

Sha'ul and the Medium at Endor

First Samuel 28:3-25

DIG: How did YHVH communicate His will at this time in Israel's history? But how did Sha'ul do it? Why did Sha'ul expel spiritists and mediums from Israel (see Leviticus 19:31, 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10-13)? Why then did he consult one anyway? And why in secret? Why did the woman fear she might die? Considering Sha'ul's assurance in verse 10, who fears the living God more - the Israelite king or the pagan witch? Why is she terrified when she saw Samuel? Why had YHVH stopped responding to Sha'ul when he called? How had Sha'ul responded to ADONAI's calls in the past? How is Sha'ul like and unlike Yeshua? Explain. How do you think Sha'ul enjoyed his last meal?

REFLECT: Sha'ul was prone to say one thing (expel the spiritists and mediums) and do quite another (consult them). What area(s) of your life are like that? Where do your actions speak louder than your words? What "great distress" in your life has you seeking God's will in earnest? Where are you looking for answers? Whom are you consulting? Do you temporarily "repent" during hard times, only to "harden your heart" when things get better? In light of your present relationship with God, what are your feelings about death and dying? Are you a "Sha'ul" or a "David?" Do you know with certainty where you are going to spend eternity? What is the basis for your certainty?

1011 BC

When this episode begins, the battle lines are already drawn, but **Sha'ul** had no heart for battle. He urgently needed someone to talk to for advice and encouragement, but found **himself** totally isolated, desperate, and in need of counsel. Of all the "night scenes" in the Bible - and there are many of them - this one is perhaps the strangest and most dramatic. A dead man returned to announce the doom of a despairing king who couldn't find any way to escape. **Samuel** and **Sha'ul** would meet for the last time, and it wasn't a happy meeting.¹⁷³

The Silence of God: In **First Samuel 28:3-6** we learn that **Samuel** had died, and all **Israel** had mourned for him and buried him in his own town of **Ramah**. This is a summary of **25:1**. But the point the author makes in this context is that **Sha'ul** could not go to **Samuel** for advice as he was able to do in the past. Although **Sha'ul** had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land (**Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14**), he had sunk down to that which he had banned. The fact that he regretted his decision indicates how far he had departed from his earlier commitment. At this time, he had the worst of both worlds.

The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem a few miles north of the valley of Jezreel at the mountain of Gilboa and had penetrated into the largest valley in northern Israel, while Sha'ul gathered all Israel and set up camp at Gilboa (First Samuel 28:4). Sha'ul had moved his army from the plain of Jezreel, where he would have been at a disadvantage because of the superiority of the Philistine chariots, to the mountain of Gilboa. When Sha'ul saw how much larger the Philistine army was than he thought it would be, he was afraid and terror filled his heart. He inquired of ADONAI, but YHVH did not answer him by: the usual method of dreams (see the commentary on [Genesis Hd - Jacob Saw a Stairway with the Angels of God Ascending and Descending](#)), or by the Urim and Thummim (Abiathar had taken the Ephod with him and was with David), or prophets (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Eo - The Days are Coming, declares the LORD, When I Will Make a New Covenant with the People of Yisra'el](#)). No matter what Sha'ul tried, he received no answer from God.

The Medium of Endor: Therefore, Sha'ul said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium who consults the dead to determine the future," so I may go and inquire of her." These mediums were possessed by demons, which impersonated the dead. So Sha'ul was in a very desperate condition. This was a direct violation of the Torah spelled out in (Leviticus 19:31 and 20:6). "There is one at Endor," they said. It is very interesting that Sha'ul's servants knew about her despite of its unlawfulness (First Samuel 28:7). Fearful of Philistine strength, Sha'ul wanted to know how to proceed, and thus was willing to go to any lengths to find out what to do.

So Sha'ul disguised himself putting on common clothing instead of royal clothing, and at night he and two men traveled about ten miles and went to the woman. This was a very dangerous journey for the king because to get to Endor from Gibeah he would have to pass over the shoulder of a hill on which the Philistines were encamped. The darkness of the night matched the darkness of Sha'ul's soul. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring me up from Sh'ol the one I name" (First Sam 28:8). Like a noose around his neck, this was a desperate attempt to escape the fate that was closing in all around him.

