

Bewitched

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you ever went into an examination and just outside the exam hall, just before you go in, you're talking to your fellow students and one of them mentions something that you haven't studied and you suddenly think, uh-oh.

Or one of them mentions the great new book on the topics and you think, oh, I haven't read that. Well, that's how I feel right now because in all my research of Endor, I couldn't find spaceships or cuddly cute little things or dragons or anything.

So I apologize if this sermon seems a little bit old-fashioned. Maybe we should pray before we begin. Amen. Oh God, our Father, you reveal yourself clearly to us in your word.

Give us ears to hear and to heed so that we may live for you and for your glory.

Amen. Amen. Peter Lloyd is awaiting sentencing in Singapore. Peter Lloyd is an ABC correspondent, radio and television, and he was in Singapore earlier this year on a holiday or leave, seeking some medical attention from Delhi, I think, and was found by the police to have ice, methamphetamines, oh, it's a bit late in the day to say that, methamphetamines, and was charged initially not only with possession but also with trafficking, although the trafficking charge has been withdrawn.

[2 : 03] If you read the article in yesterday's age, you'll see the spin that he puts on it. I don't mean necessarily that it's untrue, but it's his positive spin about why he ended up with ice.

Peter Lloyd has covered the tsunami, before that the Bali bombs. He says he's probably seen more corpses than many police, and he's been traumatised, understandably, by that, as well as being in Lahore after Benazir Bhutto was assassinated nearly a year ago, and many other tragedies and awful events.

In eight years, he's one of Australia's best journalist correspondents overseas. His marriage has broken down, he's in divorce, he's come out as gay, and he's ended up on ice.

Some people try anything in desperate times. For him, he was suffering depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, never treated properly for it, accumulated over eight years.

Other people, of course, turn to alcohol, or other sorts of abusive substances. I'm not trying to justify his behaviour at all, but some people, when they are desperate, turn anywhere for help.

[3 : 27] Some people turn to gurus. Some people pursue all sorts of superstitious practices. Others, alternative therapies, with increasing measures of desperation.

Some people turned 30 years ago to Doris Stokes. Doris Stokes was a cult figure in 1978, in Australia. I'm showing my age here.

But she was on the Don Lane show, on Channel 9, as it then was. Doris Stokes looked to be a completely benign, innocuous, and harmless grandmotherly figure, with white hair, late 50s, I worked out yesterday.

And she was a hit on the Don Lane show, because she spoke with the dead. And all these people, desperate in their grief, flocked to be audience members of the Don Lane show.

She filled the Sydney Opera House main auditorium three times that year, with people coming to hear her, and hopefully for her to speak to their dead loved ones, and bring them messages from the dead.

[4 : 39] Don Lane's ratings that year skyrocketed, with Doris Stokes. Apparently she was the first, and perhaps even only medium, to fill the London Palladium Theatre.

She was a hero, around the world. It all began on the Don Lane show. Although the Church of England was pretty aghast at her, apparently. But I don't remember anything from the church in Australia.

Saul, supposedly King Saul, was desperate. And some people try anything in desperation. Desperate times require desperate measures, sometimes people say.

Saul knew that David would succeed him as king. Saul was insanely jealous because of the acclaim that people had for David. We've seen that over the last three weeks in this series, on the last chapters of 1 Samuel.

Saul's own son, Jonathan, was in a covenant relationship with David. And in effect, in Saul's eyes, had turned against his father, Saul.

[5 : 46] Saul was desperate. Not only that, but the Philistines were the enemy, and they couldn't be subdued. And they kept on rearing their ugly heads. Maybe that's what the dragon at Endor, in that little video clip, is meant to be like, the Philistines.

The prophet who anointed Saul, named Samuel, was dead. We read that back in chapter 25.

And we're reminded of it in verse 3. Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. Moreover, David, the enemy of Saul, well, not really the enemy of Saul, but the person who Saul defined as his enemy, had gone over to the Philistines.

That occurs in chapter 27. He'd already tried that, if you remember. We saw that a couple of weeks ago, but was rejected by the Philistines at Gath. But now he's come back to them. And maybe now they realize that David is the enemy of Saul, and therefore my enemy's enemy is my friend, and they accepted him.

