

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 20

DECEPTION AND FRAUD



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

With the Philistines massing against him, Saul can't get any clues from the LORD so he turns to a "medium." Yikes. This does not go well, and Saul is to die tomorrow.

Meanwhile, David avoids going to battle on the side of the Philistines as some of them don't trust him.

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! Samuel, Week 20 — Deception and Fraud
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1 1 Samuel 28:1–7

Now it happened in those days that the Philistines gathered their armies together for war, to fight with Israel. And Achish said to David, “You assuredly know that you will go out with me to battle, you and your men.”

So David said to Achish, “Surely you know what your servant can do.”

And Achish said to David, “Therefore I will make you one of my chief guardians forever.”

Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land.

Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets.

Then Saul said to his servants, “Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.”

And his servants said to him, “In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.”

Saul is getting the silent treatment from the LORD. He’s scared—he should be—so he inquires of the LORD every way he can think of. And ... nothing. Remember, Saul doesn’t even have the real Urim. He lost that when he slaughtered the priests back in Chapter 23.

When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand. — 1 Samuel 23:6 (ESV)

But Saul has gotta be Saul. So, he seeks the advice of “a woman who is a medium.” He doesn’t give a rip about his earlier expulsion of all such people from Israel. That’s why the text mentions this expulsion—to highlight Saul’s hypocrisy. He expelled them to look good, not because he was righteous.

“And the person who turns to mediums and familiar spirits, to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people.” — Leviticus 20:6

Saul is embarking on major sin. “Mediums” are either complete frauds or worse.

If they have any real connection, it’s with evil.

Saul’s other sins can be explained by weak faith combined with pride and/or panic under pressure—but not this one. Saul seeking advice from a medium is more than just a reversal of a previous policy.

It’s completely incompatible with any level of faith.

2 1 Samuel 28:8–12 (ESV)

So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, “Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you.” The woman said to him, “Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?” But Saul swore to her by the LORD, “As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.” Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” He said, “Bring up Samuel for me.” When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul.”

How does she suddenly recognize Saul?

Hmmm, the text doesn't say, so let's dig.

We start with two basic facts: She suddenly recognized Saul, and she screamed (*cried out with a loud voice*). Her recognizing Saul means that something real happened; this can't be some fake parlor trick. Her screaming means that something was scary and unexpected. Since recognizing Saul would be plenty scary for her, that could explain the scream.

But there's a better explanation. The pieces all fit together perfectly if we add an assumption—she's a fraud. Nothing in scripture, or elsewhere, contradicts this assumption. If she's a fraud, seeing the real Samuel would surely make her scream. That's the exact timing described in the text.

And there's one more clue—scripture leaving out how she learned Saul's identity. Clearly she had some kind of epiphany, yet the passage doesn't describe it. That hints that it's indescribable.

So this poor lady, for all her faults, is suddenly way out of her depth. She's playing her usual parlor tricks, and God (whose sense of humor knows no bounds) drops the real Samuel onto the scene.

Boo!

When a scripture passage clearly raises a question, and then just as clearly leaves out the answer, that's a sign. It's supposed to pique the reader's interest. There's gold in them there hills.

The same thing holds for art. If something surprising or impossible is in a painting, it's there to get the viewer's attention. Artists often hide messages and themes this way, but you need to dig to find them.

The trick with the “missing answer” Bible passages is to not get stuck on the question you can't answer. Just let it draw your attention to the nuggets nearby.

Today's passage is filled with action and meaning, even comedy.

Its unanswered question can be a distraction, or a guide.

3 1 Samuel 28:13–25 (ESV)

The king said to her, “Do not be afraid. What do you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I see a god coming up out of the earth.” He said to her, “What is his appearance?” And she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe.” And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage.

Then Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” Saul answered, “I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do.” And Samuel said, “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done to you as he spoke by me, for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover, the LORD will give Israel also with you into the hand of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The LORD will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines.”

Then Saul fell at once full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night. And the woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, “Behold, your servant has obeyed you. I have taken my life in my hand and have listened to what you have said to me. Now therefore, you also obey your servant. Let me set a morsel of bread before you; and eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.” He refused and said, “I will not eat.” But his servants, together with the woman, urged him, and he listened to their words. So he arose from the earth and sat on the bed. Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly killed it, and she took flour and kneaded it and baked unleavened bread of it, and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

Saul seeks advice from Samuel, but the tables get turned. Saul gets no advice. Instead, he has to answer Samuel’s question, “*Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?*”

Saul’s answer paints a horrifying picture of sin. “*I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I shall do.*”

Consulting mediums is condemned in the strongest possible terms. So, Saul’s answer isn’t that far from saying, “The LORD wouldn’t give me any advice, so I turned to the forces of evil.”

