

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

1 Samuel 28

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Today's text is 1 Samuel 28. The message title is "The Point of No Return." You'll notice I'm jumping over two chapters—chapters 26 and 27. I want to take a moment to cover those and indicate why I'm not spending much time there. Principally, we are not spending much time in chapters 26 and 27 because they contain events that illustrate truths we've already looked at in 1 Samuel. Chapter 26, for example, provides us an occasion when Saul's life was spared by David once more. That also happened earlier in 1 Samuel 24 when Saul was at En Gedi. This time the location is different—he's in the wilderness of Ziph. But the lessons are the same.

You have found in life, I'm sure, you can be tested more than once in regard to a certain matter. The disciples were tested twice in regard to their fear of water and their confidence in the Lord in the midst of the storm. They failed the first, so the Lord let them have another test. Here, David has been tested once in regard to Saul, and he succeeded. But there's still another test he is to undergo. This test will make sure his first success was not a fluke, but it was a genuine manifestation of the spiritual realness of his life. David succeeded in not touching the Lord's anointed because he did not accumulate anger in his life—because he submitted his thoughts and actions to the Lord for His will and because he continued to extend forgiveness. The wonderful way to extend forgiveness is unilaterally—don't wait to forgive until the other person asks, "Please forgive me." We should be quite willing to forgive just because it comes from the heart. David had passed that test once. He passes it again. He lets Saul live.

Something else we see in 1 Samuel 26 is that a person's confession of sorrow may not always be genuine. Saul says to David in verse 21, "I will not try to harm you again." That's not true. And

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he says, “Surely I’ve acted like a fool and erred greatly.” David knows, in reference to Saul, those are only words. When a person admits wrongdoing, it’s always our responsibility to immediately forgive them. But the test of whether or not they’ve really repented is not contained within the words themselves. The true test will be in the actions taken over the course of days, weeks, or months following the confession of words. In that manner alone do we know if the confession was a worthy confession—a true confession. Or we’ll know if it was simply because there was a momentary streak of guilt or they wanted to get somebody off their back.

David knows that Saul’s confession will not prove to be real. Chapter 27:1 tells us that David goes into the most extensive time of exile he had ever undertaken. Up to this time, his exile had been pretty much within the territorial borders of Israel. Now he goes to the territory of the other side. When he was first fleeing from Saul, he had once stumbled into Goliath’s hometown, Gath, the Philistine city. He realized the mistake, so he did the only thing a sensible person could do on that occasion. He acted crazy so he would be spared.

But now, however, his coming to Gath is different. He has militia with him, and Achish knows Saul and David had a falling out. So Achish does what is typical in this world. He tries to make David his mercenary. David will be hired to fight Achish’s battles, so he thinks. David soon begins to go against the enemies of Israel and annihilate them, not the enemies of Achish.

That immediately raises the question, “How can you annihilate innocent people?” We covered that theme in 1 Samuel 15. We noted in warfare the innocent certainly do suffer. We are not in the position as a western society of being morally superior to Scripture—where we justify the events of World War II and the dropping of an atomic bomb because dropping the bomb actually saved lives and shortened the war. When dealing with a question like that, there are broader

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moral and ethical considerations to look at. I don't want to deal with that any more than what I've said.

One last thing should be noted. David lies at the end of 1 Samuel 27. Achish keeps asking him, "What are you doing?" And David keeps sending him down the wrong trail, not telling him the truth about what he is doing. The Scriptures don't condemn David for this. This raises an interesting moral and ethical question. Is it ever all right to not tell the truth? It seems that David is in a position where he is called upon simultaneously to obey two commandments—thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not lie. For example, if he told the truth, would he not be killing? If he told Achish the truth, it would have meant the destruction of all the people with him. Therefore, he'd have been an accessory to murder. Yet, if he didn't tell the truth, wouldn't he be violating another one of God's laws? He's in a situation where he has to choose between which commandment to obey—the sixth or the ninth.

