

Stranger Things – Ghost Story

1 Samuel 28

Do you love a good ghost story?

The Bible doesn't have a lot of ghost stories. The idea that the spirits of the departed are roaming the earth is simply not biblical. The Bible teaches that *"people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Heb. 9:27)."* As believers we are assured that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), not haunting the old neighborhood.

But in 1 Samuel 28, we do get an eerie ghost story filled stranger things, including a creepy medium and a weird sort of séance that brings back the spirit of the prophet Samuel of all people. We're just going to walk through this story and make application as we go.

3 Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land.

This verse just sets the scene for what is about to happen. For a generation, the prophet Samuel had been the spiritual leader and conscience of the nation. He'd also been the main point of contact between God and Israel's first king, Saul. But now Samuel was dead and gone.

During the lawless days of the Judges, people indulged in occultic practices that God had strictly forbidden, but under the guidance of Samuel, King Saul had taken steps to rid the nation of this evil. As it turns out, however, these things aren't gone, they've just gone underground.

4 The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem, while Saul gathered all Israel and set up camp at Gilboa.

King Saul is one of the most tragic characters in the entire Bible. The first king of Israel began with so much promise and potential. Saul began as God's anointed, guided by the prophet Samuel, and walking in partnership with the Lord. But then his pride caused him to ignore the word of God and do things his own way.

In 1 Samuel 13, Saul is waiting on Samuel to offer sacrifices and seek God's blessing before going into battle with the Philistines, but Samuel is running late. Saul gets impatient and takes matters into his own hands offering his own sacrifices against the proscribed will of God.

In chapter 14, Saul's son Jonathan wins an incredible battle in true Rambo fashion, but Saul makes a foolish and selfish vow unknown to Jonathan, and then Saul wants to kill his own son for breaking his idiotic vow.

In chapter 15, God gives Saul a great victory over the Amalekites, but Saul disobeys the direct command of God so that he can keep some of the best plunder for himself. Then he lies to Samuel and he lies to God about it.

At this point, God says that he wishes he never made Saul king. Samuel informs Saul that God has removed his blessing and that the kingdom is being torn from him and given to one of his neighbors. In the next chapter, Samuel anoints David as the next king of Israel.

But Saul will have none of it. He refuses to give up the throne. At first, he tries to keep David close where he can keep an eye on him, but Saul becomes so enraged with jealousy that he repeatedly tries to kill David. David must spend the next decade on the run and in hiding.

Meanwhile, Israel's perennial enemy, the Philistines, have grown in strength and threaten to divide the nation in two. Saul can no longer ignore the problem. The enemy is encamped on the slopes of Moreh on the northern side of the Jezreel valley. Saul's army is encamped on Mt. Gilboa five miles to the south.

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

We're not given any numbers here to give us any idea of the scale of the looming battle, but in an earlier confrontation Israel faced 13 to 1 odds. However big their army was, there is no doubt Saul feels outmatched and outnumbered. It's also the first time he's had to march into battle without Samuel there to give him a word from the LORD. Samuel would assure him of victory, offer a sacrifice, or tell him what God wanted him to do in insure victory.

But now Samuel is dead. Even when he was alive, Saul refused to listen to his counsel and disobeyed God. God's Spirit had left him and Saul no longer had God's anointing or guidance. Saul feels naked and exposed. He is so desperate for some word or hint from God. He wants some assurance that God will again deliver victory as he so often did early in his kingdom.

He tries everything. He prays, but he gets no answer. He consults the other prophets, but they have no word from the LORD. He goes to the priests, but the Urim yields no clue.

If you're wondering what the Urim was, join a long line. The bottom line is we don't know. All we know is that the Bible says the high priest had two objects worn in his breastpiece called the Urim and the Thummim. God then used the Urim and the Thummim to guide the priest in making the right decisions.

Here's our first big Life Lesson: You can't manipulate God to perform for you. Saul isn't really interested in what God has to say, he just wants God to promise victory, and he thinks if he can just pull the right lever or push the right button, God will spit out the answer he's looking for. If I can just find the right prophet or get the priest to use his magic thingamajigs, then God will perform for me. He will give me the results I want.

