

## When God Does Not Answer 1 Samuel 28:3-25

*“And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him...”*

**Introduction:** There was a Roman Catholic mystic in the sixteenth-century named Saint John of the Cross who wrote a famous poem and explanation on the theme of *“The dark night of the soul”*. In it, he described the experience of a person who endures a night or longer period of spiritual torment or distance from God, which is usually followed by an experience of God’s blessing and peace.<sup>1</sup> Now I’m not sure if we take many cues from 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic mystics, but most of us can relate to and have tried to describe times in our life that God *feels* distant, where our prayers *feel* like they are not being answered, and that loneliness and sadness have been our constant companion. We use terms like being in the *“desert”* or *“dry”* to describe what is going on in our mind and heart, where at one time the Lord was close and worship was vibrant but now it is more cold or forced, where we go through the motions but the intimacy is not there. Some of us have experienced this same phenomenon in marriage, where we are around our spouse and we do things in the same space, but the connection that was once there now feels light years away. This is also surprisingly experienced among seminary students, who study the Bible daily and books about the Bible, but the whole exercise becomes academic, leaving their relationship with God anemic.

This morning we will be considering King Saul on the night before he dies in his last battle with the Philistines. Last week we observed David in a period of time, 16 months to be exact, where he tired of waiting, prompting him to take matters into his own hands, going down to hide with the Philistines, and in gaining trust with Achish, king of Gath, he both lied and killed his way around the land. This left David in a bit of a pinch, as now the Philistines were moving into position for all-out war against Israel, and Achish expecting David to go with them: *“Understand that you and your men are to go out with me in the army”* (1 Sam. 28:1), with David responding, *“Very well, you shall know what your servant can do”*. It was unclear whether David had a plan to turn on Achish as they went into Israel, but it is clear that David NEVER turned on his people. Though he may have operated in less than ideal ways for 16 months, he STILL functioned for the ultimate good of his people. David struggled for times in his life, but he always turned to pursue the LORD.

On the other hand, we have Saul. From the beginning of his reign, he struggled with everything. He could not find his father’s donkeys and needed help (1 Sam. 9:4), hid among the baggage (10:22) in fear, couldn’t wait for Samuel and offered a foolish sacrifice (13:10), which caused God to reject his kingly line. He made a foolish vow and almost had his son Jonathan killed (14), and finally refused to devote everything to destruction after the defeat of the Amalekites, specifically keeping Agag alive (15), which prompted God to take away the kingdom and give it to another. Saul is an example of someone who has been given all the resources to succeed, but could not get out of his own way. He functioned at such a level of selfishness and pride, that he actually killed his own priests and tried to kill his best servant in David. He was paranoid, joyless and unsettled. He had the *“appearance of godliness, but denied its power”* (2 Tim. 3:5). He was stubborn and rebellious, but also was entitled and saw himself as a victim. He saw God as Someone to be leveraged, not worshiped, to be used, not glorified. It is no wonder that at the end of his life, God not only **rejected Saul, but stopped answering him and became his enemy.**

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Phillips, “1 Samuel: Reformed Expository Commentary”, p. 471.

So our question this morning: *what do we do when we find ourselves in a dark night? Is there a way out of the desert? Is there a difference between David and Saul when it comes to our struggles with trust and faithfulness?* The answer to these questions is the difference between faith-driven joy and joyless self-trust, and also repentant new life and rebellious apostasy.

### Desperate Times, Dreadful Measures (3-14)

The Bible is written *literally*, gives us true *historical* information, and is *grammatically* consistent. It says what it means and means what it says, and tells about real people in real time. But it is also written strategically. Here's what I mean. 1 Samuel 28:2 leaves the reader in tension, wondering what would happen to David as a dramatic battle was forming. Instead of releasing the tension, the scene dramatically shifts, from David's tension to Saul's. It's like a movie that switches from character to character, or an episode that ends with a cliffhanger. The narrative will pick back up in ch. 29 with David, but for now, we get a sense of the growing battle through the perspective of Saul...and **he is in a desperate way.**

The text gives us **three key pieces of information** in verse 3: 1) Samuel had died, which had happened years before (1 Sam. 25), but who was Saul's main go to? 2) Saul had put out the mediums and necromancers in the land, which was what **Deuteronomy 18** said, since those who practiced these demonically driven acts should be put to death (Lev. 20:6, 27). 3) Israel was in the process of being surrounded, as the Philistines assembled at **Shunem** (see map) and **Aphek** (29:1), meaning that at Mt. Gilboa, Saul and his troops would be cut off from the North and West with enemies coming up from the South. As he looked at the landscape, he was both **afraid and his heart trembled greatly.**