But the woman said, her words dripping with irony: Surely you know what Sha'ul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death? She neither admitted nor denied what she was. She wanted to make sure that this wasn't a trap. But Sha'ul swore to her by ADONAI, "As ADONAI lives, you will not be punished for doing this" (First Samuel 28:9-10 CJB). [The rabbis teach that Sha'ul was like a woman who swears by her husband's life when in bed with her lover.](#) In a practice forbidden by ADONAI, he swears by ADONAI's name.

Then the woman asked: **Whom shall I bring up for you?** And **Sha'ul** answered: **Bring up Samuel.** Despite the finality of **Sha'ul's** last confrontation with **Samuel (First Samuel 15:10-35)**, **Sha'ul** still longed for the word of **ADONAI** that **he** had received through the prophet who first anointed **him** and proclaimed **him king.** **He** must have hoped that **Samuel** would somehow reverse the judgment that **he** had pronounced, much in the same way that some people today refuse to take seriously the consequences of sin in their lives.¹⁷⁵

She left the room and drawing on the demonic powers of necromancy (**Deut 18:10-11**), **she** called up the apparition of **Samuel.** **Even the rabbis do not speculate as to her technique in conjuring up Samuel, but simply say, "She did what she did, and she said what she said, and raised him.** When the woman saw **Samuel,** **she** recognized something was different. Normally, **she** would bring up a demon that would impersonate the dead. But in this case, **it seems to follow the view held by the rabbis that the text records a genuine appearance of Samuel that YHVH Himself brought about.** When **the real Samuel came up** and **she** cried out at the top of her voice. It was cry of shock and a cry of fear because this didn't normally happen. It shows that **she herself** had nothing to do with **Samuel coming up.** **YHVH took over and allowed the spirit of Samuel to come up from Sh'ol.** **She** said to **Sha'ul,** **"Why have you deceived me? She** immediately realized that it was the work of **God** and not **herself** and that **her** disguised night visitor was none other than **King Sha'ul.** **She** declared indignantly: **You yourself are Sha'ul"** (**First Samuel 28:11-12**)!

When **the king** heard **her cry out,** **he** called to **her,** saying: **Don't be afraid - you will not be executed. What do you see?"** What this tells us is that **Sha'ul** was in another room. **The woman** had the capacity to see the unseen world. **Hers** was a demonic power, but a power nonetheless. **She** said: **I see a god-like being coming up out of the earth. He** asked **her,** **"What does he look like?"** **She** said: **An old man wearing a robe is coming up.** Before glorification, **Samuel** appeared the age in which **he** died. **He** was in death exactly as **Sha'ul** knew **him** in life: unaccommodating and unwilling to cosign **Sha'ul's** sin. Then **Sha'ul** knew it was **Samuel,** and **he** bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground as if before the **LORD (First Samuel 28:13-14 CJB).**

The Message of Samuel: **Samuel's** shalom in sh'ol was disturbed, and **he** didn't like it at all. **He** said to **Sha'ul,** **"Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"** **Sha'ul** laid the full weight of his abandonment and despair before **Samuel,** **"I am in great distress. The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. Sha'ul justifies his action by saying he needed God and had no alternatives. So I have called on you to tell me what to do"** (**First Sam 28:15**).

Samuel said: **Why do you ask** (Hebrew: *sha'al*) **me** this, **you** have answered your own question. **Now that the LORD has departed from you, He has become your enemy!** **Samuel** explains, in an impatient, serious tone, that **ADONAI's** and **he** are allied and nothing can come between **them**; if **God** had departed, **Sha'ul** may be sure that **Samuel** had also departed. If **the LORD** had no answer, there was no reason to believe that **Samuel** had any answer. No wedge could be driven between them. Then **Samuel** painstakingly reviewed the record: **YHVH has done what He predicted through me (First Samuel 15:28)**. The record had not changed, and the verdict had not softened. **ADONAI has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors . . . to David (First Samuel 28:16-17)**. This is no surprise to us, and it surely is no surprise to **Sha'ul**. The entire story has been building the case for the utterance of this **name**.

First Samuel 28:18-19 is structured like a lawsuit that asserts the verdict and sentence against **Sha'ul**. The cause is **Sha'ul's** disobedience. **Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out His demand** to utterly destroy the **Amalekites** (see **Af - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**), **ADONAI has done this to you today**. **He** had no one to blame but **himself**. The verdict was that because **he** did not utterly destroy the **Amalekites**, **God** would utterly destroy **him (First Samuel 15:18-19)**. Then the sentence against **Sha'ul** is pronounced: **YHVH will deliver both Isra'el and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your three sons will join the dead** (see **Bw - Sha'ul Takes His Own Life**). **Samuel's** speech is final and absolute. There will be no appeal, no protest, no argument, and no alternative. The narrator does not mention **Samuel's** departure. It doesn't matter. It is **the Voice** that counts, and that **Voice** only speaks of death and doom for **Sha'ul**. Since **Chapter 15**, **Sha'ul's** career has been carried out under the omen of this irrevocable decision.¹⁷⁵

But the question remains, was **Sha'ul** saved? Which side of sh'ol did **he** end up in for eternity (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hx - The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus**)? When Jewish believers talk about **the righteous of the TaNaKh**, the emphasis is on **the righteous**. Not perfect, but having a loving, obedient heart that desires to please **the LORD**. But **Sha'ul**, possessed by an **evil spirit** and having a murderous heart, selfishly worked against the known purposes of **God**. We see no repentance from **Sha'ul** after this encounter with **Samuel**. **He** only felt sorry for **himself**. Like **the rich man** in the parable above, **he** was spiritually dead. Though **Sha'ul's** selfishness was awful, **God** would have forgiven him if there had been a softening of the heart that led to repentance. **Peter** denied **Christ** three times, yet he was forgiven due to a repentant heart. **David** also sinned; but **David's** heart was so grieved by **his** sin and totally repentant before **God** that **he** also was forgiven. When there is true repentance, **God** always forgives. There is no sin too big that **God** can't forgive. All sins are forgivable - when the heart is truly grieved over the sin and turns away from sin to lovingly follow **God**.

When people abandon YHVH, their only desire is that ADONAI leave them alone to their own devices. But when the LORD abandons people, He assigns to them the judgment of death, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Sinful mankind has violated the law of YHVH and rebelled against His sovereign rule, the only possible result is that foretold by Yeshua in the parable of the Ten Minas: **The king said, "But those enemies of mine who rebelled and did not want me to be king over them - bring them here and kill them in front of me"** (Luke 19:27).

If we think this is a dreadful picture of God's justice and wrath, let us not forget His spurned offer of grace and the sacrificial blood of His own Son. If you have heard but refused the Gospel offer of forgiveness through the blood of Christ, your judgment will be not only for rebellion against His divine authority, but also for contempt of His saving grace. The application from Sha'ul's plight is both urgent and unwavering: **Seek the LORD while He may be found and call on Him while He is near. Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts, let them turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on them, and to our God, for He will freely pardon** (Isaiah 55:6-7; Second Corinthians 6:2b).¹⁷⁶

Do you have peace with God? If so, that's great. If not, would you like to accept Christ right now? If so, there is a prayer I would like you to repeat. But before you do I want you to remember that saying a prayer does not save you, trusting in Christ does. Say these words: **God, I admit that I have sinned. I believe Jesus Christ died for my sins, and I want to trust Him to save me right now.** If you were to die right now, where would you go? That's right, heaven. Why should God let you into His heaven? That's right, because Jesus died to pay for your sins (see my commentary on [The Life of Christ Fr - Jesus the Bread of Life](#): see [imputation](#)).

