

In Enemy Territory - 1 Samuel 27-31

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Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Searching for a King - 1 Samuel

Texts: 1 Samuel 27-31

One of the comments that I have heard so often as we've been reading through Samuel together goes along the lines of "this text is awful, how can this be in the Bible?!" I want to probe the assumptions that lie behind that question. For the Christian we can rightly have a high view of the Bible as God's word. We believe God is good and holy, therefore we expect his word to be morally upright. Likewise the non believer can expect the Bible to be a morally pure text. These assumptions are sorely challenged when we come to texts like Samuel whose characters are so deeply flawed, and which record awful and morally ambiguous events. So what are we to do with them? Let me suggest some helpful guidelines for reading. The first key thing to remember when reading the narratives in the Bible, especially Old Testament ones, is that narrative is not normative. That is, they describe what happened, they do not tell us what to do. A second key principle is that the only human being in the Bible that is morally perfect is Jesus. Everyone else is flawed, capable of good and evil, just like us. So we should not be surprised to find morally complex situations when we read the Biblical stories, because they are about real people, just like us, who find themselves in difficult and ambiguous situations. And yet, God in his providence, is at work in and through these flawed people, which means there is hope for you and me! As we reflect on the humanity of the characters in the Bible we find they offer a mirror to our own lives, both to see God at work, and also how he might be calling us to grow more like his Son.

Today is our last sermon in Samuel. We finish book 1. We'll pick up book 2 next year. Through Samuel we've been searching for a king, who will lead God's people Israel. God has rejected Saul as king and chosen David to replace him, but David has repeatedly promised that he would leave room for God to work and not take Saul's life. As the book closes in chapters 27-31 David is in the enemy territory of the Philistines. Saul himself goes into the territory of our greatest enemy, death itself. David plays a delicate double game with the Philistines. There's a sense of mounting dread as Saul meets his doom. Saul has always been proud and insecure, traits which so often go together. This character flaw issues in his disobedience, and remains right to the end. Saul's death clears the way for David to become king without blood on his hands. And yet as the book closes we cannot help feeling the tragedy of Israel's first king. Strap in as we head across the border into enemy territory.

David in Enemy Territory - ch 27

David has been on the run from Saul since chapter 19, now as chapter 27 opens we read:

But David thought to himself, 'One of these days I shall be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines.

So David and his band of 600 men, plus their wives and children, head to Gath. The ploy works and Saul gives up his pursuit. David asks Achish, the king of Gath, to let him settle in one of the Philistine towns. Achish gives him Ziklag, and David and all his men settle there. David and his men take up raiding Israel's traditional enemies, the Geshurites, Girzites and, most notably, the Amalekites. It seems that Saul did not actually carry out that command to wipe them out, back in chapter 15. David plays a double game. Each place he raids he leaves no one alive to spill the beans, because when Achish asks him, "Where did you go raiding?" David makes the bald faced lie and says he's been raiding Israelite territories like Judah. The ploy works and Achish comes to trust David.

Chapter 28 opens with all the Philistine forces mustering to attack Israel. Achish says that David and his men need to come with the Philistine army. It puts David in an impossible situation. If he says no, then Achish will doubt his loyalty and might try to kill him. But how can he go and fight his own people? His answer to Achish is a study in doublespeak.

"Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do."

Indeed! What will David do?!

Saul in Enemy Territory - ch 28

The scene now switches to Saul. The Philistine and Israelite armies are assembled in the north on either side of the valley of Jezreel. In 28.5 we read,

When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. **6** He enquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets.

Once again Saul is paralysed, uncertain what to do, desperate for divine guidance and assurance. Through Samuel, God has spoken in dreams, through prophets and priests by the Urim and Thummin, but here God is silent. The Urim and Thummin were kept in the ephod, the breastplate Israel's priests wore. The priests used them to discern God's will. But Saul has no priest. He slaughtered them all at Nob, in rage for aiding David. With God silent, Saul is desperate. And here things take a very dark turn. Saul calls for a medium. That is someone who can talk to the spirits of the dead.

We live in a rational culture which on the surface believes that the material world is all there is, and that the supernatural, the world of spirits, ghosts, gods and demons is superstitious

nonsense. Except dip below the surface, and people are not so sure. Things happen that defy rational explanation. When we consider other cultures around the world and through history, the rational materialist view of the world is the exception. Most cultures know there is a spiritual world. Growing up in PNG people were aware of and interacted with ancestral spirits. I was talking with Xuewei last week and she said that in traditional Chinese culture when someone dies incense and paper money have to be burned to help the spirit of the deceased along their way. Here in Australia we're paying more attention to the traditional beliefs and customs of Aboriginal people, and their sense of the ancestors. I remember when we cleaned out the asbestos in the ceiling cavity of the church, the workmen found a child's shoe, which would have been placed there to ward off evil spirits, not that the clergy of the time would have approved!

There are two equal and opposite dangers when it comes to dealing with spirits. The first is to deny that they exist. The second is to naively think that they are all your friends and so to start mucking around with things like seances, ouija boards, witchcraft, fortune tellers and the like. The Bible is clear that to do so is to go into enemy territory and open yourself to Satan and the spiritual forces of darkness. Just ask Ken if you want to know what it's like to come out of this. It is a realm of power, fear, darkness and deception.

Part of the allure of things like magic is that it promises to give spiritual power and control over your destiny. That is what Saul is seeking here. For others I've known it can be the utter desperation to see a loved one who has died. But this is a boundary we cannot cross.

Deuteronomy 18.10 reads,

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, **11** or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.¹

The New Testament reiterates this command. As God's people we are not to get involved with this sort of thing.

Returning to Samuel, we're reminded that Samuel has died. Following God's command, Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land. But now he calls for one.

Surprisingly his attendants know exactly where one is to be found. Endor was north of the Philistine camp at Shunem, so Saul disguises himself and sneaks behind enemy lines at night. Saul's taking off his usual royal garments is symbolic of taking off the kingship. Saul asks the woman, "consult a spirit for me." It's the same verb as the Philistine diviners in back in chapter 6, and the crucial moment in chapter 15:

¹ Cf. Leviticus 19.31, 20.27; Deuteronomy 18.9-12

For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
 and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.
 Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
 he has rejected you as king.²

There Saul rejected God's word, now he's using divination. The woman protests, citing Saul's ban on mediums. But Saul responds with a terrible irony, invoking God's name while breaking his command,

As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this.'

Saul calls the woman to bring up Samuel, and as he comes, she is terrified. It's not clear whether this is because she's surprised that he is coming, or because she realises that it is Saul himself who has asked her. Samuel is recognised by his robe, and we recall the little robe that Hannah made for him year after year at Shiloh, and the robe that Saul tore, symbolising how the kingdom had been torn from his hands.

Saul asks Samuel one last time what to do. But Samuel has no guidance for Saul. He simply repeats his earlier words. The only thing new is a prophecy of Saul's doom, and it's just like Eli and his sons.

The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbours – to David. **18** Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.'

At these words Saul collapses. We learn he's been fasting, recalling his foolish command for his troops to fast on the eve of battle back in chapter 14. He's at last persuaded to eat, and the woman kills a fattened calf for the meal. The verb is literally sacrifice, which recalls the sacrifice and feast back in chapter 9 at which Samuel anointed Saul king, and Saul's own premature sacrifice in chapter 13. Now it's the last supper before his death. Things have come full circle.

David victorious 29-30

In chapters 29 and 30 the scene switches back to David, and we step back in time from the eve of battle. The Philistine commanders ask Achish why on earth David and his men are marching with them.

² 1 Samuel 15.23

How better could he regain his master's favour than by taking the heads of our own men? 5 Isn't this the David they sang about in their dances:

“Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands?”

So Achish sends David back home to Ziklag. Again we see David playing the double game as he says to Achish,

Why can't I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?

Which king indeed. Achish or Saul? And yet, at the same time, it's by God's providence that David gets out of this impossible situation.

What's more, when they reach Ziklag after a 3 day march they discover the Amalekites have burned it to the ground and carried off their wives and children and property. David and his men weep bitterly. In verse 30.6 we read,

David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters.

Distress. It's the same word that Saul spoke to Samuel in the previous scene. But instead of transgressing God's clear boundary like Saul, going even to the realm of the dead, we read,

But David found strength in the LORD his God.

The contrast with Saul couldn't be clearer. It's only one line, but it contains so much. When under the most extreme pressure, in the face of devastating loss, what does David do? He turns to God for strength. We can turn to the Psalms to get a picture of David's spiritual life. Here I'm reminded of Psalm 27 where David says,

My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'

Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Do not hide your face from me,

do not turn your servant away in anger;

you have been my helper.

And then, it finishes with these words,

Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

The question for you and me is where do you go to for strength when you're in distress? Do you wait for the LORD? His promise to you is that he will give you strength. Indeed, it's in our weakness that we know his strength.

Unlike Saul, David still does have Abiathar the priest to inquire of the LORD for him. God says, "pursue them". With the green light from God, David and his men pursue and overtake the Amalekites. They catch them enjoying the spoils, and despite being outnumbered and exhausted David and his men fight all night and win through, rescuing their wives, children

and property. Again David shows a strength of character and creativity Saul lacked. He skillfully negotiates the competing claims of his men and evenly distributes the plunder between the troops who fought and those who stayed behind with the baggage. Where Samuel had earlier warned that a king would take, and take and take, David generously gives from the plunder to the various elders of Judah and their towns of all who had helped him.

Saul defeated 31

In the final scene of 1 Samuel, chapter 31, we return to Saul on the day of battle, and the tragic end of this tragic king. Israel is on the run. Saul's 3 sons, including Jonathan, have been killed in battle. Saul is hard pressed by the Philistine archers. He stands head and shoulders above the rest, yet he's always been "small in his own eyes" as Samuel said back in chapter 15,³ proud and at the same time insecure, always afraid of how others see him, hesitant yet impatient, taking things into hands rather than trusting God. Now as death looms, he falls on his sword, rather than facing humiliation at the hands of the Philistines. The personal tragedy underscores the disaster for Israel.

So Saul and his three sons and his armour-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

Even in death things don't go Saul's way. The Philistines violate his corpse and the bodies of his sons. And the book closes with the men of Jabesh Gilead, making a daring raid to retrieve their bodies. This was the same city which Saul rescued from humiliation at the start of his reign. It underlies the tragedy of his end. Israel wanted a king to fight their battles. Now he is dead.

Tragedy is the tone of these chapters. Yes, in the providence of God, the path to the throne now lies clear for David. Yes, David is clearly a better candidate for king than Saul. But there are no winners as 1 Samuel ends. Part of the tragedy of Saul's life is that unlike David, he again and again did not wait and look to God for his strength. Instead his willful choices of rebellion and divination bookend his life. And yet, the scene of his greatest failure points us to the true king Jesus who fights for us. His last supper heralded his death as the sacrifice which would accomplish all that Saul failed to do. He faithfully obeyed God's command, even to the cost of his life. He defeated our greatest enemies, of sin and death. He has rescued us from enemy territory, the dominion of darkness, and brought us home into his kingdom. He's the one in whom we can find strength, even as he invites us to share in the bread of his own life.

³ 1 Samuel 15.17