

ANATOMY OF A STORM

SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.



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1 Samuel 28:1–25
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As most of you know, we're currently in the middle of a ten-month study of the life of David, arguably Israel's greatest king next to Jesus. At this point in our study, near the end of 1 Samuel, David's life is interwoven with the life of another of Israel's kings, King Saul. The Lord has anointed David to be the nation's king, but Saul is still on the throne. David is waiting to assume power, but Saul is still ruling.

Before we continue with our study, I'd like to do a bit of stage-setting, a bit of groundwork, by briefly looking at a passage from the New Testament—a passage that I hope will serve as a lens through which we can see David and Saul's lives. Hopefully, the stage-setting will help us to better understand these men, especially Saul who is the main subject of today's lesson. The New Testament passage I have in mind records Jesus' final words in his best-known sermon, The Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:24-27:

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

This passage contrasts two kinds of men—two kinds of people—one wise and the other foolish. The wise man hears Jesus' words and puts them into practice while the foolish man does not. The two men are very similar in certain respects but very different in others. Both men build houses—perhaps similar houses—and both men experience storms—perhaps similar storms. However, their houses have very different foundations—one rock,

the other sand—and consequently they experience very different outcomes. The wise man's house survives the storm while the foolish man's house does not.

What I'd like to suggest this morning is that this passage provides a way of viewing David and Saul's lives. Which is to say... their lives can be seen as illustrations or examples of these two kinds of men—the two kinds of men Jesus is talking about. David can be seen as an example of the wise man—the man who built his house on the rock—and Saul can be seen as an example of the foolish man—the man who built his house on the sand.

Like I said, our passage today is almost exclusively about Saul. We're going to be looking at Saul's life when he encounters a storm—a storm that will ultimately cause his house to come crashing down. We're going to see what happens to a foolish man, a man who failed to put God's words into practice. Today's passage is a cautionary tale. It's a tale of warning. It's the negative example—the example of how not to live—and hopefully it's an example that will deter us from making similar disastrous choices.

I've entitled today's lesson “*The Anatomy of A Storm*”. It's a lesson about the storm that hits Saul's life and proves his undoing. More generally, it's about how storms can destroy any house that's built on sand—Saul's or perhaps even our own. It's about how storms prove the undoing of those who have failed to put God's words into practice.

In terms of an outline for this morning, I'd like to conduct the anatomy lesson in seven steps. I'd like to break the storm down into seven parts—parts that include both the storm itself and Saul's response to the storm.

Storm Clouds on the Horizon

First, storms generally begin with ‘storm clouds on the horizon’. Before a destructive storm arrives, thunderheads typically appear in the distance—thunderheads that begin to grow and move our way. In Saul's case, the clouds on the horizon involve the threat of a Philistines invasion of Israel.

1 Samuel 28:1–2

In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, “Understand that you and your men are to go out with me in the army.” 2 David said to Achish, “Very well, you shall know what your servant can do.” And Achish said to David, “Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life.”

At this point, David has fled from Saul and sought refuge among the Philistines, Israel’s enemies. However, in order to avoid being killed, David has formed an alliance with Achish, one of the Philistine leaders—or at least he’s pretended to. Now, as the invasion plans unfold, Achish calls on David to demonstrate his allegiance by joining in the attack. David’s response is highly ambiguous—“You shall know what your servant can do”. If you want to find out if David actually does join the attack, you’ll have to come back the next two Sundays when Scott and Paul talk about chapters 29 and 30.

However, as far as today’s study goes, from Saul’s perspective, storm clouds are building on the horizon. Military forces are gathering on Israel’s northern border with the clear intention of launching an invasion—an invasion that will result in the conquest of Israel. Perhaps some of you may feel in a similar position today. Some invasion, some ominous storm, seems to be brewing on the horizon and moving your way. Perhaps you’ve heard rumors about your company having a lay-off. Perhaps you’re becoming increasingly uneasy about your health or about a relationship. Perhaps you’re feeling a growing inner storm of loneliness, anger, or despair. Perhaps the storm clouds are more political in nature, as you watch the evening news and wonder what deluge may be approaching for the nation or the world.

The Calm Before the Storm

In the anatomy of a storm, the second step is typically known as ‘the calm before the storm.’ Before a large storm arrives, there’s often an eerie calm or a foreboding sense of quiet. All seems well, but it’s really not. In reality, the calm is temporary and fragile, just a brief interlude before the full fury of the storm breaks loose. We see this taking place in verse 3, where it says:

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

Again, viewing the passage from Saul’s perspective, the supernatural has been excluded from his life. On the one hand, he’s not hearing from the Lord through the voice of Samuel. On the other hand, he’s not hearing from the devil through the voices of mediums and necromancers. Which is to say... at this point, Saul is living a life of complete self-reliance. He is relying solely on himself—relying simply on his own strength, intelligence, and abilities. It’s an approach that seems to work on a sunny day or during the calm before the storm, but, as we’ll soon find out, self-reliance is the sandy foundation on which Saul’s life has been built. It’s the foundation that will quickly give way when the fierce storm actually arrives.

