

SI: On a historical level, the book of 1 Samuel is about the establishment of Israel’s monarchy, and about how David became God’s chosen king. On a spiritual level, 1 Samuel is about what it means to live by faith.

INTRO: When I was in college I church hopped my first two years, before finally settling down my junior year. But during my church hopping stage I at a church in October and they announced they were having a costume party for children as an alternative to Halloween. Rather than wearing typical Halloween costumes, scary stuff, werewolves and vampires and so forth, were supposed to dress like a character from the Bible.

When I was leaving worship, pastor was at the door, I decided to pull his leg. He didn’t know me, so I told him I was a visitor, that I had a little sister.

And I was wondering if I could bring her to the costume party. He said, Of course! We’d love to have you bring your little sister. So I said: She’s supposed to dress up like a Bible character, right? Yes, he said. That’s right.

So I told him that she liked witches and was going to dress up like the witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28.

You should have seen his face. He didn’t know what to say.

If you think about it, there are lots of scary Bible characters.

You could be a headless John the Baptist, or one of the beasts of Revelation.

This woman is not actually called a witch. Traditional title of this story.

Most English Bibles call her a medium or a woman with a familiar spirit.

The Hebrew literally is a woman with mastery over bottles (used in divination). Interesting that the Septuagint (Greek translation of OT), translates as ventriloquist.

Which probably indicates the Jews who translated the Septuagint thought she was a fraud. She didn’t really have any powers to communicate with the dead. She would just fool people with her ventriloquism make think dead speaking.

Grandma, is that you??? Yes, it’s me.

Maybe that’s correct. Some commentaries argue that when she screams in fright it’s because for the first time it actually worked. A spirit did appear.

It wasn’t her power that did it. She was a fake.

But the Lord sent Samuel back to give this final message of judgment.

Other commentators have said: No, she had power to communicate with spirits.

She screamed because when she saw Samuel, she suddenly realized who her mystery customer was. That it was King Saul.

She was afraid it was a sting operation and she was about to be killed.

And then there are other commentators who say that the whole thing was faked.

Saul didn't actually see anything. She tells him what she sees. Old man in robe. She made suggestions and Saul, being an emotional basket case, imagined that he heard Samuel speaking this message of doom.

It's a fuzzy story. You can argue all three scenarios based on how you read data.

She was a fake but, surprise, surprise, Samuel's spirit did appear and speak.

She did have some demonic or occult power to communicate with spirits.

Or the whole thing was fake and confirms Saul's mental and spiritual breakdown.

I personally lean toward option one, that this woman was unable to actually communicate with the spirits of dead people.

But she got the fright of her life when God himself sent Samuel back to proclaim one last prophetic word.

Samuel was the last judge of Israel. He was the king-maker. Gets final word.

But as interesting as all that is, and as much as it might pique your curiosity about spirits and seances, the occult and demonology—that's not the point of the story.

So that's all I'm going to say about that.

Whether or not this was actually Samuel's spirit, the message that the Lord had abandoned Saul is the real point of this story, that's what I want to focus on.

Let's explore the biblical theme of God abandoning people.

It's not a huge theme in the Bible, but it occurs enough and is important enough that we ought to have some understanding of it.

So let's look at it under three points or headings.

1. Abandonment as judgment
2. Feeling abandoned
3. An abandoned substitute

MP#1 Abandonment as judgment

In this story Saul's final judgment is announced.

He's not dead and in hell. He's still alive.

But he receives the final, divine verdict as if were standing before judgment seat. His judgment is described in about five different ways.

God no longer answers him.

God has turned away from him.

God has become his enemy.

God tears away his kingdom from him.

God arranges for Saul's death.

I've called this abandonment, but notice God is still very much present.

The Lord is mentioned again and again in this story.

But the Lord has abandoned Saul in the sense that he has removed the final vestiges of his mercy and common grace.

Saul never had a personal faith and trust in the Lord. That's clear.

Over and over in 1 Samuel, Saul's unbelief contrasted with David's faith.

But all along Saul in a sense had access to God.

Or you could think of it this way, the Lord kept preserving his life and giving him chance after chance to repent and believe.

Think of the two incidents where David spared Saul's life—in cave and in camp.

Both times David challenged Saul to consider what he was doing and to repent and turn to the Lord. Both times Saul got for a little while a clear view of self.

Both times Saul even softened a bit.

You can see in those incidents David's concern for Saul, his regard for him.

That had to be in David's heart because it was in the Lord's heart.

The Lord was concerned for Saul and gave him chance after chance, warning after warning. Think of all the times Samuel confronted Saul when still alive.

Think of those very emotional times when his own son Jonathan challenged him.

Father, why are you trying to kill David? You're fighting against God.

In crisis after crisis, challenge after challenge, God was still there in mercy and Saul could have turned to him and found grace and forgiveness.

But he didn't. Saul never gave his heart to the Lord.

Then we come to chapter 28.

Saul faces a terrible challenge, a full-scale Philistine invasion.

And he's terrified, because he realizes this might be it, this might be the end.

But there's something else that terrifies him.

He senses that he is spiritually alone.

