

# ***“A Long Disobedience”***

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***Unlike Saul, AIM toward a long obedience in the same direction.***

***1 Samuel 28:3-19***

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## ***What not to do***

Most of what we do is influenced by three factors: impulse, reason, and faith. By “impulse” I mean some combination of instinct or other factors we don’t control. These actions live in our brainstem or limbic system. Researchers now tell us there’s more of this involuntary reactive behavior than we’ve understood before.

By “reason” I simply mean that we observe, get input, weigh the pros and cons, create a third alternative, wait, choose. These decisions live in our prefrontal cortex.

By “faith” I mean we Christians believe there’s a part of us that is more than instinct and neuroscience. Sometimes we do what we do because of “the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). We read Scripture, we pray, we consult with other people who believe, and then we decide what to do.

What if none of that works? That is what happens to King Saul in 1 Samuel 28. Nothing is working, and he’s desperate to get answers from somewhere. We could title 1 Samuel 28, “What not to do when you don’t know what to do.”

## ***How to inquire***

We’re almost finished with 1 Samuel. There’s just one more Sunday after today, and I need to warn you – if you like happy endings skip next week. It’s not pretty. From my standpoint, that’s OK, because what follows after that is Advent and Christmas. There’s good news ahead. There’s always good news ahead when it’s God’s story.

The stories in 1 Samuel are brilliantly narrated, with layers our studies have only begun to uncover. Some of the layers are invisible in most English versions. For example, the name “Saul” (Hebrew *sha-ul*) means “to ask or inquire.” In this chapter, Saul inquired of the Lord (6). In Hebrew, then, Saul “sauled” the Lord. This ties his entire story together. It ties together all of 1 Samuel. It’s a book about how to inquire – and, in this chapter, how not to inquire – of God.

There are three primary characters in the book – Samuel, Saul, and David. In our passage, Samuel has died. For a generation – and Samuel lived to an old age – all Israel and its leaders had confidence about God’s word. They didn’t always listen and obey, but at least they had clarity about what God thought.

Chapter 28:3 is the second time we’ve read in 1 Samuel that Samuel died and that there had been a nationwide mourning and funeral. After the first mention (25:1), our narrator proceeded to relate several stories across three chapters of what David did after Samuel died. Now he repeats the death of Samuel as an introduction to stories about Saul after Samuel’s death. To Saul, the death of Samuel is almost as if God himself has died. To whom does he “inquire”?

Saul is desperate in chapter 28. I know you don’t like Saul; I don’t either. The writer wants you to empathize with the burdens of leadership on his weary and aged shoulders. He’s fought two primary foes in his life.

Against the Philistines, the coastal enemies to the west, he’s always won. He’s never attacked them, but across the decades they keep regrouping and trying again. Since Saul had always won against Philistines, he had maintained the loyalty of his people and his army. He’s been what the people demanded – a “king like all the other nations.” Great kings win battles and from that standpoint Saul has been a great king.

But Saul has never been able to win against his other enemy, David. A year and a half ago, David disappeared into Philistine territory. As the Philistines marched up the coast and are now attacking from the north (4), surely Saul has heard David and his men are with them (28:1).

When Saul saw the Philistine army, “he was afraid; terror filled his heart” (5). *The Message* puts it this way: “He shook in his boots, scared to death.” Why? Reason didn’t work. He can’t strategize a winning formula. Faith isn’t working either. God is inaccessible. Not only is Samuel dead, but Saul gets no answer from all the ways a leader in Israel is supposed to inquire: “dreams, or Urim, or prophets” (6).

### ***What not to do***

In desperation, Saul turns to the occult. Why was this wrong? First, it’s wrong because God says it’s wrong. In some areas you can argue for or against morality – even from the Bible. The occult is not one of them. The Bible’s consistent message cover to

cover is avoid the occult. Even Saul had issued a nationwide ban (3). I don't remember any other record of Saul enforcing biblical laws – nothing about the Sabbath or pilgrimages or adultery or loving the Lord thy God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The one rule Saul had enforced was about the occult.

Second, it's wrong because there are some things we are not meant to know. The Bible tells us very little about the world of spirits – angels and demons. The most extensive passage in the New Testament (Ephesians 6) simply says that there is a spiritual battle behind the scenes and we are to put on God's armor of faith and righteousness, and use the weapons of God's word and prayer. In other words, we're not supposed to spend our time trying to contact the spirits or educate ourselves.