Self-reliance of course is the foundation on which many people build their lives. Indeed, self-reliance increasingly seems to be the foundation of our entire materialistic society—a society that dismisses the supernatural as mere superstition and fairy tale. With the supernatural excluded, individuals and societies are left to face the storms of life with only their own strength, intelligence, and abilities. They’re like Frank Sinatra, always singing “I Did It My Way”¹—no doubt Saul’s theme song as well as that of the modern world.

The Storm’s Arrival

Inevitably, the calm before the storm ends and the storm descends, the storm arrives. That’s Step 3 in a storm’s anatomy—the storm’s arrival.

1 Samuel 28: 4–5:

The Philistines assembled and came and encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly.

At first glance, it may be difficult for us to understand what is actually happening, especially if we’re unfamiliar with the geography of Israel. However, Shunem is a city in northern Israel. In other words, we’re being told that Israel has been invaded. The storm has descended. The nation’s borders have been breached and the enemy is apparently attempting to cut Israel in half, proceeding from west to east. In response, Saul gathers Israel’s armies at Mt. Gilboa from which he can view the invading army—a view that strikes him with fear. The invading army—the storm—is far more powerful than he can handle.

Fear—both Saul’s and our own—emerges from a sense of personal inadequacy. Fear emerges when we realize that our own strength, intelligence, and ability—our own self-reliance—cannot protect us from harm or loss. Saul’s heart trembles greatly. His house is being shaken as he feels the storm’s first gale-force winds. The sandy foundation of his life is beginning to move and shift even before the full brunt of the storm arrives, even before he enters into battle.

There may of course be some of you here today who are experiencing a storm’s arrival. A storm isn’t merely on the horizon; it’s rolled into town. As Jesus told us, storms will arrive for both the wise and the foolish. The day may arrive for example when you learn that you really have lost your job or that your spouse really is having an affair. The day may arrive when you receive the phone call that no parent wants to receive—the call saying that one of your children has died. The day may arrive when another terrorist attack happens here in the U.S. or an 8.0 earthquake rocks the Bay Area. Those are days that can fill us with fear and seem to shake our very lives to their foundations.

Calling Out For Supernatural Help

When that day comes—when the storm actually arrives and the foundation begins to shake—Step 4 usually occurs. Namely, people begin calling out for supernatural help.

1 Samuel 28:6–7.

And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. 7 Then Saul said to his servants, “Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.” And his servants said to him, “Behold, there is a medium at En-dor.”

During the calm before the storm, Saul’s life was founded on the sand of self-reliance. He had shut out the supernatural, had shut out God and mediums. Yet, now, after recognizing his own personal inadequacy, he begins looking for help from both—from both the godly and the ungodly supernatural realms. As someone said, “There are no atheists in the foxholes.” When the bullets are flying overhead, everyone starts looking for other-worldly assistance.

In these verses, it may initially appear that God is the villain. Saul cries out to God, but God doesn’t respond. Saul seeks God, but God doesn’t answer. He

doesn’t answer either through prophets, dreams, or the Urim and Thummim (which were apparently stones attached to the high priest’s breastplate that would be used, perhaps like casting lots, to discern God’s will). However, what we need to understand is that God does not respond for a reason—a reason very likely stated in **Proverbs 1:27-29**. Here, the Lord declares,

**when terror strikes you like a storm
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
28 Then they will call upon me, but I will
not answer;
they will seek me diligently but will not
find me.
29 Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,**

Yes, Saul wanted God to rescue him from the invading Philistine armies. Yes, Saul wanted God to remove the terrifying circumstances of his life and keep his house from falling down. Many people are like that. They want God to rescue them from the problems, pressures, and pain of life, but they don’t really want to change. They don’t really want to repent, become obedient to God, know him, and love him. They simply want God be the genie in their magic lamp, granting their three wishes and leaving them to return to their same disobedient lives. They want to survive the storm but they don’t want to give up their self-reliant foundation. I believe this was the case with Saul and the reason God did not respond to his cry for help.