We'll see in a few moments the dangers of trying to use occultic magic to manipulate the spiritual. But sometimes we try to manipulate God with expressions of faith that we wrongly perceive as magical. If I just pray enough, or if I just pray the right words, then God will deliver

for me. We fall into this trap of treating faith as if it were magic. Have you ever gone to church, not because you really wanted to, but because you thought by going, you could convince God to do something for you? Have you ever received some bad financial news and you look up to heaven and say, "I put money in the plate every week. I tithe. What's going on?" These are signs that we are trying to manipulate God with our faith. We're doing these things, not because we love God, we want to be with him, we want to experience him, but we want him to perform for us- to be our genie in a bottle. This is a very unhealthy place to be. This is also where we begin to make some very unwise decisions.

Which brings us back to Saul. When Saul can't get God to respond the way he wants, he has a truly harebrained idea. He thinks if only I could talk to Samuel, he could tell me what I want to hear. Samuel always knew how to get God to perform. Nevermind that the last few times Samuel told him what to do, Saul ignored him. How can I talk to a dead guy? Oh, I've got it. If I could just find a witch, someone who practices the occult, they could bring the spirit of Samuel back, and then I could get God's answer. Nevermind, that Samuel himself would hate the idea. Nevermind that God had strictly forbidden the practice, and God has already rejected you for ignoring his commands. Nevermind, you have already enacted a law that cast out all such practitioners from the land. This idea is stupid in every which way.

I said in this series we would deal with the difficult questions. We've just hit one of them here. This is supposedly one of the big contradictions in the Bible. Let me show you. Verse 6 says Saul *"inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him."* But over in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14 this is what it says,

*13 Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord and even consulted a medium for guidance, 14 **and did not inquire of the Lord.** So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.*

How does one verse say he inquired of the Lord, but the other verse says he didn't? The translators did us no favors here, because these are two different words in the Hebrew. In 1 Samuel it simply means to ask. However, in 1 Chronicles, an entirely different word is used, a much stronger word, which means to earnestly seek. These are completely different levels of inquiry.

Here's what's going on. When Saul inquired of the Lord, he wasn't really interested in what God had to say. He wasn't really interested in doing what God wanted him to do. He just wanted God's guarantee of victory. He was worried about defeat. He was worried about losing power, not what God wanted. God had already told Saul what his will was – to turn the kingdom over to David. Saul had been fighting against God's will for years. If Saul had any real interest in what God wanted, he would abdicate and crown David as King.

This brings us to Life Lesson #2. If you want an answer from God, you need to be willing to listen. We can be just like Saul. We pray. We ask God about some situation in our lives, but we're not really interested in what God wants. We just want God to bless what we

want. We want God to agree with our will. We're not really interested in God's will. We're just going to do what we want to do anyway. If that's the case, we probably won't receive any blessing or guidance from God either. If you really want an answer, you need to be willing to really listen.

These two different words for inquiry come into play in the very next verse. Check this out.

*7 Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her."
"There is one in Endor," they said.*

Guess which word for inquiry is used here. Casually ask or earnestly seek? This is the much stronger word. Saul casually asks God for his help, but he earnestly seeks the witch's help. His heart and his hope are all in the wrong place.

Not every medium has left the land. Some, apparently, have just gone underground. Makes you wonder how much Saul actually enforced his law. It is also concerning that his closest advisers seem to readily know where such a necromancer can be found. They don't even have to search. It is apparent that such evil is already being tolerated in his administration.

For you Star Wars fans like me, who got excited at the mention of Endor, I hate to inform you there are no Ewoks in this story. If you have no idea what I'm talking about here. That's okay. That just means you're normal.

8 So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name."

Saul knows what he is doing is wrong. He puts on disguise and he goes at night under the cover of darkness. He doesn't want anyone to know. He doesn't want anyone to recognize him. **Life Lesson #3 Beware when you find yourself keeping lots of things hidden.** One of the surest signs that you are wandering away from God is when you try to keep what you are doing hidden. Secrecy and holiness are usually enemies. We have all sorts of ways of disguising our actions and motivations to keep others in the dark. If you find yourself frequently hiding behind layers of facades, it's time to check your heart.