We also know very little, even in the Bible, about what's often called "the intermediate state" – where people go between this life and the eternal state. I did preach a sermon on this from 1 Peter 3 (June 7, 2020) last year, specifically about that phrase in the creed that Jesus "descended into hell." If you missed it or forgot it, let me know and I'll send it to you. The summary is that in Old Testament cosmology, the underworld is a holding place with three layers – one for the righteous dead, one of unrighteous dead, and one for evil spirits. Thus Samuel comes "up" and can also say that Saul and his sons will be "with me." If you're wondering if Saul is going to heaven or Samuel is in hell, you're asking the wrong question. The New Testament perspective is that Jesus changed all that. What we know is that for the believer, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). We don't know much else.

Third, it's wrong because, as Saul found out, if your inquiry does work you might not get the answer you wanted.

In his desperation, Saul instructs his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her" (7). Saul is "sauling" again. And specifically he wants to find a "medium" (NIV). The word can mean a "necromancer," someone who talks to spirits or the dead, or it can mean a woman who serves the Lady of who rules the underworld – someone who communicates with the spirits of dead people.

Saul's people tell him there's just such a woman in Endor (7), which is a bit of a problem since Endor is 4 ½ miles northeast of the Philistine encampment – in other words, behind enemy lines. That's probably the main reason he goes under cover of darkness, in disguise, with two servants. He doesn't want to be recognized by either the enemy or his own soldiers as he takes a risk militarily, legally, and spiritually.

When he finds the unnamed woman, she doesn't know who he is, and he makes a request she probably wouldn't find unusual. "Consult a spirit for me," he says. "Bring up the person I name" (8).

She exercises the kind of caution that anyone would who is doing something illegal. "You know Saul's law," she protests with innocence. "This is entrapment, and I

could face the death penalty” (9). Saul, whose identity is still hidden, assures her she will not be punished (10).

Satisfied, she says, “Whom shall I bring up?” “Samuel,” Saul says. She apparently doesn’t object – until it works. Maybe she’s used to faking it and people don’t know the difference. She seems shocked when her incantation produces Samuel. She shrieks, and for the first time realizes her inquirer is King Saul. “Why did you deceive me?” she asks. She’s certain now she will be punished.

“You have nothing to fear,” Saul says. “What do you see?” (13). Apparently he doesn’t see what she sees. The end of verse 13 results in a number of different English translations. She says, “I see gods ascending from the underworld.” Most translations are singular – “god” or “a god” or “a spirit.” The problem is that it’s actually a plural word – *Elohim* – the same word that is the most common word for God in the Old Testament. When it’s used with a singular verb it means “God” in all his comprehensive majesty. When it has a plural verb it is usually translated “gods.”

The reason it’s singular in most translations is probably because of Saul’s next question – “What does he look like?” (14). Not, “What do *they* look like?” I think she’s telling Saul her summons brought forth lots of spirits. Saul hears that, but he’s only interested in one of those spirits – Samuel. “Never mind *them*; what about *him*?” When she answers, “An old man wearing a robe is coming up,” Saul bows low, but Samuel is irritated with him. “Why are you harassing me?” he asks (15).

“I am in great distress,” Saul answers. “The Philistines are on the attack again, and God has abandoned me. I inquire and I get nothing – not by prophets or dreams. I need you to tell me what to do.” He’s emotional, he’s desperate.

I don’t know what Saul expected to hear, but what Samuel says is definitely not what he wants to hear. “God has become your enemy,” he says (16). “I had told you this would happen. You’re losing the kingdom to your neighbor, David. You didn’t obey God, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me in the underworld. Your army is going to lose this one to the Philistines.”

Saul bows even lower than before. He’s full length on the ground, terrified again (20). He’s also weak from hunger. He had been fasting – maybe to prepare for meeting Samuel but maybe to prepare for battle (14:24). From that point on, the woman, comes off pretty well in the story. She whips up a meal and insists Saul eat. He and his two servants do, and they head back to Gilboa to fight the next day’s battle (25).

### ***The main point***

So what does this mean to us? I think it would be a mistake to spend the rest of the sermon on a warning about the occult. If I went in that direction you might leave church (or finish watching on YouTube) thinking, “I don’t use Ouija boards or engage in

séances or practice dark magic, so I'm good – and better than those who do.” Or you might argue over the dinner table about what some would consider gray areas. “Is it OK to read Harry Potter?” “What if I read the horoscope only as entertainment?” “Are fortune cookies OK?” “Can I give out candy on Halloween as long as I don't worship the devil?” If that's your takeaway – even if you win the argument – you're likely to miss the main point.