His attempts to pray and get God's guidance are impotent.

All his life, at every big crisis there was someone in his life pointing him to the Lord, whether Samuel or Jonathan or David. But he said: No, no, no.

Now he looks for that again, at least that comforting thought that God is there if he needs him, but he senses nothing.

Samuel says: The Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy.

God had abandoned Saul.

And not just abandoned him, but was actually beginning to carry out his final judgment—stripping him of his kingdom, arranging for his death.

What is this? It's hell. It's a man starting to enter hell before he is even dead.

No more mercy. No more chances for repentance. The day of grace has passed.

During a cholera epidemic in London, Spurgeon called to bedside of a dying man.

This man had often mocked Spurgeon, mocked the Christian faith.

Now called him. Come see me, I'm dying.

Spurgeon talked to him, shared the Gospel, but the man could not respond.

He just lay there with a look of terror on his face and then he died.

He had, when in health, wickedly refused Christ, yet in his death-agony, he had superstitiously sent for me. Too late, he sighed for the ministry of reconciliation, and sought to enter in at the closed door, but he was not able. There was no space left him then for repentance, for he had wasted the opportunities which God had long granted him.

The Apostle John says in his first letter that there is a sin that leads to death—and he says that he can't even counsel praying for someone in that state.

It's possible for a person who persistently rejects God to be rejected by God.

If you despise God's word he will take it from you.

If you persistently refuse to obey God's speech you will endure God's silence.

You may know you need to repent—but you can't, because you over and over ignored the mercy offered and now your heart simply will not move.

The very possibility of repentance is taken away and your next stop is hell.

Scary stuff. Scarier than witches.

How easily we could be hardhearted and miss the grace of God.

All the warnings in the Bible are intended to impress upon us the absolute necessity of faith in Jesus Christ and the preciousness of that faith.

But this raises an experiential question.

What about those times that some Christians experience

when they feel abandoned by God? So let's consider . . .

MP#2 Feeling abandoned

Saul certainly felt, or had a sense, that God was gone.

What if someone says that and it's someone you are sure is a Christian.

Someone who has earlier in his life or her life professed faith in Jesus

and who has demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit, love for God, love for neighbor.

Not at all someone like Saul who was never convicted and never had faith—

but someone who has shown a life of faith in many ways.

What do make if it when a person like that says:

God has abandoned me.

God is not answering my prayers any more.

Or maybe even: I've lost my salvation. I've fallen from grace.

I've encountered a few people like that.

There was a man I knew once just a little younger than I am—

he was a devout, warm Christian, and then he went into a downward spiral that took on a very negative spiritual tone.

He began to say: Where is God? God has rejected me.

I cry, I pray, and my prayers bounce off the ceiling.

God's not listening to me any more. I don't even know if I'm a Christian.

One famous example of this in church history, a case study I've mentioned before is William Cowper, the English hymn writer, friend of John Newton.

There Is A Fountain, Oh For A Closer Walk, God Moves In A Mysterious Way

After a series of blows and disappointments, failed relationships, failed jobs, vivid bad dreams, depression, became convinced God had rejected him.

In fact, believed that not only had he lost his salvation, but that he was a hopeless case and God would never take him back no matter what.

One more example, this one from the Bible. Writer of Psalm 88. Heman .

He felt rejected by God. Actually says: I cry to God for help day and night but the Lord has rejected me and hidden his face from me.

When reading Psalm 88, you think he's bound to turn a corner and feel the sunshine of God's face, but he doesn't. Psalm ends with these words:

You have taken my companions and loved ones from me, the darkness is my closest friend.

Even more striking in Hebrew because the last word is darkness.

My closest friend—darkness.

Sometimes it's hard to help a person in that condition.

Good old John Newton and his wife Mary tried and tried to help their friend

William Cowper. They even let him live with them.

Assured him of God's love, pointed out the evidences of God's grace in life, the promises of Christ, his profession of faith—but it didn't help him. He felt God had rejected him and couldn't overcome his feelings.

If you are committed to life in the body, sooner or later you will encounter this. Someone in the church saying: God's rejected me. God's not answering me. We don't have time to sort through what might cause this. Another sermon. But how do you assess the spiritual condition of a person in that condition? They might be say some pretty negative and critical things about God. They might say they don't know if they believe any more, or if still Christian. They might try to harm themselves. Cowper tried suicide several times.

Let me point one profoundly important detail in Saul's story.

When Saul felt God had rejected him, where did he turn?

He turned to a witch and asked her to call Samuel's ghost.

In the story I told you from Spurgeon's life, the man dying of cholera,

do you remember what Spurgeon said about the man calling him?

in health, wickedly refused Christ, yet in his death-agony, he had superstitiously sent for me.

Spurgeon interpreted his request for a pastor as superstition.

It wasn't Jesus the man looked for, looking for a proxy to make him feel better.

Samuel says to Saul—Why are you bothering me? I can't help you.

The key difference between a person God has rejected for persistent unbelief and a regenerate person who feels rejected is that the regenerate person will continue to deal with God.