*9 But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul 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?"
10 Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this."*

At first she refuses. Maybe she already suspicious that this man in disguise is Saul. Maybe she's just doing her due diligence because she doesn't want to be caught in a sting.

Here is where we can see just how twisted Saul's thinking has become. He assures her by invoking the name of the Lord. Capitol L-O-R-D. That's Yahweh. He name drops Yahweh. He's

involving God in an activity that God hates. That's like paying a prostitute with a Bible verse check, and telling her she knows your check is good because you're a Christian.

How could he be so blind? How could he not see the obvious disconnect? We would never do such a thing, would we? We would never indulge a blatant sin on Saturday, and then come to church on Sunday and sing praises to God, or is that just me?

Here's another big Life Lesson from this story – Spiritual compromise leads to a loss of moral clarity. It works the other way too – moral compromise leads to a loss of spiritual clarity. When we begin to muddy the waters in our life spiritually, right and wrong suddenly become very fuzzy. Whenever we begin to go against God's commandments, truth becomes really hard to discern.

As a wearer of spectacles, every couple of days I noticed that things get harder to see. My screen gets blurry. I have a harder time reading text. That's when I take my glasses off and noticed how filthy and smudged they are. Every time you deliberately disregard what God says about right and wrong. Every time you purposefully ignore a biblical truth, you're smearing your spiritual lenses just a bit. You're clouding your spiritual vision. Making good decisions becomes harder and harder.

*11 Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?"
"Bring up Samuel," he said.*

*12 When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul,
"Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"*

With Saul's assurance, the witch of Endor proceeds. Who do you want to see? Saul says Samuel. Now you need to fully appreciate the nature of this request. She is a necromancer, an illegal practitioner of the occultic arts, and now her client wants you to consult the spirit of someone who would have led the charge to get rid of you.

This is like showing up to a major drug deal and you bring your friend with you. Never mind him. He's just a buddy of mine. He's a Deputy Administrator with the DEA. Suddenly, everyone in the warehouse gets a little more tense and their fingers get a little twitchy on the trigger.

But Miss Cleo has no clue just how nervous she's about to get. Now a couple of the questions that always come up in this story have to do with the nature of her work. Is she the real deal? Does she really consult with spirits? Does she really call up Samuel?

Most psychics and mediums are complete BS. Baloney Sandwich. There's no real meat to what they do. It's all baloney. They use cold reading techniques and speak in vague generalities that would make P.T. Barnum proud. They fish with popular bait that would be meaningful to most people, a ring, a necklace, a favorite fishing hole. They dangle connections that most people have. "I'm sensing a grandmother, or maybe an aunt who was really close to you." Oh, how could they have known?

With most psychics, the medium provides most of the words, but it is the subject that provides all the meaning. They use a technique called subjective validation. For example, John Edward will say that he sees a spirit, “He’s showing me a book. What does that mean? Does that have any significance to you?” The book is just a wild guess. It could be anything – a Bible, a cookbook, a prized novel, but that allows the subject to supply all the significance.

But we also know that the spiritual realm is real. Our world is a part of a much greater reality that is filled with angels and demons and all sorts of things beyond our daily experience. I don’t believe everything in the occult can be explained as fakes and frauds, not in a hands-under-the-table-moving-hidden-cables sort of way.

The truly occult, real magic, taps into demonic power and demonic presence. I have no doubt that demons happily impersonate the spirit of the dearly departed, just to lure you in. Satan loves to masquerade as an angel of light and he will pretend to be anything in order to fool you.

Now which one is the witch of Endor? Does she just use tricks of the trade to fool her clients who desperately want to believe, or does she traffic in demonic spirits who happily pull the wool over their eyes? We don’t know. It doesn’t say.

But we do know this. Nobody is more surprised when Samuel actually shows up than her. Did you catch that? Verse 12, “*When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice.*” She’s terrified. I don’t think she actually expected to see Samuel. It was a shock to her.

Here’s what this tells us. She didn’t call up Samuel. God did. This story isn’t proof that mediums can actually talk to the dead. This is God intervening in a miraculous way. No medium, no séance, no occultic formula ever has the authority or power to call up the spirit of a dead person.

