

Prayer

The glory of Your presence, Lord Jesus, brings faith, hope and love. I praise You, because You show us, through Your life and death, something of the glory of Almighty God. With this insight and revelation, we have courage to trust our lives to You, in certain hope of our own resurrection in glory. We give our lives to live for You and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Thanks be to God. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church Conferences

Pray for the church of God, which as one people under Christ, has no united voice. May God raise up those who will speak His Word and be recognised by all God's people.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for athletes at the Olympic Games*
- *Give thanks to God for those who enrich your life*
- *Pray about the fighting between Russia and Georgia*

Meditation

How do you choose those at church to whom you wish to speak?

Do you converse with the same people week by week,

Sustaining welcome fellowship with those you know?

Do you look at appearances, or actions and reactions,

Before deciding who you might approach for conversation?

Are there some to whom you never speak because of past events,

For to talk would make you facing what it might mean to forgive?

I ask you; can you see the face of Jesus in those you see?

Or only those you know, or those to whom you feel it safe to talk?

I beg you, please try to answer this; for if you walk away

Unforgiveness is as a doormat placed for Satan,

And he will not miss a chance to walk straight in.

He will keep you bound exactly where you are,

Stuck with those you know, unable to spread the Gospel on to others;

Out of fear; fear of self, fear of others, fear of those we do not know,

Especially those who need to hear the Gospel first of all, from us!

Bible Study - 1 Samuel 28:1-7

¹ *In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, 'You know, of course, that you and your men are to go out with me in the army.'* ² *David said to Achish, 'Very well, then you shall know what your servant can do.'* Achish said to David, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life." ³ *Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. Saul had expelled the mediums and the wizards from the land.* ⁴ *The Philistines assembled, and came and encamped at Shunem. 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 When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, not 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, so that I may go to her and inquire of her.' His servants said to him, 'There is a medium at Endor.'

Review

The beginning of our passage places big question marks in our minds about David's wisdom as he continued to hide from Saul by ingratiating himself to the Philistine king Achish. The story keeps us on a knife edge wondering what would happen. How could David possibly fight with the Philistines against his own people? What on earth possessed David to allow himself to be made the personal representative and bodyguard of a Philistine King, the very role possessed by Goliath, the man he had killed in battle so many years ago? It is only because we know the story in advance that we can relax, knowing that David did indeed escape all culpability in the war that follows (see ch.30). The real story is the tragedy unfolding before our eyes of King Saul, who lost his spirit and his faith because of his lack of trust in God and his rebellion against the Lord.

In this passage, the scene is set for the final confrontation between Saul and the Philistines, with the Israelites under Saul encamped at Gilboa and the Philistines at Shunem in the north of the country. The very fact that the Philistines were so far north was an indication of their strength and ability to travel around the country at will. Saul was weak, and the Kingdom of Israel was vulnerable, and the Philistines knew this. They sought to gain the upper hand in their long running land disputes with Israel. Saul knew his weakness as well, and probably felt that what lay ahead would be a defining battle, because he was very fearful (28:5).

It was the normal thing for a king to consult the gods before going in to battle, and Saul sought to do this. It was normal to seek out a prophet of God to discern God's will through dreams or prophecies, or ask a priest to do the same by using the stones Urim or Thumin (special stones meaning 'Yes' and 'No' placed in special pockets in priestly vestments called 'ephods'). However, it was because of Saul's refusal to follow these procedures before battle that Samuel was forced to confront Saul's disobedient spirit (1 Sam 13:8-15), creating a permanent rift between the two. Saul had never repented of this so it was no wonder that he received no answer to his quest for the Lord's guidance (28:6).

Saul therefore reverted to the ancient and godless practices of the people, by seeking the help of a medium; one who would summon up of the spirits of the dead. Earlier in his reign under Samuel's guidance, Saul had banished all the mediums and wizards in Canaan (28:3), but we do not know exactly when this happened and now he was in desperate need for advice. With few people around him he could trust, Saul sought out a traditional medium (28:7). The story of what happened when Saul found a medium is something we will look at next weekend, but it is worth noting that the practice survived, probably 'underground' in Israel, even though it was formally banned. If Saul found a medium with little effort other than asking his servants, what does this say about people's worship of the Lord in Israel under Saul? As in many cultures, traditional practices survived according to people's desires and inclinations; and now the King was in such a state that he would do anything to seek spiritual advice in order to maintain his position of authority in Israel.

It never ceases to amaze me when I see the extent to which people will go to sustain their own position even in the church when it is evident that they have departed the ways of the Lord. I have seen the following, all relatively recently: ordained clergy who have committed adultery profess repentance more to retain their status than do what is right before the Lord; youth leaders in the church sleep with their partners and openly decry marriage and

refuse to believe anything is wrong when asked to consider their lifestyle in the light of the Gospel; and church employees who insist upon their rights in employment law and tie up money which has been given for God's purposes thereby paralysing the church. In most cases, such people have started the road well, as did Saul, and ended up doing things they knew to be wrong before God, yet justifying themselves according to social and personal interest rather than any attempt to apply God's ways.

These are not the ways of the Kingdom of God. They are the signs that leadership amongst God's people is failing through being influenced by the ways of the world, as in this story of Saul. The good news is that God always has His hand on those who will take up the reigns of godly authority, just as David was waiting in the wings here is our text today. At the time Saul sought a medium, few would have thought that David, who was previously thought of highly, but was now strangely absent and apparently living within enemy lines, would come and sort out the mess Saul had made of the kingship of Israel. But this is what scripture tells us, and it is there for our encouragement, particularly when we see God's people led badly today by someone travelling the path of a Saul.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Does David's position in this story shock you? How would you respond to this information about him if you did not know more about what happened to him later?
2. Why did God not respond to Saul's calls for help? Is there anything Saul could have done to obtain God's guidance?
3. What are the early signs that a leader of God's people has departed the ways of the Lord and how can they be challenged and dealt with justly?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Within this study I have been highly critical of some people in church leadership; comparing what I have seen to the example of Saul in the Old Testament. I feel this is justified because we are asked to use the Old Testament as a guide and a means of teaching; and we can expect that when things go wrong, the Old Testament will furnish us with examples which will help us sort out what to do. Unless we use the Bible like this, we fail to use it for its intended purpose.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If this study has made you aware of issues to do with leadership in your church with which you are concerned, then discuss it further with others. It is by sharing our interpretation of God's Word that we are emboldened to act.*
- *The truth about Saul will probably never be fully understood, as will the truth about all of those who fall away from the Lord from great heights of influence and power. Pray about your own responsibilities within the life of the church, and pray that you will have the integrity to sustain godliness.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus; draw me to Your perfect love, and as I seek to be like You, keep me mindful of my humanity; of where I have come from, as well as where I am going. May I learn from Your powerful and compassionate love how I can remain true to my Christian calling throughout my life. Through Jesus Christ I pray; AMEN