As you’ll recall, back in 1 Samuel 15: 23, when Saul disobeyed the Lord by refusing to entirely wipe out the Amalekites, God said to him through Samuel:

**For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
he has also rejected you from being king.”**

In God’s eyes, rebellion—disobedience—is the same as divination, the same as witchcraft. Both sins amount to the same thing. Both sins are just ways of engaging in evil. Here, in 1 Samuel 28, we discover that Saul not only failed to wipe out the Amalekites, he also failed to wipe out the mediums and necromancers—failed to wipe the forbidden channels into the realm of the dead. Perhaps fifteen years have passed between the two incidents—between Saul’s failure to completely wipe out the Amalekites and his failure to completely wipe out the mediums and necromancers—demonstrating that Saul had not fundamentally changed. He was still the

same self-willed disobedient man that he was fifteen years earlier. The proof of this is that he turns to an actual medium. He turns to divination, imagining that a medium will somehow help him to weather the storm.

The Roof Gets Blown Off

The next step in the storm's anatomy, Step 5, might be called 'the roof gets blown off'. The storm has arrived, the building has started to shake, and now the roof gets blown off. Saul opens himself to evil—opens up his life to the influence of the medium.

1 Samuel 28:8-14:

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." 9 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?" 10 But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." 11 Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." 12 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." 13 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." 14 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.

Saul continues his downward spiral by putting his plan into action. He travels the ten miles or so from Mt. Gilboa to Endor, seeking to contact the medium. Like the alcoholic who makes the sad transition from thinking about alcohol to actually driving to the liquor store or like the pornography addict who makes the sad transition from thinking about pornography to actually clicking on an illicit website, so Saul now makes the sad transition from thinking about consulting a medium to actually consulting one. The roof is blowing off his house—Saul's life is becoming more directly exposed to evil—and the storm will soon begin to wreak its full havoc.

As people become increasingly open to evil—as the roof gets blown off their house—I've observed that two things frequently occur. First, people find themselves living a lie, disguising who they really are or what they're really doing. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, the crime is usually followed by the cover-up. The forbidden fruit is usually followed by the fig leaf—by attempting to hide and conceal.

Saul disguised himself so that he wouldn't be recognized by his own army, by the Philistine army, or by the medium. In a more profound sense, I believe that Saul was also disguising himself from himself. He was engaged in self-deception, which is a form of delusional thinking, which in turn is the second characteristic of a life that has opened itself up to evil.

Delusional thinking is thinking that is out of touch with reality, out of touch with the way things really are. Saul's own delusional thinking is revealed in at least three ways. First, Saul swears to God that the medium won't be punished for summoning up a spirit from the dead. One person who is sinning (Saul) invokes God's name to assure another person who is sinning (the medium) that there will be no consequences for sin. This is delusional thinking, thinking that is completely out of touch with reality.

Second, Saul asks the medium to summon up Samuel, one of God's prophets. God won't speak to Saul directly, so Saul imagines that Samuel will. Again, this is delusional thinking, imagining that a medium—a prophet of evil—has the power to summon up a prophet of God, who will then tell Saul what God himself won't.

And third, perhaps the greatest hallmark of delusional thinking is the belief that turning to evil will somehow result in good. Saul clearly believes that doing what God has forbidden will somehow work in his favor. Nothing of course could be further from the truth. As it says in Galatians, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). If we sow evil, we will reap evil. If we imagine otherwise, we're deceiving ourselves. We're engaged in delusional thinking.

The House Comes Down

Having seen the roof blow off the house, Step 6 is inevitable: the house comes crashing down.

1 Samuel 28:15-19:

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.” 16 And Samuel said, “Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy? 17 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. 18 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. 19 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.”

Before we talk about the actual collapse of the house, I'd like to talk briefly about one of the long-standing theological questions associated with 1 Samuel 28. Namely, did Samuel actually appear to Saul or was someone or something else involved? Was the spirit perhaps a demon disguised as Samuel or did the medium simply use ventriloquism or some other hoax? This isn't the central subject for this morning, and I don't want to go too far down this admittedly interesting road. However, yes, I do believe that the spirit genuinely was Samuel.

I believe this for three reasons. First, there's the terrified response of the medium, indicating that something happened that was beyond anything she expected. As someone said, she realized, “This isn't a normal séance!” Second, the text clearly states that the spirit was Samuel. It doesn't say that the spirit was a demon masquerading as Samuel or that the medium somehow tricked Saul. And third, everything the spirit says is absolutely true. The spirit doesn't utter a lie, half-truth or exaggeration, characteristics of the demonic and satanic.

In many ways, I believe Chapter 28 of 1 Samuel is like Chapter 5 of Daniel, where a divine hand appears in the midst of King Belshazzar's drunken party writing a message on the wall—the proverbial handwriting on the wall. The message to Beshazzar and the message to Saul are essentially the same: “You've been weighed in the balance and found wanting, your kingdom is going to

be taken from you, and you'll soon be dead.” God broke through Belshazzar's delusional thinking, declaring truth and pronouncing judgment, and I believe he did the same with Saul. At some point, the madness needs to stop, and God will stop it whether it's occurring at a drunken party or at a séance.