His desperation has sent him around the bend.

I had a karate teacher who carefully trained us to keep our heads when things got intense.

That’s a skill all Christians should cultivate. We’re all prone to making mistakes under stress.

4 1 Samuel 29:1–5

Then the Philistines gathered together all their armies at Aphek, and the Israelites encamped by a fountain which is in Jezreel. And the lords of the Philistines passed in review by hundreds and by thousands, but David and his men passed in review at the rear with Achish. Then the princes of the Philistines said, “What are these Hebrews doing here?”

And Achish said to the princes of the Philistines, “Is this not David, the servant of Saul king of Israel, who has been with me these days, or these years? And to this day I have found no fault in him since he defected to me.”

But the princes of the Philistines were angry with him; so the princes of the Philistines said to him, “Make this fellow return, that he may go back to the place which you have appointed for him, and do not let him go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become our adversary. For with what could he reconcile himself to his master, if not with the heads of these men? Is this not David, of whom they sang to one another in dances, saying:

*‘Saul has slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands’?”*

David and his men catch a huge break; they won't be involved in any way in the coming battle. This prevents David from possibly killing Saul, or even being accused of killing Saul. The same goes for his men. They can't kill any Israelites.

Who can know what nightmares will be avoided because of this? The recriminations could be endless.

David will ultimately be hailed as a man after God's own heart. He will make mistakes, and be called out severely for them, but he will be held up as the great king. His dynasty is even messianic.

But this battle has the potential to ruin all that. Keeping David from it is part of the plan of redemption.

Many of God's greatest blessings are the things we cannot see—the things that didn't happen because God kept them from happening. Sometimes we notice that we “just dodged a bullet,” but usually we don't know what we don't know.

Detecting these hidden blessings is difficult, even unnatural. When we reflect on what might have been, we usually think of good things we missed. We don't want to think about all the ways our sin and stupidity might have taken us out.

Thus, we fail to see, and fail to appreciate, many of God's greatest blessings. Even though we don't intend it that way, this is effectively the same as having a negative attitude.

By failing to think about the disasters we avoided, we compare what did happen to an unrealistic ideal.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEE3ycDH9_8

5 1 Samuel 29:6–11

Then Achish called David and said to him, “Surely, as the LORD lives, you have been upright, and your going out and your coming in with me in the army is good in my sight. For to this day I have not found evil in you since the day of your coming to me. Nevertheless the lords do not favor you. Therefore return now, and go in peace, that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines.”

So David said to Achish, “But what have I done? And to this day what have you found in your servant as long as I have been with you, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?”

Then Achish answered and said to David, “I know that you are as good in my sight as an angel of God; nevertheless the princes of the Philistines have said, ‘He shall not go up with us to the battle.’ Now therefore, rise early in the morning with your master’s servants who have come with you. And as soon as you are up early in the morning and have light, depart.”

So David and his men rose early to depart in the morning, to return to the land of the Philistines. And the Philistines went up to Jezreel.

The Philistine princes are right and Achish is wrong—to an amazing extent. How did David manage to fool him so completely? Was it David’s brilliance or Achish’s foolishness? Or was it so bizarre that only the LORD’s intervention can explain it?

Rewinding back to the beginning of David fleeing to Achish in 1 Samuel 27:5—*Then David said to Achish, “If I have now found favor in your eyes, let them give me a place in some town in the country, that I may dwell there. For why should your servant dwell in the royal city with you?”*

Well, that rules out any brilliant argument by David. He’s obsequious, but makes no argument at all. Achish’s instant trust of David makes no sense. So that leaves Achish’s foolishness and the LORD’s intervention as possible explanations.

But Achish taking his princes’ recommendation here is wise. It’s definitely not the behavior of a fool.

So, it looks like this is the LORD’s doing. Achish is blinded to what everyone else can see.

Achish’s main error was a failure of due diligence. He trusted David from the get-go and never even had someone check up on him.

When David raided city after city, Achish never found out that they were Philistine cities, not Judean ones. There are many ways that Achish could have learned of the totally destroyed Philistine cities (e.g. from travelers). It’s curious that he never did. He seemed to deliberately avoid learning the truth.

Many churches have learned this lesson the hard way. No matter what you hope is true, due diligence is an absolute. Never slack on security. Never slack on running background checks.

Anyone who is offended by this practice is simply wrong.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever seen a purely spiritual sin that made your blood run cold?
2. What's your biggest unanswered question from the Bible?
3. What mistakes have you seen made under stress?
4. What was your biggest close call?
5. When has failure of due diligence been a catastrophe?

Items for prayer: