

'Drawing Near to God'

Seeking Security

Any scan of almost any newspaper or any modern magazine will indicate that we live in a world of insecurities.

Deep inside we know that we cannot control our destinies.

We are fearful of the future and afraid of the impact of the present.

And our fear displays itself in every area of our lives.

And one of the principal ways in which it shows itself is our manipulation.

We seek to assuage our fear by trying to manipulate our physical situations.

We fear ageing and death.

And so we exercise more, diet more, use cosmetics or even surgery.

Though we know the truth, we try and cheat it.

Or we fear daily life and what it might bring.

And so we seek to assuage our fear by bringing in experts from science, psychology or economics.

We listen to them in their white coats, their computers, and with their many qualifications.

We read the latest self help books that promise success.

We buy the latest hints from the latest guru.

We diagnose our personalities with the latest personality profiling tools.

And we follow the latest investment strategies.

And by such means we cling to the hope that we can know ourselves, change ourselves, change our future or simply bring stability.

Our modern fears are displayed everywhere.

And they are not only displayed in the sciences and economics.

For we also seek to assuage our fear by trying to manipulate non scientific forces that might help.

These external forces include the spiritual or metaphysical.

And so people consult horoscopes.

They go to mediums.

They wander into occult practices.

And by these mechanisms we try and control or at least understand our destiny.

Friends, we have come a long way in the book of 1 Samuel.

We have seen the rise of David and the machinations of Saul.

Well, tonight we come to the dying days of Saul.

And in these chapters he is a man in deep distress.

As a young man he was successful and blessed by God.

But he has seen these days of success and blessing drift away.

He is now a very isolated man.

A tragic man.

He is cut off from God.

Bereft of God's prophet, Samuel.

Isolated from his family and many in his nation.

He is a solitary, lonely man,

Fearful, and fighting for survival.

And in his isolation and fear he engages in some bizarre behaviour.

Tonight we are going to concentrate on one act in his drama.

We are going to see if his actions can teach us something about ourselves.

For we can so easily identify with Saul.

For we too often find ourselves isolated.

We too fear our futures.

So, let's turn to 1 Samuel.

Let's start by getting a quick overview of the chapters in which this story occurs.

The story of 1 Samuel 27-29

Remembering the context

You may remember the larger context.

The book of 1 Samuel is about the inauguration of kingship in Israel.

The first king is Saul.

He started off well.

He was chosen by God and blessed by God.

However, he disobeyed God and was rejected as king.

In his place, God chose another unlikely candidate, the shepherd David.

David proved to be a great warrior and a man of God.

He was God's appointee.

However, Saul still occupied the throne.

And so, since about chapter 18, David and Saul have been at loggerheads.

David has been trying to stay out of Saul's way.

And Saul has been trying to get rid of David.

Last week we saw Saul at David's mercy twice.

However, David refused to take advantage of the situation.

His argument was that Saul was God's anointed and if God wanted him removed he could do it himself.

He, David, was not going to be responsible for Saul's removal from office.

So, there is the background.

Now let's quickly survey the chapters around our main passage for tonight.

David in a Philistine Court (27:1-28:2)

In chapter 27, David escapes to the land of the Philistines.

He and six hundred men flee to the court of Achish, the king of Gath.

Achish gives him the country town of Ziklag.

And from there David engages in raids on some of the enemies of Israel.

When questioned by Achish, David lies about his activities and pretends that he has been raiding Israelite territory.

Achish is sucked in by this behaviour and develops a significant trust in David.

Anyway, the day comes when Achish and the Philistines themselves gather to wage war on Israel themselves.

Achish calls upon David to join in battle.

David agrees.

And Achish says that he will make David his personal bodyguard for life.

David dismissed by the Philistines (29:1-11)

This situation is very delicate for David.

He has sheltered with the Philistines.

He has lied about his raids.

His heart is with his people but those people are under the rule of Saul.

If he joins the war against Israel and they win he will have been part of getting rid of God's anointed.

The Israelites will hardly embrace him as their ruler.

And he will have been found to have been fighting against God and his people.

However, if he refuses to go out to war with the Philistines then his past activities will be seen to be a lie and his current shelter may be jeopardised.

And so it is that David pursues the façade.

The rest of the Philistines see David.

They raise the issue of his commitment, referring to him using the derogatory term 'Hebrews'.

Achish comes to his defence.

But the Philistines reject the defence.

They suspect what Achish should have suspected.

They suspect that he cannot be other than a Hebrew.

They remind Achish that this is the man who is sung about as a hero in Israelite songs.

Achish speaks to David.

David pretends that his feelings are hurt.

He returns home.

And the Philistines advance toward Israel.

The Medium at Endor (28:3-19)

It is while all of this is going on that the events of chapter 28 occur.

The story itself is straightforward.

Last week we heard about the death of Samuel the prophet.

The Philistines are gathering for war against Israel.

War in Israel is holy war.

And to wage holy war, you need to have God on side.

Saul knows this.

He longs to hear from God.

But God does not speak to him by any of the usual means.

And so Saul resorts of unusual means.

Although he had previously expelled mediums it is clear that they were still in the land.

He gets his servants to track one down.

He disguises himself and goes to the medium.

He asks her to bring up Samuel.

And she succeeds.

Saul falls to the ground before him.

And the Samuel who confronts him is as cantankerous in death as he was in life.

He asks why he has been raised.

Saul explains his dilemma.

Samuel rebukes him a second time for his failure in chapter 15.