And they kept him a little bit at arm's length. They gave him a city well south, at Ziklag, to look after that. And David fought lots of battles. And in that time, chapter 27 tells us that the king of Gath thought that David was fighting against Israel all the time.

[7 : 03] Although David was actually fighting against other peoples, and in effect, fighting Israel's battles as well. There was some mutual benefit in all of that. But Saul was worried.

Saul was desperate. The Philistines are now mounting a major offensive in the Jezreel Valley, in the north of the country. This is not just one of those border skirmishes that's been going on all the way through 1 Samuel.

We get the sense that this is the major offensive. This is the major battle. It's building to this climax. The Jezreel Valley is a large flat valley in the north, and the Philistines no doubt were going to parade their chariotry, their sophisticated weaponry that Israel did not have.

We're told they encamped at Shunem in verse 4. Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped not all that far away at Gilboa, a mountain slightly to the east of the mountain where Shunem is.

One senses here the build-up to a climax. Indeed it is, or it was. And against this enemy, this enemy of the Philistines plus David, because David has been brought in as the bodyguard for King Achish at the very beginning of chapter 28, against this combined enemy, Saul is understandably terrified.

- [8 : 29] In verse 5, when Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. Strong language. It's not just, oh yes, this is a pretty big enemy. He's terrified. He doesn't really know how he's going to handle this military predicament that he's facing. But behind that fear, we need to read something more.
- Time and again in the Old Testament, preceding this passage, in instructions about warfare for the people of God to fight enemies larger than them, more fortified than they are, we hear the refrain over and over, do not fear.
- The most common command in the Bible in general. But time and again in warfare. So when we read that Saul was afraid, at one level we say, well, humanly speaking, we can understand that.
- But there's more to that statement. Saul's fear demonstrates his complete lack of trust in the God of Israel. He's bereft of faith, spiritually bankrupt, terrified of an enemy that he should not be afraid of.
- [9 : 48] Remember earlier, back in chapter 15, preceding this little series on 1 Samuel, Saul had gone out to fight against the Amalekites and disobeyed the laws of warfare and spared the king of the Amalekites, Agag, to the cost of his kingship in the end.
- Here again is Saul, not so much now disobedient, although that comes out later in this chapter, but lacking in trust. And of course, disobedience and lack of trust flip sides of the same coin all the way through the scriptures.
- When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him. To his credit, he turns to God and prays or asks God for guidance.
- But God doesn't answer him in verse 6. The Lord did not answer him. Not by dreams. We know that sometimes God speaks through dreams.
- As for example, to Joseph in the book of Genesis and on a number of other occasions. Not always, but sometimes. God did not speak or answer Saul by Urim.
- [11 : 03] Urim is something like a dice. Well, it's probably like a flattish stone, two-sided. The Urim and Thummim would be two stones kept in the ephod of the priest.
- It may be saying here God doesn't answer him by Urim because the ephod was taken, if you remember, by the one surviving priest of Ithar who joined David's group. And therefore, there's no access to it.
- Or it may be that in throwing the Urim, Saul gets no answer. It's hard to know exactly what it's like, but probably the two stones were a sort of yes and a no on either side.
- And if you threw the two stones and they both matched, that was clear guidance. But if they didn't match, yes or no, then you were in a bit of a pickle, a bit of a dilemma. But either way, God is not answering Saul through that means.
- Not by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. Samuel's dead. He's the great prophet of this book. The other prophet who's perhaps most significant in this book is Gad, but he's with David's group.
- [12 : 12] Saul is left alone and God doesn't answer him. Is it fair? Isn't God a God of mercy? Shouldn't God be answering prayers to him?
- The picture we get here is just like at the beginning of the book. In 1 Samuel chapter 3 with a corrupt priesthood of Eli and his bad sons Phineas and Hophni, we are told that the word of God was rare in those days.
- That's when God spoke to Samuel in those dreams if you remember in the tabernacle at Shiloh. Israel with a monarch is no better than without.

We ought not be surprised at that because those middle chapters 8 to 12 make it very clear that their desire for a king is a misguided desire. And now they're in the same sort of impoverished spiritual state as they were at the beginning.

And when God doesn't speak to Saul, we're meant to see again that contrast between David and Saul that we've seen the last three weeks as well. If you remember last week when David was at Kyla, twice he asked God and twice God answered him.