This brings us to Life Lesson #5 from this story – Following Jesus is completely incompatible with the occult. The Bible never speaks favorably of any attempt at speaking with the dead, or manipulating the spiritual realm in any way. This isn’t just an Old Testament thing. Both the old and new testaments portray occult practices such as necromancy, séances, divination and the like as offensive to God.

Galatians 5 lists those who practice witchcraft among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Revelation 22 lists those who practice sorcery among those forever shut out new Jerusalem. In Acts 19, the faith is spreading rapidly in Ephesus and all kinds of people are become Christ followers. Acts 19:19 says, “*A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.*” That’s several million dollars.

The Bible connects the occult with Satan and his demons. Dabbling in these things takes you in the opposite direction of following Jesus. Even if most psychics, tarot card readers, clairvoyants,

and mediums and such are frauds, that doesn't mean such things are harmless. You never know when you might be messing with true demonic power. That's not something to mess around with.

It's not harmless. It's not fun and games. If you are a follower of Jesus then you will have nothing to do with consulting the dead, palm readers, psychic readers, tarot cards, Ouija boards, witchcraft, voodoo, potions, spells, crystals and the like. Any power those things might promise is deceptive and destructive, not to mention inferior to the true power of God. 1 John 4:4 promises, *"for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."*

13 The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?"

The woman said, "I see a ghostly figure[a] coming up out of the earth."

14 "What does he look like?" he asked.

"An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said.

Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

This medium is so scared, Saul has to reassure her. At first, apparently only the woman can see Samuel. She describes a spirit coming up out of the earth. He's an old man wearing a robe. This isn't just any robe. This is the mantle of prophet. We talked about this last week. Elijah drops his mantle, and Elisha picked it up. It's this trademark mantle that is the tell-tale sign that this is Samuel.

Now why if Samuel is a righteous prophet, why is he described as "coming up"? In our mental model of the spirit world we think of people going up or going down after they day. In the Ancient Near East. Everyone went down. The grave is down. The dead were understood as existing deep within the bowels of the earth. This was the underworld, what the Jews called Sheol. Sheol was divided into the two parts – the good place and the bad place. The good place came to be known as Abraham's bosom, which we read about in Luke 16. It was a place of peaceful rest. The bad part of Sheol was a place darkness and discomfort. So this is why Samuel is described as coming up.

15 Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"

"I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do."

So Samuel is coming up from the good part of Sheol. He has been disturbed from his place of peace and rest in Abraham's bosom. Finally, Saul is able to ask his question, and we see what he really wants. He wants to know what he can do in order to win. He's never stopped to consider the fact that he hasn't heard from God is a sign that there is no winning this one.

16 Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has departed from you and become your enemy? 17 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 neighbors—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. (New Slide) 19 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.”

Samuel explains what Saul should already know. God no longer regards you as king. When he did tell you what he wanted, you didn't listen. Now God has nothing to say to you. But since you insist, this day will be your last. You'll be joining me in the grave tomorrow. This battle will not go well for you. You will die. Israel will lose and the Philistines will be victorious.

There is perhaps no greater tragic figure in all of Scripture besides Saul. Maybe Judas. A kingdom that began with such promise and potential ended in disgrace. The battle the next day was completely one-sided. The Philistines quickly overran the Israelite position. Their troops turned and fled the battlefield. Even Saul and his sons turned and ran. A Philistine arrow, however, found Saul and wounded him critically.

Saul knew his time was up and begged his armor-bearer to run him through with his sword, so he wouldn't be killed by uncircumcised Philistines. However, the armor-bearer refused to do it, and Saul committed suicide falling on his own sword.

At this point, all the Israelites living in all the towns along the valley abandoned their homes and fled their cities, and the area was completely taken over by the Philistines.

The next day, the Philistines came and stripped the dead, they cut off his head, stripped him of his armor which they proudly displayed in one of their temples, and then hung his body on display on the wall of one of the Israelite cities.

Only Jesus has the power to reach beyond the grave.

2 Timothy 1:10

“It has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”