to do what they want, especially those dabbling with the devil!

Saul's reaction to all this confirms it to be true. The phrase, "*he didn't even have a prayer*", applies here, for Saul's heart is hardened. As deeply depressed as he is, it will not bring about any repentance. He is too hardened in his sin to be open to the Spirit. Like Faust, in the opera, he has even gone as far as selling his soul to the devil.

Two Different Forces

Whichever of these three views you take, it still comes down to only two different forces – two totally different opposites, as far away from each other as heaven is from hell. For there is, on the one hand, the System of Satan. He continues his battle with the hosts of heaven, and especially he targets those anointed ones through whom the Prince of Heaven one day will come. That much he does know about the future, because God has said so.

But the dangerous deception of Satan's system is that it is not something way back there, three thousand years ago. It's set up against us – right here! When the apostle Paul warns us to take our stand against the devil's schemes, he wants us to know that it's especially against believers, those who share the anointing today, that the devil is attacking. Forget the world – Satan's already got that! But the gates of hell are coming up against the Church!

They are not, either, looking like the grim gates that Faust saw with the sign, "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here". They actually seem to be the most light and bright and beckoning entrance imaginable. Just as many of this world's fleshy entertainment spots are so attractive, especially when compared with the outside of so many churches. And that's just it! The fact that the witch could ply her business there in the promised land, even though there had been a purge before, shows just how deep a hold evil can have, right among the chosen people.

But the gates of hell won't prevail! As much as Satan's Schemes may seem to be so seducing and overwhelming, and the struggle for you so very grim, God will triumph still! The last word is His!

Though that lightning bolt which struck that concert when the devil was declared to be in control, may not have converted anyone that night, it doesn't change the truth of who's in control. It can't change the fact that only through Jesus Christ can you be saved! *"For God so loved the world that he sent His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16).

You can take that or leave it. But let me remind you, when you turn a deaf ear to that Word – the Word who is the Living Word, Christ Jesus Himself – it's at the peril of your own soul! Then the gates of hell could well prevail against you because you're not inside the right city. Then the devil is inside **you!**

I invite you to take a look at the world around you. Is there a sense of real optimism and happiness out there? Aren't we rather seeing the end result of man's own progress. Mankind thought he could do it all; the sky was the limit! Like the Tower of Babel, though, all that's happened is complete confusion. The devil's had a field day!

Perhaps that's what it feels like in your own life right now. You have tried to do it on your own, maybe you have even got caught up in traps so that you could do it on your own. But you are not alone are you? Oh, you may well be feeling that, like Saul. There's still one difference though. He didn't have a prayer! But you do!

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