There's a larger message in 1 Samuel 28, and I offered a hint in my sermon title. The title is a takeoff from something Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, and Eugene Peterson turned into a book title: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Peterson's book is about the Psalms of Ascent (120-134), which are traveling songs for Jewish pilgrims.

We're almost at the end of this long story of Samuel and Saul, and we're part way through the story of David. The questions the narrator is skillfully weaving throughout 1 Samuel are these: “Why not Saul?” and “Why David?” For generations to come, the people of Israel will want to know why “the king like all the other nations” was rejected and why David was “the king of God's own choosing.”

The difference between the two is not that one is worthy and the other is unworthy. We have already seen, and will see again, that David can also be afraid, insecure, jealous, and disobedient. The same human tendencies live in him. The difference between the two is between a long obedience in the same direction (David) and a long disobedience in the same direction (Saul).

The tragedy of Saul is that he starts well but finishes disastrously. The writer of 1 Samuel tells us that Saul was humble at the beginning, that God's Spirit came upon him, and that his heart was changed. If you're overlaying your theology of eternal security – “once saved always saved” – you're once again missing the point. Let the Holy Spirit tell the story as he does.

The way he tells this story is that Saul's trajectory is a long disobedience in the same direction. Back in chapter 13 he did almost everything God told him to do, and Samuel said, “That's it; you're done.” But God said that to others and then allowed them to repent and change course. Saul continued his disobedience, and it led to insecurity and fear and anger. He became a murderous monster. David even spared his life twice but it didn't change his heart. Finally, when his one spiritual crutch (Samuel) was removed, he tried to find God in the one way that he himself had explicitly forbidden. That act was tragic and rebellious, not unexpected from one who had become proud and distant and finally desperate.

As my walking buddy Kevin Konecny said this week, “The more bad decisions you make the more bad decisions seem reasonable.” Part of the problem is that bad decisions, even bad moral and spiritual decisions, often don't have immediate consequences. Saul didn't immediately lose the throne when he disobeyed the first

time. He even won some significant additional military victories. People still loved him as “a king like all the other nations.”

Likewise, the first opioid pill doesn’t kill you. The first click on an inappropriate web site doesn’t destroy your marriage. The first week you ignore your time with God nobody looks at you and says, “Bet you’re not praying.” The first time you slip a little something from your office that doesn’t belong to you in your pocket you don’t get fired. The first time you raise your voice at someone you don’t wind up in anger management.

The cover story in the current issue of *Christianity Today* magazine is titled, “Empty Pews are an American Health Crisis.” The article compares the physical health of Americans who attend church regularly and those who don’t. There’s a significant statistical gap in divorce, depression, suicide, and substance abuse. Those who attend church regularly have better survival rates with cancer and heart disease, greater meaning in life and life satisfaction.

I’m now hearing and seeing this first hand – almost daily contact from those who have been isolated and disconnected for too long. I understand that the pandemic is partly to blame. There was a time where it was simply not safe to attend public meetings. For some it still may not be. But I hope everyone hearing my voice will pay attention to the long term consequences of isolating yourself from the body of Christ.

I’ve mentioned Curt Thompson’s new book, *The Soul of Desire*, a couple of times already. I just [reviewed](#) it on Amazon and linked the review on my Facebook site. The take home point of the book is how our brains are hardwired to alter our thoughts and then our behaviors in community – in real, interpersonal, face-to-face relationships with other humans. Seclusion is only one of the ways that “a long disobedience in the same direction” will ultimately destroy us and those around us.

Saul’s story is a warning. You just can’t push God and people away and be OK. If you hear yourself in this message today – if there are ways in which you are living a long disobedience in the same direction – there’s good news ahead as we turn shortly to the Gospel story. But you don’t have to wait that long.

What’s the next step? *AIM* toward a long obedience in the same direction.

- *A – Admit.* Confess that you’ve become spiritually isolated and you’re seeing the effects. Admit it to God and to others.
- *I – Inquire.* Saul had this part right. To seek those who can re-establish your connection to God and to his people is the right inquiry. Saul inquired after the wrong source of wisdom after a long disobedience.
- *M – Move.* Take the first step. Do something. Create or recreate habits that you know will ground your life in what’s true and good.

AIM high. Amen.