[13 : 31] Saul asks God and no answer. Again, that contrast between David and Saul, not just that God is somehow picking favourites and liking David, but because David is searching honestly after God and seeking to obey God's guidance.

Saul not so. It's not that God is being unfair in not answering Saul. Saul's history is a history of disobedience and lack of trust. And God therefore has withdrawn his word from Saul through any means in effect as judgment against his disobedience.

So where does a king turn in such a plight as this? When God earlier in the Bible gave instructions that he would raise up prophets who would speak his word to the people and to the king, it was in contrast to what God would not do and what Israel should not follow.

The instructions come back in Deuteronomy chapter 18 and before it says that God would raise up a prophet, in contrast, it lists various practices that were not to be followed by ancient Israel.

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire or who practices divination or is a soothsayer or an augur or a sorcerer or one who casts spells or who consults ghosts or spirits or who seeks oracles from the dead.

[15 : 11] Whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord. But without a prophet, Saul is stuck.

We've already been told that there are no wizards or mediums in the land. That's back in verse 3 at the end. Saul's got rid of them in a noble moment, it seems. But now he's desperate.

Under Saul's law, Doris Stokes would have been banished out of the country. But Saul is not daunted by his own prohibition. So he says in verse 7 to his servants, seek out for me a woman who is a medium so that I may go to her and inquire of her.

Presumably he thinks that even though he's outlawed such people, there must be some around somewhere, even if they're unemployed. And his servants said to him, there is a medium at Endor.

I think an implication of that is that Saul's own decree to banish such people has been ineffective. After all, we keep seeing the ineffectualness of this king time and again.

[16 : 21] So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went there, he and two men with him. It's a risky business because Endor was a bit further north than Gilboa.

And that meant that they're passing probably rather close to the Philistine camp, maybe hence the disguise. In effect, Saul is now acting as a pagan by consulting a medium.

We ought not be surprised by that because his actions have been so disobedient at other places, that he's actually pursuing the Lord's future anointed king and so on, that he's placing himself time and again in effect in pagan territory or at least in a pagan guise.

The woman, when they come to her fear as a trap, surely you know what Saul has done, how he's cut off the mediums and wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?

Presumably, she's not particularly practicing as a medium because of the prohibition. Or if she is, she was doing it very carefully and making sure that the king's henchmen were not finding her.

[17 : 31] But Saul swore to her by Yahweh, by the Lord, as Yahweh lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.

Do you sense the tragic irony in those words of Saul? The one who's seeking a pagan practice of divination swears by Yahweh that she will not suffer punishment.

It's terrible to see how perverse this king has got. How vainly he uses the Lord's name in this oath. The woman believes him.

She says, whom shall I bring up for you? A bit like Doris Stokes. Which relative has died that you want to talk with? And he answered, bring up Samuel for me.

We're not told that the woman brought up Samuel. but we are told in verse 12, when the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice.

[18 : 42] The narrative does not tell us whether this woman medium has real power or not. We don't know. She may be a fraud. God. And there was that sort of debate time and again about Doris Stokes and presumably about other mediums when they appear on the television screens.

How did Samuel appear? Was it at her call? Or by God? We do know that evil power exists in the world.

We know that Satan masquerades as an angel of light and has some evil power that he does exercise. I think it's fair to say that things like necromancy which is what this is, mediums speaking to the dead, are not simply benign or harmless little games.

They are pagan and evil practices. That's why they're condemned by God in Deuteronomy 18. I think the Bible acknowledges in effect that in this area of evil these powers do exist.

That it's not simply a fraud or a pretense. having said that, when the woman sees Samuel, she screams. It may be because she's so surprised that actually someone has actually appeared.

[19 : 55] That is, if she's a fraud, she wouldn't expect to see Samuel. She may just pretend that she's seen him to Saul and maybe that's why she screams. Or it could be that she simply screams because she suddenly realises that the person talking to her is the king.

Saul here, of course, is acting exactly as the people wanted when they appointed him. A king like the nations. A pagan. I think it's fair to say that this passage gives no justification for this practice of necromancy or a medium.

We ought not to think that here is an okay example and therefore this is an okay practice. The Bible's laws about this are very clear prohibitions. This is a narrative telling us what Saul does and the background of Saul clearly shows a man who is lacking in trust and disobedient.