Desperate times often lead to dreadful measures. Now notice in the text what verse 6 says, "*And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him*". If that is not one of the most sobering verses in the Bible, I don't know what is. Saul tried everything in his religious arsenal that he could to get through to the Lord, but nothing was coming through dreams and visions (as they had since Moses' day – Num. 12:6), nor through the Urim, a priestly garb that could show God's will (Num. 27:21), and no prophets were speaking. Now, the irony, of course, is that Saul put almost all the priests to death (1 Sam. 22), only leaving Abiathar alive, who took the linen ephod with him. **But Saul did not see the irony.** He knew the religious tools, but did not know his God. He pursued things FROM God, but did not want Him. In fact, in **1 Chron. 10:14**, it says, "*He did not seek guidance from the LORD*". In other words, he inquired, but not in a personal and humble way. **In His pride, he did not think the problem could have been him, but saw the problem being outside of himself!** Such are all who feel victimized by their own selfishness, never turning from their sin and repenting.

Since Saul was far from self-aware or self-evaluative, he took the next logical step in his mind: **let me find a diviner, a medium to help me figure out what to do!** Saul consistently showed that he could not make decisions on his own, had little conviction, and chose what was expedient and pragmatic. There is much **irony** in this whole scene. 1) **Irony #1** – Saul asked for a medium, and it did not take long for his men to find one. It almost seems like he was a politician who held a certain standard for everyone else but not himself (glad that doesn't happen today!), and was willing to violate his command for his own advantage. 2) **Irony #2** – He risked his life to get to a demonically driven helper – he and his two men had to skirt the Philistine camp to be able to get to the medium at **Endor**. 3) **Irony #3** – When Saul got to the medium, she balked at his request, citing the royal decree and the death penalty for those who practiced

this pagan art. So Saul **swore to her by the LORD!!!** This is the definition of irony and foolish living. He swore an oath of her safety by the same God he was rejecting and rebelling against.

**4) Irony #4 – The demonically driven medium unexpectedly conjured up what Saul requested –** Saul had asked her to bring him Samuel, an audacious request. Mediums were those who stood between the demonic world and human world, and *necromancers* were those who seemingly interacted with the dead. I say “seemingly” because we know that the dead cannot be raised but that demons are real. The demonic host, just like Satan himself, exist and function as angels of light (2 Cor. 11:14) and use lies and deception as their greatest weapon (John 8:44). The demonic host is real and has delegated authority in this world. That is why Paul was so adamant that believers **STAND** against the schemes of the devil by putting on the armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18).

When the medium used her common trickery and parlor tricks to conjure up the dead, to her shock and horror, Samuel actually came forth, dressed in a robe. She had never actually raised someone from the dead, and whatever had been done was delivered by demons. But this time, it is clear, this woman nor a demonic host had the power to do this, but this was an exceptional time where God allowed a dead person to visit the living, similar to Moses and Elijah at Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt. 17). She knew right away that this was Saul, and in another ironic statement, he told her **to NOT be afraid, when that was the exact point everyone SHOULD have been.** He bowed down to the vestige of Samuel, setting the scene for a devastating message.

#### **Desperate Hope, Devastating Message (15-19)**

*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.”<sup>16</sup> And Samuel said, “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy?<sup>17</sup> **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.**<sup>18</sup> **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.**<sup>19</sup> 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.”*

God’s silence turned into a deafening blow to Saul, as Samuel brought devastating news to Saul about his past, present, and future. In a Dickens-esque scene (where perhaps *A Christmas Carol* drew inspiration), Samuel asked, “Why have you disturbed me and brought me here?” It is clear that this was not expected or received in a positive light. It is also clear that Saul’s character was on full display. He identified as being in **great distress**, since that is how he viewed most of his life. He played the **victim**, as the Philistines were warring against me, and God has **turned from me** and does not even answer me anymore. Finally, Saul showed how little conviction he had in life outside of self-preservation or self-justification, and asked Samuel what he should do. **Imagine that!?!** Here is the leader of Israel, God’s chosen man who had the written Law of God, who had been trained by a prophet of God, who at the time of peril could not figure out how to tie his shoe! He risked his life to get to a demonic medium with the *hope* to conjure up a **dead leader** who could tell him what to do in a situation! I have counseled people who live this way, and it is maddening. **Conviction and decision-making comes from having a clear understanding of our purpose and informed understanding of the truth so that we can apply the**

**principles of Biblical wisdom in every situation.** Saul had none of this, since he had always lived vicariously through others. This was exposed the most in the time of greatest stress.

Samuel's response was NOT flowery but was clear.

1. **You are not going to get anything different from me since you have become an enemy of God since YOU turned from Him.**
2. **Everything happening is a fulfillment of a promise given by God from the past.** If you need a refresher, Saul, let's just review our notes:

**1 Samuel 15:22 – 23** - And Samuel said,

*"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.*

<sup>23</sup> **For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.**

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

Notice **a few things** from this incident with the Amalekites: 1) God simply wanted obedience, and Saul tried to justify his disobedience by saying "we did it to make an offering to you!" 2) Notice that rebellion is like the sin of interacting with demonic hosts. Saul fulfilled both ends of the spectrum by the end of his life; 3) God had rejected Saul **NOT** because He is whimsical and unfair, but because Saul rejected Him! This is so important to understand our dark nights.

