



Community Group Discussion Guide

March 30, 2025

1 Samuel 28: 3-25 | Saul's Last Shot

MOTIVATE

- ⇒ **Starter Question: Discuss highs and lows of Saul's time as king. Are there any moments of obedience? What seems to be his lowest point?**

DISCUSS

Since the time of Joshua, the Philistines continued to plague Israel with battles and invasions. Their consistent threat led the Israelites to demand a king (1 Samuel 8), which led to Saul's anointing (1 Samuel 10). Saul was supposed to destroy all the enemies of God and His people—something he failed to do (1 Samuel 15). While the events of 1 Samuel 28:3-25 take place chronologically between 1 Samuel 29 and 30, the narrator includes them here to contrast the way David and Saul handle the dilemmas before them. David's dilemma is introduced in the first two verses of 1 Samuel 28 and is picked up again in 1 Samuel 29. (See [1 Samuel Overview](#) for more information.)

- ⇒ **How was the presence of the Philistine army evidence that Saul had not fulfilled his role as king?**

Saul's life of folly and rejection of the Lord culminated in war with the Philistines for a final time in 1 Samuel 31. Before getting into the details of that battle the narrator gives us a glimpse into Saul's inner thoughts in 1 Samuel 28. The king, once described as a man of valor, was weak and terrified to his core. In his despair, he stooped to blatant sin and blasphemy by consulting a medium to seek guidance from the deceased prophet, Samuel. This narrative is bleak and bizarre and leaves many unanswered questions. But it certainly shows that outward religious acts to God without actual heart surrender will not give access to Him. God's grace, forgiveness, and protection are extended to those who earnestly seek Him and His will for the sake of knowing and loving Him, not as a means to personal gain.

1 Samuel 28:3 Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land.

- ⇒ **What did the loss of Samuel mean for Saul?**

Verse three sets the stage for the story by reminding us of two historical events: Samuel's death and Saul's previous attempts to remove mediums and necromancers from Israel. At some point in Saul's kingship, he enforced the commands of the Mosaic Law that forbade engaging with the spirits of the dead. The Hebrew word "*ob*" can refer to "spirit of the dead," "necromancy," or "medium." It is most often translated in the Bible as "medium," which is a person who practices necromancy.

Necromancy is the act of conjuring spirits of the dead to predict or influence the future. Secular archaeology has found ample evidence that these practices were pervasive in the ancient Near East. The Israelites are the only known culture that forbade such practices. God alone has sovereignty over

the future, so any attempts to change that via another power were considered blasphemous and would be punished through expulsion from the community or by stoning (Leviticus 20:6, 27).

- ⇒ **Throughout Scripture, what is God’s attitude toward mediums, necromancers, occult practices, or other forms of magic? How should we handle these as Christians?**

1 Samuel 28:4-7 The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. **5** When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. **6** And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. **7** 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.”

In this instance, the Philistine’s military position gave them an advantage over the Israelites by geographically separating the northern Israelite tribes from Saul, forcing battle in an open field instead of the mountains where the Israelites were confident. Saul recognized that he and his army were likely to lose and terror filled his heart.

Saul attempted to seek guidance from the Lord through approved means. Saul had killed all of God’s appointed priests and Samuel had died, so his chances of hearing from God through Urim or prophets were already slim. But after constantly rejecting the Lord’s counsel and commands, it should be no surprise that God did not answer Saul. Desperate, Saul asked his bodyguard to find a medium, choosing to violate God’s commands instead of repenting.

- ⇒ **What were the approved means of discerning God’s will? Why were these allowed, but divination or mediums were not?**
- ⇒ **How does Saul’s decision to consult a medium further demonstrate his descent into sin and his unsuitability to lead God’s people?**

1 Samuel 28:8–10 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.” **9** 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?” **10** But Saul swore to her by the LORD, “As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.”

Saul’s journey to the medium took deliberate calculation. En-dor was 6.2 miles away and on the other side of the Philistine encampment. Saul removed his royal clothing and traveled by night with only two guards. When he reached the woman, she suspected this was a trap and repeated the law that Saul himself had made. Saul then swore an oath by the Lord, whose law he was breaking, that she would not be punished for also breaking God’s law.

- ⇒ **How was Saul’s oath to protect a sinner by God’s power blasphemous?**
- ⇒ **Discuss this quote by Robert Bergen, “Saul invoked the Lord to grant immunity to one who broke the Lord’s command.”**

1 Samuel 28:11-14 Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." **12** 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." **13** 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." **14** 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.

Despite not knowing Saul's identity yet, the woman seemed to sense his authority because she trusted the oath. Again, Saul deliberately and hypocritically stepped deeper into sin and requested the medium to bring up Samuel. The narrator does not provide details on how the medium performed this ceremony, likely to avoid tempting readers to imitate her, and because the "how" is not as important as the "why." The woman's cry of shock indicates that Samuel's appearance surprised her, either because her previous attempts were fake, or the demonic apparitions she had seen before were different than what she saw now.

Once she saw Samuel in this abnormal form, she realized she was not in control and deduced that her client was Saul. Saul pressured her to move forward, asking the woman about the apparition's appearance, ignoring yet another opportunity to turn from his sin. Once the medium described Samuel's characteristic robe (1 Samuel 2:19; 15:27-28), Saul knew it truly was Samuel and responded by paying homage—a display of honor and respect for someone held in high regard.

- ⇒ **How were Saul's actions deliberately sinful and of what sins was he guilty? What opportunities did he have to turn back?**
- ⇒ **How does this medium appear to show greater spiritual sensitivity than Saul?**

1 Samuel 28:15-19 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." **16** And Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? **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. **18** 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. **19** 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."