This is clearly the wrong thing to do. Even if Samuel appears and speaks God's word. Whether or not this woman called him up, and we're not told that she did, God's power and permission bring Samuel up.

He appears and he speaks. Maybe that's little different from Moses and Elijah appearing on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. God is after all the Lord, the dead and the living.

[21 : 22] And God's power would extend to enabling this to happen or not. When Samuel appears, he's none too pleased. It's a bit like when we're woken up from the middle of a sleep.

Oh, why have you woken me up now? Well, that's in effect what Samuel says. Why have you disturbed me? In the Old Testament, there's a sense of the place of the dead shield being a bit like a place of sleep.

And Samuel's been disturbed from that place. Now, it's God behind allowing Samuel to come and speak. But nonetheless, Samuel is, it seems, displeased as though he's had a do not disturb sign and he's been rudely awakened.

Saul answered, I'm in great distress. The Philistines are warring against me and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams.

As if, come on, God's to blame here for my distress. Saul's answer really is quite pathetic. Notice that he calls him God and not Yahweh.

[22 : 29] There is a distance in their relationship here, even though he used the name Yahweh a bit earlier in making an oath, which just shows how far he's fallen. In effect, in part, he's blaming God for not answering him.

And he's saying to Samuel, what am I going to do? And Samuel's answer is basically, well, I've told you already. There's nothing new, at least initially, in what Samuel says to Saul.

in verses 16 to 18. Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy? As though, if God's turned away from you, who am I?

Why ask me? But then he says, the Lord has done to you just as he spoke by me. For the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor David.

Words that echo very clearly what Samuel, or God through Samuel, said to Saul in chapter 15, when Saul had spared King Agag.

[23 : 29] He was told then that the kingdom would be torn from him, that was dramatically demonstrated by the tearing of a robe, and would be given to your neighbor, and now the name David is added in. But we've known that already for chapters.

Verse 18, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, chapter 15, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you today.

Samuel's saying, I've already told you, or God's already told you, and now God is fulfilling exactly what he said he would back in chapter 15. He's not answering your prayers of distress, it's too late, don't disturb me.

Back in chapter 15, to obey is better than sacrifice, and you didn't obey, and now God has withdrawn his word in punishment to you.

Notice how verse 18 says, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord. It sharpens the focus, not just obey the Lord, but obey the voice of the Lord, or therefore in effect the word of the Lord.

[24 : 36] You did not obey what God said. That is, it's making it very clear that Saul's disobedience is culpable, he's guilty, because God has spoken, his voice has issued forth very clear commands and instructions, and Saul has chosen to disobey those.

It's not just that he disobeyed a God who was relatively silent and therefore a bit confused about what I should do and shouldn't do, no, not at all. Saul has disobeyed the very voice of God that has precisely and clearly stated what he ought to have done, which he didn't do.

God speaks, and we are to hear and heed. Saul's complaining that Yahweh's not listening to him, but that's because Saul didn't listen in the first place.

And God's answer to that is, if you don't want to listen to my word, well, why should I bother speaking a word? I withdraw it. I'm not answering you anymore. A sharp contrast with David as we saw last week.

Remember that David was portrayed there as strengthened in God by Jonathan? And what did Jonathan do to strengthen David in God? But to reiterate the promises of God, which David was strengthened by because he trusted them.

[25 : 58] Not so for Saul. The word of God has fallen on deaf ears with Saul time and again. And now it's too late.

He's a bit like a petulant child, isn't he? What am I going to do? Why isn't God answering? It's not fair. But it is fair because God has spoken so clearly.

There's a clear warning the way this narrative is told, not just this chapter but leading up to this chapter and the contrast to David making it clearer. It's about listening to the voice of God, hearing it and heeding it.

And that's what Saul failed to do. it's what David does though he's not perfect. And Saul now faces the judgment. And you don't need to be a king to apply this to yourself because the language of hearing and heeding and obeying the voice of the Lord is for all of God's people in any time and any place.

all too often we're a bit like Saul with deaf ears. Prone to live our lives our own ways but then quick to complain when things go wrong and God doesn't seem to answer our prayers.

[27 : 23] How many times I've lost track of the times when people in some form of distress have complained to me, why is God doing this to me? And sometimes I'm very tempted to say, though it's pastorally not politically correct to do so, to say, well you haven't followed God's word, you haven't lived for God, why should you expect God now to answer this prayer?