We also read in 1 Samuel 15:26-28 that God was tearing the kingdom away from Saul and giving it to another, someone **better**, since Saul refused to kill King Agag as he was instructed. What was happening in Saul's life was simply a future fulfillment of past sin.

3. **You, and your sons, will join me in death tomorrow** – In a stark and sure comment, death for Saul was imminent and known. God was going to exact justice by judgment, and the Philistines would win because **God would give the army of Israel over to the Philistines.**

Now it is here that we pause and consider our introductory questions. What does this teach us about our dark nights when God feels distant, or we feel dry, or we're not sure what to do? Let me give a few principles that will shed light on this conundrum:

- 1) **God does not listen to sinners** – *"We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him"* (John 9:31) – In other words, when Saul was in rebellion, or anyone is in rebellion, God will not listen. Now, does God respond to a cry in faith of repentance, belief, and asking for forgiveness?! The Scripture gives a clear and abounding "YES!", as seen in the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20) and tax collector (Luke 18:13-14). Saul's rebellion was progressive, and those who have heard the gospel and continue to harden drive themselves further and further away. They may cry foul that God has left them, but the reality is they have driven themselves away, and must humbly repent to be heard again or for the first time.
- 2) **We must deal with our own sin as the source of dry, dark days** – Sin is the enemy of faith, and sin creates a barrier between us and the LORD. Sin is also the height of pride and selfishness, and God does not present Himself as a Genie in a bottle but a Glorious God to be worshiped,

pursued, and valued. *What does this mean if we are not sure about our sin and disconnect with God? James 4:4-10 gives us a pathway:*

*“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to **be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” 7 **Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.** 8 **Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.** 9 **Be wretched and mourn and weep.** Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”***

What do we do when we have become enemies of God because we have been a friend of the world? **1) Submit, wholeheartedly, to the LORD, which means willingly placing ourselves under His authority and loving leadership;** **2) Resist the devil** – Put on the armor, see the deceit, and turn away; **3) Draw near to God** – Stop asking God to fix or give stuff, and simply draw near to Him as your greatest delight (Ps. 37:4); **4) Recognize, Confess, and Repent** of our sin, both overt and hidden, both things done and not done, both action and attitude – it is the broken and contrite (Isa 57:15) that God dwells with. Contrition means we are devastated by our own sin in light of God’s love and glory, and tears are an appropriate response; **5) We humble ourselves** – we stop blaming others, blaming circumstances, and take responsibility for our plight, and turn from “self” and with nothing in our hands, ask for forgiveness and come into His presence.

Has God felt distant because you have been a friend of the world, delighting in everything *except God*, and then wondering why God feels so distant. This is a process we **MUST** consider, both for the joy of our heart and salvation of our soul.

- 3) Finally, it may not be a result of sin that God feels distant, but He is walking us through a wilderness, like He did David, to teach us and train us for His own purposes** – In this, we keep pursuing, crying out, calling out, and seeking Him. The Psalms are full of these experiences.  
**Psalm 13:**

*“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?...**But I have trusted in your steadfast love;** my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me.”*

This is the cry of FAITH in the midst of dark nights. Even in Psalm 88, where there is no resolution, there is a determined faith to pursue the Lord, even when it seems He’s distant. We cling to the promise, as believers, that **He will never leave us or forsake us** (Heb. 13:5; cf. Deut 31:8), and we have a great High Priest of whom we can draw near with **confidence** to find grace and mercy at His throne of Grace (Heb. 4:16)

### **Desperate Response, Deplorable Meal (20-25)**

This story ends in as sad of a way as it began. We remember today that there is always hope for sinners. God will listen to our cries of faith for forgiveness, but Saul went another way. The final night of his life,

Saul was devastated, but stayed at the **demonic medium's house**, and she convinced him to eat something to gain strength, which he finally did, and then he rose and went away at night. This is not the first time someone listened to the voice of a woman and complied with the demonic host to **"take and eat"**. This was eerily similar to Adam's descent into sin, as he took and ate. But it also points to the next time we hear **"take and eat"**. Just as Saul scurried away at night, so did Judas on that last night of Jesus' life, filled with demonic rage and deception. But in these scenes of sadness and devastation, the bright light of hope shines through. We know that when Jesus said, **"take and eat"**, it was not out of distrust or self-preservation, but for the ***forgiveness of our sin through His shed blood and broken body.*** Jesus died and rose so that we can turn from our rebellion and to Him, to worship Him, love Him, pursue Him and find satisfaction in Him. That is the call today! Humble yourselves, ask for forgiveness, and draw near to God, and He will draw near to you! This is the solution to the dark night of our soul!