Removing the medium from the conversation, Saul and Samuel spoke directly to each other. Saul explained his situation with the Philistines and God's lack of response, then requested Samuel's help. Seeing no indication that Saul's heart has changed, Samuel refused to share military strategy or the Philistine's secrets, indicating his unwillingness to give advice the Lord had withheld.

Samuel reminded Saul that God had promised to reject him due to the king's disobedience. Samuel stated that God was now fulfilling that promise (1 Samuel 15:19, 28). For the first time, Samuel admitted that the "neighbor" who would receive the throne was David, confirming what Saul had already suspected (1 Samuel 24:20). Never one to pull punches, Samuel delivered the final blow: Saul and his sons would die in the forthcoming battle.

- ⇒ **What was at the root of Saul’s request for Samuel’s help?**
- ⇒ **Discuss the event of Samuel’s spirit appearing. What evidence supports that it was truly Samuel? Is there evidence to the contrary?**
- ⇒ **What does Samuel’s response to Saul’s request teach us about God’s character?**

This event has long been debated by scholars and theologians. The reality is that we do not have every answer to the questions that arise from studying this passage. Most scholars believe the Lord allowed Samuel’s spirit to return and speak briefly to Saul for a few reasons:

1. The text does not indicate that it was a demonic spirit or some kind of ruse. The narrator speaks as though Samuel and the woman’s shock indicated an abnormal event.
2. The character of Samuel’s spirit seems consistent with Samuel’s while he was alive. Samuel’s spirit used the same language to describe David (compare 1 Samuel 28:16 to 15:18), reiterated the prophecies he previously made, and gave a true prophecy concerning Saul’s future. Most scholars believe a demonic spirit would not have access to the truth of the future.
3. Samuel’s spirit mentioned the LORD seven times in his response. Mediums were typically consulted when someone wanted to change the future, which Saul was trying to do here, but the spirit of Samuel showed no indication of influencing what God had ordained. It’s hard to believe that a wicked spirit would respect Yahweh by mentioning His name several times and adhering to His will.

Whatever the normal limitation on a medium’s power, it seems clear that God intervened in this situation to prove to Saul that he would not receive any support. Saul made God his enemy through his deliberate disobedience and hard-heartedness (1 Chronicles 10:13-14). The king once appointed to defeat the Philistines would now die at their hands, leaving the people to truly experience a king like the other nations had (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

- ⇒ **Why must we come to terms with the fact that not all Scripture can be easily explained? How do we learn to live with this tension?**
- ⇒ **New Age spirituality (i.e., manifesting, horoscopes, crystals, tarot cards, etc.) is on the rise in America. Why do these practices appeal to people? How can the church step up to connect seekers of spirituality to Jesus?**

1 Samuel 28:20–25 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. **21** 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. **22** 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.” **23** 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. **24** 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, **25** and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

The man once described as honorable and a head taller than everyone else was now lying face down on the ground (1 Samuel 9:2). Saul’s fragile mental state was fully broken and he succumbed to physical weakness, leaving him defeated before the battle even began. The medium, not wanting the

king to die in her home, urged him to eat so he could find the strength to leave. She killed her fattened calf, which was an indicator that despite Saul's attempt to drive out mediums, this woman was likely wealthy, as having a stall-fed calf for special occasions was a luxury. This feast would be the last supper for the doomed king, who finally seemed to accept that the Lord's word was unalterable. Saul's kingship began at the break of dawn but ended under the cover of night, where the Lord of light had left him (Psalm 90:8; Proverbs 13:9).

- ⇒ **What sticks out to you about Saul's response to learning of his own death?**
- ⇒ **What was the ultimate cause of the Lord rejecting Saul?**

TRANSFORM

1. Make personal application: Saul's habitual disobedience supports the idea that he was never truly a child of God. Although Saul nominally followed God and outwardly appeared to adhere to the law, his heart was always self-seeking and he did not surrender to God's will. There is no indication that he fostered a relationship with God or turned to Him in sorrowful repentance. His anointed role, proximity to prophets and priests, and worldly possessions and power were not enough to make him righteous before a holy and just God. God is merciful, loving, and slow to anger, but He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Saul's refusal to acknowledge God's sovereignty and seek mercy led to his destruction and rejection.

We must carefully examine our hearts and actions to ensure we are surrendered to the Lord, not merely giving Him lip service or acting the part. Our career, calling, religious heritage, physical location, church attendance, evangelism, volunteer hours, Bible knowledge, and even prayer life are not enough to save us. If we have not confessed our sins, asked for forgiveness, and surrendered our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ then all of our outwardly appearing "good works" are but filthy rags before God (Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:1; Galatians 2:16).

It is never too late to repent and seek God for God, not for what He can do for you (Isaiah 55:6-7; Joel 2:12-13; 2 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:9).

- ⇒ **How can you determine if your faith is merely religious piety or true devotion?**
- ⇒ **How does our secular culture encourage you to make decisions or seek guidance?
How can you fight against these pressures?**
- ⇒ **What steps can you take to seek God's will for your life?**

2. Pray: Ask God to reveal the state of your heart. Whether it is the first or thousandth time, confess your sins to God and ask for forgiveness. Receive God's mercy and thank Him for His grace. Thank Jesus for standing in your place and being your advocate. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and produce fruit in your life, including the courage to share the gospel with seekers around you.

STUDY

Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- *English Standard Version Study Bible* (2008), paged 603-605.
- *ESV Expository Commentary: 1 Samuel-2 Chronicles* (2019), pages 264-270.
- *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (2015), pages 559, 1075, 1151, 1623-1624.
- *Holman Old Testament Commentary I & II Samuel* (2009), pages 185-188, 196-197, 200.
- *NIV Application Commentary I & II Samuel* (2021), pages 369-384.

- *Wiersbe Bible Commentary, Old Testament* (2007), pages 544-545.