

Saul at En Dor

1 Samuel 28:13-15

Sunday, January 31, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Introduction

People try to somehow contact the dead, and interest in spiritualism has been longstanding. It was widely practiced in ancient times, yet worship of ancestors continues to this day in some parts of the world. I remember the wealthy couple who donated the estate that became the University of St. Mary on the Lake. It includes the tomb of their only son, who died in battle during World War 1. How many times must that poor bereaved couple yearned to talk with their son again. Such attempts to contact the death are expressly forbidden in the Bible, and in many cases are complete hoaxes, yet here we seem to have an event in which that actually takes place. Why is this here in Scripture?

Set the Stage

In one of the strangest episodes recorded as a case study in Scripture, Saul, the King of Israel, is on the verge of battle against the Philistines. He is desperate for counsel, but his mentor, the great Prophet Samuel, is dead and there is no one to replace him so Saul goes to the home of a spiritualist to consult with Samuel's ghost. Contacting the dead was forbidden in Scripture and was illegal in Israel, but Saul assures the spiritualist that she will not be harmed. To the terror of the spiritualist, Saul and anyone else there, Samuel actually shows up (this is controversial, but I think a case can be made that God made a rare exception to the rule and allowed Samuel himself to respond). Samuel scolds Saul, and tells him that he will lose the battle and by this time the next evening Saul will be with Samuel. Devastated, Saul slowly recovers enough to move and then walks out into the night toward his doom. There is much to discuss in this episode, but today I'd like to suggest that in all the trouble there is an example of the great grace of the Lord. This is what I mean...

The great longsuffering and grace of God

Saul's was a career that started well in the eyes of God, but degenerated terribly over time. He was supposed to enact judgment on the tribe of Amalek and he failed. He murdered the priests who gave David and his men the showbread, mentioned last Sunday. He made multiple attempts on David's life. At first he repented when confronted, then he started to make excuses. Then he just did what he wanted. By this time he enters the home of the spiritualist in En Dor, he is very far from the will of God. So where is the grace of the Lord in all this?

I think the grace comes in when Samuel tells Saul "this time tomorrow you will be with me". Well, where was that? That depends on how you answer this question: Was Samuel a false demonic spirit and Saul was going to hell, or was this the real Samuel, allowed to return as a rare exception to the rule, to speak prophetically one last time to Saul. Was Saul, in spite of all his failures, still going to be allowed into the Bosom of Abraham, the realm of the righteous dead before Christ came? I think so, in spite of Saul's many sins. Why? For God's grace is tremendous. One can lose salvation, but it is not easy.

Application: As mentioned before, the application to any reading of Scripture can be "do this" or "know this", or "pray this way", or a combination. One application of this text instructs us in how to pray. Give thanks for the Lord's tremendous grace, don't give up praying for loved ones who may have wandered from the church.

Conclusion

The episode of Saul at En Dor is one of the strangest in all of the Bible. It brings up many questions regarding contact with the dead, or the destiny of the soul, or others. I think it may also, for all the harsh circumstance, an example of the Lord's great longsuffering, and forgiveness and patience with people, and for that we can be grateful.