And he then promises that the Lord will further desert him in battle the next day.

Saul is devastated.

He loses all strength.

The medium is also terrified.

But then this outsider and practitioner of outlawed arts cares for this rejected king.

They eat a sentenced man's last meal and rise and go away to an assured death.

Remembering chapter 15

So, there is our overview of the chapters.

Now my own view is that chapter 28 has a number of deliberate links with chapter 15.

Turn back to chapter 15 with me and you'll see what I mean.

In chapter 15 David is not present nor on view.

Saul is king.

He has been told to engage in holy war on the enemies of God and his people, the Amalekites.

But he refuses to be rigorous in his pursuit of holy war.

He spares the best of Amalek.

And he spares Agag the king.

And in response to his disobedience the word of the Lord comes to Samuel.

And Samuel goes to Saul.

And I want you to look with me at what he says in 1 Samuel 15:22ff.

²²*And Samuel said,*

“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?

Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.

²³*For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.*

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.”

Now the first thing I want you to notice is the reference to divination.

This immediately links the two chapters together.

Second, I want you to notice the words that are linked together.

First, there is a string of words that are used negatively.

Can you see them there?

The words are burn offerings, sacrifice, rebellion, stubbornness, iniquity, and idolatry.

But there is also words that are used positively.

The words are obedience and heeding.

Can you see what is common about the negative words.

The negative words all contain reference to things that can so easily become centred around humans.

Sacrifice can easily be a way humans seek to manipulate God.

Divination and idolatry are ways that humans seek to short circuit or sideline God.

Rebellion and stubbornness or arrogance are when humans seek to assert themselves against God.

The positive words convey an alternative approach.

And this alternative approach is founded upon obedience and heeding.

Now I want you to notice something about these two words.

Both words assume that God is accessible.

Both assume that God has made himself known or accessible in his word.

All that God requires is to heed that word, to obey that word.

You see, to heed God's word is to heed God.

To obey God's word is to obey God.

To trust God's word is the means by which humans can relate to God.

God is accessible in his word.

What he requires of us is that we live by that word.

He wants people to tremble at that word.

His desire is that they are determined to live not by their wits but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And the point that Samuel makes here and in chapter 28 is that Saul will not do this.

And God responds by making clear that Saul has been rejected as king.

It is a tough word.

It is a clear word.

But it is not a word that Saul can accept.

And so he seeks alternatives.

And this search for alternatives just leads him deeper and deeper into sin.

And eventually his rebellion leads him into bizarre acts of conjuring up the dead.

And when he does, Samuel tells him what he already knew.

God's word is clear and irrevocable.

But Saul has no place for it.

He therefore has no place for God.

And God has no place for him until he finds a place for God.

Can you see what I'm saying?

Saul is a man caught in fear and isolation.

He is like the person who has found themselves ill with an incurable disease.

The doctors have pronounced a diagnosis.

But the person is not satisfied.

They search for alternatives.

Eventually they become so desperate that they turn to the unproved.

They turn to the fringe.

And in these things they seek a cure.

The tragedy is that Saul did not need to do this.

You see, God was nearby.

He was nearby in his word.

It is just that Saul did not like God's word.

Implications for us

Friends, I wonder if you can see the implications of this for us.

We live in a terrifying world.

There are many things to fear.

Disease.

Environmental collapse.

Employment fragility.

Family disintegration.

Death.

Sickness.

Unfriendly spiritual forces.

Our own inability.

In that world, God can seem out of control and inaccessible.

But he is not.

He is God.

He has given us his word.

That word is Jesus Christ.

He is God's living and incarnate word.

And he is revealed in God's written word.

And in this word God has given us everything that is necessary for life and godliness.

Can you see what I'm saying?

God is not inaccessible.

God is present to this world.

He is present in his word.

He is present in the gospel—the word about his Son.

He is present in the scriptures that tell us about his Son.

God is very clear.

He is a speaking God.

And he has bound himself to his word.

So, in the fragility of this world, where can we go?

Samuel has made it clear.

Do not go to human inventions.

Don't turn to human arrogance.

Don't turn to science with all its promises.

Don't turn to psychology.

Don't turn to the metaphysical sciences.

For these things do not fully capture reality.

God is the source of reality.

And God is found in his word.

What is needed is to heed that word.

What is needed is to obey that word.

The loneliness of Saul as he goes out in chapter 28 of 1 Samuel is a horrifying prospect.

He has rejected God's word.

He has therefore isolated himself from God himself.

And here he sits in the comfort of this medium, this conjurer of the dark forces.

The meal he shares is an empty meal.

It is not a meal in the presence of God.

It is a dying man's meal.

A barren comfort when the comfort of God's presence in his word has always been accessible if he would but tremble at it.

Friends, it would be easy to finish here.

However, I think that I need to push on.

You see, my own suspicion is that many of us here know the theory of what I've said tonight.

However, I wonder if we believe it.

And one of the ways you can tell what people believe is how they act.

And so I want to ask you tonight how your personal reading of God's word is going.

I wonder if it is regular.

I wonder if it is disciplined.

And if it is not, I wonder if I might urge you to reinstate it.

You see the only infallible place where God has spoken about himself and his Son is in the scriptures.

These scriptures are breathed out by him.

They are from his mouth.

And he has made clear that we are to be people that live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Let's do that in our individual lives.

And let's do that in our corporate life together.

We are people of God's word.

Let's not be left barren with counterfeits.

Let the word of God dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.