In other words, no, the medium did not summon up Samuel. The powers of evil can't make God's prophets do their bidding. Rather, God stepped in and took control of the situation. God blew apart the séance, the delusional charade, and brought down the curtain on the sad drama of Saul's life.

Regardless of where one stands on this theological question, today's central point is that a house built on sand will eventually fall down. The house will fall down—the curtain will come down—and all that will remain is the wreckage. By the following day, Saul and his sons will be dead and the armies of Israel defeated. Saul's house will lie in ruins and his reign as Israel's king will be over. For the fulfillment of this prophecy, you'll need to come back in three weeks when Paul talks about 1 Samuel 31.

The Aftermath

The final verses of 1 Samuel 28 describe the aftermath of the storm. This is Step 7 in the storm's anatomy. In the following verses 20-25, we see Saul contemplating the wreckage of his life.

1 Samuel 28:20-25:

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. 21 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. 22 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.” 23 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. 24 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, 25 and she put it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

Sadly, Samuel's prophetic words don't drive Saul to brokenness and repentance. They don't drive him to call out to God and ask for forgiveness. Saul isn't like David, who, after being confronted by the prophet Nathan about his sin with Bathsheba, cried out to God, recognizing that "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Instead, Saul considers the wreckage of his life and simply collapses in a state of fear and exhaustion. He feels sorry for himself but remains unchanged. His life was heading in the wrong direction before Samuel spoke to him, and it continues heading in that same direction afterward. Indeed, in a tragic testimony to his spiritual state, Saul ends up finding strength and comfort by eating a meal provided by the medium. Instead of turning to the Lord, he turns to the medium—the prophet of evil—who herself shows no signs of repentance.

In this, Saul is like Esau, about whom the author of Hebrews writes, "He found no place of repentance though he sought it diligently with tears" (Hebrews 12:17). Esau shed tears and felt sorry for himself, but he couldn't find it within himself to repent. He couldn't find it within himself to change. Similarly, as Saul surveys the wreckage of his own life, he reveals this same tragic inability.

Conclusion

As I said, 1 Samuel 28 is a cautionary tale. It's a tale of warning. Sometimes we learn from positive examples, sometimes we learn from negative. The Bible is of course filled with both—examples of the wise and the foolish, examples of those who built their house on the rock and those who built their house on the sand.

Ultimately, both kinds of examples are meant to give us pause for serious reflection. As Jesus said, the storms of life will arrive for all of us—the health crisis, the financial crisis, the relational crisis, the national crisis, international crisis—and the question is, how will we fare? Will the storms reveal our wisdom or our foolishness? Will they reveal a foundation of rock or a foundation of sand? Will they prove our destruction or will we endure?

As someone said, "Your life is not a dress rehearsal." The Bible declares that you and I are making real choice—choices that will have real consequences, regardless of whatever self-deception or delusional may currently be holding sway.

However, that said, I also know that there are some of you here today who are perhaps feeling convicted by this message. There are perhaps some of you who are feeling that your house has indeed been built on sand—or worse, that your life has fallen down in the middle of some storm.

If that's the case—if you're perhaps feeling more like Saul today than like David—I'd like to remind you of another story that Jesus told, the story of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son also built his house on sand. He was self-reliant, chasing after wine, women, and song, and his life eventually came crashing down. And yet, in the middle of the pigpen—in the middle of the wreckage of his life—he came to his senses. He had a moment of clarity, realizing his need to return to his father, realizing his need for a new foundation, for a new basis for life.

The truth is, for those who have built their lives on sand—for those who feel like Saul—God holds out hope. He holds out the hope that life can be different—that a foundation of sand can be replaced by a foundation of rock. That change can occur when there's genuine brokenness and repentance—things that Saul never appears to have experienced. If we are genuinely broken and repentant, God will restore and God will redeem. I know that from my own life. I know what it's like to build my life on sand and to see it all come crashing down. I know what it's like to be like Saul or like the Prodigal Son. Thankfully, unlike Saul, I also know what it's like to turn to God and to be given a whole new life.

I'm of course no better than anyone else here. As Ron Ritchie used to say, I'm just a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread. If God can change me, I know he can change any of you. If God can replace the sandy foundation of my life with the Rock, I know that he can do the same for anyone. My prayer of course is that the Lord will do precisely that. I pray for any of you here today who are longing for a new foundation, longing for a new life, and longing to know the One who can sustain you through all the storms of life, I pray that Jesus will make himself known to you. I pray that your life might become like David's, who built his house on the rock and is an example of a person who sincerely longed to put God's word into practice and to have God be the foundation of his life.

(Endnotes)

¹ Anka, Paul. "I Did It My Way." My Way. Los Angeles, CA: Reprise, 1968.