But when the hardhearted unbeliever is rejected by God, and when he feels desperate and life falling apart and death approaching, where does he turn?

To some religious proxy. Some person or symbol that he hopes will give peace.

The true believer might complain about God, accuse God, blame God, be angry at God, be furious at God, feel wronged by God, hurt by God and question God.

But it will be God with whom he continues to deal—not a proxy.

There's a relationship. It may be strained, but it's the Lord and one of his own.

So even if feels a subjective sense of abandonment, not objectively abandoned.

I've given two extreme examples, William Cowper and Psalm 88.

You might not ever experience a sense of God's abandonment that severe—

I hope not.

But I think that most Christians have times and seasons in life when they have feelings of abandonment. Seasons when worship is dry and unappealing.

Seasons when reading the Bible and listening preaching doesn't feed you.

Seasons when if feels like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling.

As I said, you might not sink so deep you feel you've lost your salvation and are headed to hell, but still it hurts.
So how do you get through those times? Let's consider one more point . . .

MP#3 An abandoned substitute

Where is Jesus Christ foreshadowed in this sad tale?
After Saul collapsed the woman insisted on fixing him something to eat.
She butchered a calf and baked some unleavened bread.
What meal does this remind you of? Young butchered animal, unleavened bread?
It's like Passover. But it's an upside down Passover.
Instead of eating it with the Lord, Saul eats it with a witch.
And after eating, it says that Saul and his servants went out into the night.

The Last Supper was a Passover meal with unleavened bread.
Remember Jesus told the disciples one of them would betray him.
He gave a piece of bread to Judas and said: What you intend to do, do quickly.
Judas left. The other disciples thought it was to take care of financial business.
He was actually going out to make plans to betray Jesus.
Listen to the way John 13:30 describes that scene.
As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

Just like Saul, Judas left and stepped out into the night, into darkness.
Darkness and night is symbolic of abandonment by God.
For both Saul and for Judas it was a picture of their true spiritual condition.
They had their last encounter with the truth—Saul with Samuel, Judas with Jesus.
And they then stepped into eternal darkness.
They abandoned God, and he abandoned them.

If we keep following this symbolism of darkness and night and abandonment then we come to the crucifixion.
Darkness descended from the sixth to the ninth hour—noon to three.
This was the pinnacle of Jesus' suffering.
What was the worst part of his suffering?
Was it the physical pain? Was it the nails tearing his flesh?

You know the answer. His greatest suffering was in his spirit.
He was experiencing abandonment by God.
And he cried out those words from Psalm 22—
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
Jesus Christ didn't cry to a proxy.

He didn't cry to angels to rescue him.
He didn't cry to his disciples to gather around him.
His heart of faith cried out to the God.

But even though he had perfect faith in his Father in heaven, and even though he and always listened to God's word and never turned away from it for a second—in the darkness he experienced the abandonment of judgment.

When we say the Apostles Creed, and get to that line—
He descended into hell—that is an affirmation of Christ's abandonment.

Even though he didn't deserve abandonment, he willingly experienced it as our substitute.

This is the great and glorious heart of the Christian faith.

We are connected to Jesus. His life is our life. His death is our death.
He experienced the abandonment of judgment so you never have to.
That means when you go through periods of darkness, whether mild or severe, you can be assured even though it may feel like the Lord has abandoned, hasn't. And in God's time, the light of his presence will be restored.

There are lots of Psalms that speak of this experience, and they all end with the Psalm writer turning a corner and the sense of abandonment lifting.

Psalm 22, the Psalm Jesus Christ cried out on the cross, has a turning point.

David, writer, says: Lord has no longer hidden face, listened to cry for help. So in the vast majority of cases, just hang on. Keep your eyes on the cross. The clouds will lift in God's time.

What about those rare and severe cases? The Psalm 88s, the William Cowpers? When Cowper died, Newton preached his funeral and he chose as the Scripture text Exodus 3:2-3—the burning bush. Moses saw the bush on fire but it was not consumed because the angel of the Lord was there.

I know of no text in the whole book of God's word more suited to the case of my dear friend than that I have read. He was indeed a bush in flames for 27 years, but he was not consumed. And why? Because the Lord was there.

The Lord was there. William Cowper was not abandoned even if felt was. Then Newton said.

He suffered much here for twenty-seven years, but eternity is long enough to make amends for all. For what is all he endured in this life, when compared with the rest which remaineth for the children of God?

Newton is saying: This terrible feeling of abandonment—now it's passed and he knows, because he's in heaven and resting with Jesus.

As I said, an extreme case, but what a precious reminder that one day all doubts and fears whatsoever will be removed, and we will see the Lord face to face.

If you are just in church because you like the comfortable presence of religious things, and like knowing God is there if you happen to need him—but you haven't given your heart to him—then you're like Saul.

Don't wait until it's too late. Today is the day of salvation.

Believe in Jesus today. Give yourself to him today.

Don't risk the abandonment of judgment.

And for all of you who do know him, and especially those of you who even today might feel that the Lord has abandoned you—keep looking at Jesus—remind yourself of his suffering on your behalf—and be assured that in time, the Lord will restore the light of his face.