People who hid Jews in the Holocaust in World War II had the same dilemma. It appears in this instance, David, in evaluating which commandment to obey, chose to obey the sixth commandment because life was involved. Where the sixth and the ninth commandments may be in conflict with one another in regard to obedience, David takes it that the commandment to obey the ninth is waved in view of the greater obligation to obey the sixth. It's a fascinating subject, and we could take a whole semester in college just to consider that one moral and ethical problem. It's not an easy one.

The real stuff I want to get to today is in chapter 28—the point of no return. It's the eve of Saul's death. It's a tragic chapter. In fact, the rest of 1 Samuel is tragic. Here in this chapter, we see the end of someone who, over a period of time, has refused all of God's pleadings to change. It's difficult to change. As we get older, we get more set in our ways. We're difficult to change. Yet,

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the Christian gospel is all about change, repentance, and starting over. After you've passed thirty-five, your chances of making real changes in your life are few and far between. It's a miracle when such a change occurs. We need to stand up and applaud it. We need to say, "It's a special grace from God." I know firsthand how difficult it is to change. I've watched people not change. As a result, they become very hardened in their life—very destructive in their family situation. In spite of repeated attempts from people, the Lord, and His Word to bring change, they remained unchanging.

Scripture gives us examples like Saul to help us get a hold of this idea in our life. If we're on a similar course, it can be a red flag for us. This is given as a warning to what will happen in our life if we don't change. Sooner or later, we're going to face a time of crisis and distress like Saul. We'll face a time of conflict. We'll face a time when we'll feel God's presence has been forfeited. Those are the three issues of 1 Samuel 28—a great time of distress, a great time of conflict, and a great time of forfeiture of God's presence.

When Saul first appeared in 1 Samuel 11, we find him as a young man who's gone off in search of lost donkeys. He winds up at the end of that search being anointed king. What a surprise! His whole life had been a surprise. Certainly, Saul's life as seen in 1 Samuel 28–31 is not what he would have vowed to make it. It turned out far different. He got that way through accumulative effects of his own choices.

I. Saul is in great distress.

The heart of the matter is in 1 Samuel 28:15. It's the summary of all that happens in the chapter—Saul says, "I am in great distress...The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me" (NIV). That's a tragic thing to say as you near the end of your life. A

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tragic thing to say, “I’m in great distress. I’m in great conflict. And God has turned away from me.”

How did he get to that time of great distress? The same word he uses for distress is used in Exodus 19 to describe the distress of Mount Sinai at the giving of the law. The mountain shook. Saul’s personality, at this point, is being violently shaken by the terrible things surrounding his life. He’s on the eve of a major conflict with the Philistines, and he senses doom. How did he get to that point? He got there over a period of time by resisting God’s Word, by never heeding what God said to him, by building his kingdom instead of building relationships, and by turning away the love of the people who were nearest to him. Instead, he manipulated and used them as pawns in his game of personal success. Not everyone in personal distress is there because of their own fault. Jesus was in distress in Gethsemane. That was not his fault. But Saul’s distress is his own fault. Over a period of time, he hardened his heart against every event and person God sent him that could have changed his life. Now disaster looms for him.

II. Saul also is in great conflict.

The Philistines have pitched a battle against him. The Philistines have moved out of the south, where they were living, and they have come up north to the valley of Jezreel, right to the valley of Gilboa and camp across from Gilboa. They’re on flat land where they can use their chariots. They were iron makers, and Israel didn’t have chariots. They were in a military place of strategic superiority, and they had well-chosen their sight. They were going to cut Israel in two and finish Saul’s realm. He knew he was in trouble.

Isn’t it true that we’re always attacked in our life at our most vulnerable point? If you’ve struggled with something all your life, it is reasonable to suspect that in the crisis hour of your life, that is where you’re going to be hammered—right where you’re the most vulnerable. Saul

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was in a place where he was being hammered militarily. We all know that before a battle is ever lost externally, it is lost internally. Saul is losing the battle within, and he's losing it with good reason. You will always lose spiritual battles if you look at the size of the enemy, you look at your few resources, and if you forget the Lord. If you approach any conflict, if you approach any opportunity, if you approach any battle and what you are facing becomes larger than your resources and you leave the Lord out of the picture to do a miracle—you're in deep trouble. Saul's in that kind of position. He is distressed. He is in conflict.