Jesus' last words from the cross were: **It is finished** (John 19:30). That is the translation in Aramaic because that was the common language of His day. But the original Greek text in the B'rit Chadashah reads, *tetelestai*, which means **paid in full**. This word is actually an accounting term. After the destruction of Herod's Temple in AD 70, many Jews found their way to Alexandria, Egypt. There they had one of the greatest libraries of the ancient world by the second century. But by then, the international language was Greek. And while the Jews spoke Aramaic, they wrote in Greek, not Hebrew. Archaeologists have discovered an underground storage area there with thousands of clay accounting tablets. Across each one was written *tetelestai*. It is important for you to understand that your sins have been **paid in full** by the blood of the Messiah on the cross. *All of your sin, past, present, and future. And as a result, you now possess living water* (John 4:4-14, 7:37-39; Revelation 7:17), or eternal life (John 6:37-40; 10:27-30).

Sha'ul's Last Supper: Samuel ended his message by saying that the LORD would also give the army of Isra'el into the hands of the Philistines. Thus, Sha'ul, who had not seen the divine vision, but had heard only too plainly the prophet's words, was as good as dead already. The fatal truth overwhelmed him and he immediately fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and all that night (First Samuel 28:20). Most people in fear for their lives lose their appetite rather quickly.

When the woman came to Sha'ul from another room (it seems likely that she had an inner sanctum where she practiced her secret rites) and saw that he was greatly shaken. She said: Look, your servant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so you may eat and have the strength to go on your way. She was thinking in human terms of some way to boost the morale of the king. Though she couldn't save him from his fate, she could give him temporary help and comfort to strengthen his fainting spirits. But she was astute enough to realize that Sha'ul was in no mood to eat. So she reasoned that since she had risked her life for him, he should be willing to do something for her.¹⁷⁷

Initially, he refused and said: I will not eat. Without a doubt, he was not hungry. But his men joined the woman in urging him, and finally he listened to them. He got up from the ground and sat on the couch. The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she butchered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast. Then she set it before Sha'ul and his men, and they ate. That same night Sha'ul arose and dejectedly walked off into the darkness (First Sam 28:21-25).

In Richard Samuel's commentary on **First Samuel**, the author reflecting on Sha'ul, remembered another Last Supper (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Kd - The Last Passover in the Upper Room**) when **Yeshua Messiah** gathered with His apostles on the night He was betrayed. Sha'ul brings to mind one of the apostles, who for all his privileges as one close to the Savior had nonetheless rejected Jesus in his heart. Yochanan says of Judas Iscariot that after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night (John 13:30). Yochanan was not merely noting the time, but also the state of Judas' soul and the destiny to which he was turning to unbelief. Like Sha'ul, Judas had a heart of darkness. Messiah's words about Judas are true of all those who turn from His light to the darkness of sin and self-rule: **It would have been better for that man if he had not been born (Mattityahu 26:24).**

After the Last Supper, our Savior Himself would head into darkness. Like Sha'ul, Yeshua bore the curse of a prophesied death upon His head. The only completely righteous man, the One who had perfectly obeyed the will of YHVH every moment of His life, the Son of David who was far more unlike Sha'ul than even David, would be nailed to the cross to die for sin.

As Mark records: **When the sixth hour came, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice . . . My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me** (see my commentary on [The Life of Christ Lv - Jesus' Second Three Hours on the Cross: The Wrath of God](#))? As God's Son prepared to die in the sin-cursed darkness, the words spoken by Sha'ul to Samuel could equally be said of Jesus, **"God has turned away from me and answers no more"** (First Samuel 28:15).

Yet how great, how infinitely great, was the difference between Sha'ul in the darkness of his own sin and Messiah in the darkness of the sins He did not commit. Sha'ul with his hardened heart and in his rebellion against YHVH had entered a darkness that would last forever in sh'ol. But the Savior, Jesus Christ, in obedience to the saving will of the Father, became sin on our behalf (Second Corinthians 5:21) so that He might take its curse away forever from the people who belong to Him by faith. Yeshua entered the darkness of the cross that we might enter life and light of His resurrection glory. On the third day He rose in the light of the open tomb, and all those who place their sins on His cross may know the joy of eternal life in His grace. The Bible teaches that **neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:38-39).¹⁷⁸