III. He is in a place of forfeiting God's presence in his life.

He knows it. He says, "God no longer speaks to me by dream, He no longer speaks to me by the priests, and He no longer speaks to me by the prophets." He goes and finds a medium—a witch of Endor. Endor is a little village just north of Mount Gilboa on the valley floor of Jezreel. She was a necromancer—her art of witchcraft was to make contact with the spirits of the departed. Saul had banished all mediums from the land.

Isn't it interesting the art of witchcraft and the occult are as much alive today as they were then? I was amazed to discover there were twice as many books in the occult section of the secular bookstore than there were religious books from mainstream Christianity. Shirley MacLaine has popularized channeling, for example. Necromancy is a little bit different than channeling. In channeling, the evil spirit comes upon the person directly. In necromancy, you're trying to materialize an independent spirit up. This is a troublesome Scripture in the text. Samuel is produced. Some say, "It was all in Saul's head—all psychological. It's impossible to produce the spirit of one who has gone into the other world. Therefore, this had to be psychological on his part." Yet, it doesn't appear to be psychological in the way the Scripture deals with it—the witch actually sees Samuel. If it were psychological, an independent person would not have seen him.

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It also appears not to have been a demonic impersonation. That's often how witchcraft develops. It uses demonic impersonations—a demonic spirit imitating a departed person. In this particular case, however, Samuel has such a word of God for Saul that it appears a demonic impersonation could not be possible.

Someone suggested it was a trick or fraud—that the witch used ventriloquism. Mediums do that today. They use ventriloquism. In the cover of darkness, it causes people's minds to think there is a real materialization on the part of the spirit. Houdini, the great escape artist, had for many years offered a tremendous reward for any medium who could do something he couldn't do using his own intellect. All during Houdini's life, no one ever won the offer. He could always duplicate the trick the spiritualist was using.

But the fact this wasn't a trick is shown when Samuel comes out—the witch herself screams at the top of her voice. She evidently spent a lot of time developing trickery, but this was no trick. She was astounded herself. That leads us to the conclusion that for some sovereign reason, God himself (not the witch) allowed Samuel to come forth from Paradise—from that region below, which in the Old Testament times was where the spirits of just men who had departed had gone, waiting to be set free in the resurrection of Christ, and brought into heaven. God allows Samuel to come, and it is the one exception God makes in all the Old Testament for an appearance from the dead of a believer. The only other time when that happens is at the Mount of Transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus.

Why does God allow it here? I have a very simple reason. It may not satisfy you, but it does me. I believe deeply that God loved Saul, just like I believe God dearly loves everyone in this room. I don't think there's anybody in this room who has gone so far in their life that they have permanently removed themselves from the love of God. I believe the love of God is so deep and

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profound that it reaches us even in our most wild state of rebellion. He still is seeking us. There's something so tragic about Saul, but God is still not done talking with him. He is still wanting to love Saul.

Saul asked for Samuel to come and tell him what to do. Notice, Samuel never does tell him what to do. He simply tells him that when he goes into battle, his life is going to be lost, and the army is going to be taken. There lies an opportunity for Saul, on the edge of disaster and at the end of life, to still make things right with God.

You say, "How could he have done that?" If a message like that had been brought to you or to me, I think we would respond like Abraham did to God. Abraham, remember, was brought a message of doom by an angel of the Lord. The whole town of Sodom and Gomorrah was going to be destroyed. Abraham didn't take that at face value. He began to bargain with God. Saul here could have come back and said, "Lord, far be it from me to lose lives in this battle tomorrow. That is a battle I need not fight. In holding on to the kingship, I have been wrong. From the first day, I should have given up the kingship when You told me I was through. I should have stepped away from it."

By the way, one of the things that happens in life is that we're all going to have the door slammed on us sooner or later. Something we wanted to happen—desperately wanted to happen—isn't going to occur. Somebody we wanted to marry is going to marry somebody else. A job we wanted to have is going to be given to somebody else. An investment we made is going to go crashing. Someone we love is going to be killed in a car accident. How are we going to accept those "no's" in life—when the door slams on us?

Saul got very bitter and said, "I'm going to remain inflexible, and I'm going to hang on." When God told him that He was going to yank the kingdom from him, things could have been different

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if Saul would have just said, “Ok, God, the kingdom is not everything. Relationships are more important than job titles. What I’d like to do is at least keep my relationship with my son Jonathan and my daughters. I’d like to keep that intact. And You’ve got this young shepherd boy out there, and he’s really wet behind the ears. I could help him a lot—help him to learn to be a good administrator and warrior. I’ll break him in. I’ll train him. Then there will come a point I’m going to abdicate the throne, and I’m going to turn everything over to him. I’m going to be his greatest friend, protector, and backer. I want Your will, Lord, more than anything.” But Saul remained inflexible. He’s one of these persons who says, “I’m going to get what I’m going to get. I don’t care what it costs me or anyone else.” It’s like the Lord is coming to him one more time and saying, “Saul, this is your last chance.”

Saul could have abdicated the throne. He could have gone back to his home and sent message to David saying, “The next battle, David, is yours. If I had fought that one, I’d have lost it. And I would have dragged everybody down and gotten myself killed in the process. I’m abdicating. The last years of my life I want to support you, and I want to be your friend.” But he remains hardened in his heart—almost seemingly locked in his will, refusing to change.

“A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy” Proverbs 29:1 says (NIV). That is a warning, not only directed against Saul. But it’s directed to all of us as we look at life and the decisions we make. There may come a moment, if we continue in a wrongful path, that our will gets frozen, and we choose not to seek a way out of it. And we bring ourselves and those round us into destruction. Saul never tries to make things right. Even though God’s special grace operated on him by giving him something God never gave anyone else, he still remains unchanged.

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Saul, on the eve of his death, is like a person who gets into a barrel and is shoved out into the waters of the Niagara. As the current of the river picks up speed, there comes a point when that barrel is beyond the point of no return and crashes over the falls. Saul is now at such a point. The Scriptures say to us that we can reach such a point in our own lives. But it need not be this way. How can we have hope ourselves? Saul failed miserably in his life. But he failed, most of all, because he did not take God's grace to cover his failure. If you have failed, God's grace is waiting, and change is possible. It may be difficult. It may take time. It will certainly take plenty of encouragement. It will require the laying aside of self and becoming concerned for the things of God. It will require a genuine concern for other people. But change can take place. You need not wait until it's too late.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we realize this message for some comes like a rifle shot to their heart. Lord, it is true that often, when we are most in the need of change, we are the last ones to recognize it. We are so easily directed toward the change that needs to take place in another, not the change that need to take place in ourselves. Help us, Lord, to not reach a point of no return in our relationships and in our life. Help us not to forfeit Your presence, be led into defeat, and accumulate great stress in our life. Instead, bring us close to Your side. Bring to pass the words that mark Your people of all ages—the words of “forgiveness, restoration, restore, healing, reclamation, renewal, and regeneration.” Bring to us, as a gift of Your grace, any change needed in our own life.

Lord, I pray especially for those friends and family members who we know are not here today because they're at a point in their life where they have so consistently denied and refused You that they find themselves in a position of great hardness against You. They use every excuse they can employ to justify being away from You. We ask You, not to remove Your grace from them,

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but to continue to strive with them—if they might have a change of heart and come to You. Lord, help us to avoid being locked into our own fate, which is made out of the accumulation of wrong choices. Bring us to deliverance that is greater than our propensity to sin. We ask these things, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.