

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 28

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Samuel 28 recounts the most desperate moment of Saul's life and reign. With the Philistine army massed against Israel and the LORD silent in every legitimate channel — dreams, Urim, prophets — Saul commands his servants to locate a medium. They identify a woman at Endor. Saul disguises himself, travels by night, and demands that she conjure Samuel. The woman, terrified, sees Samuel ascending and describes an old man wrapped in a robe. Samuel speaks with devastating finality: Saul's disobedience has not been forgotten, the kingdom has been given to David, Israel will fall to the Philistines tomorrow, and Saul and his sons will be with Samuel by the following day. Saul collapses. The woman urges him to eat; he refuses, then relents. He departs before dawn. The chapter is framed by a literary bracket: at the outset (vv. 1–2), David has been conscripted into Achish's Philistine army, raising the question of what David will do — but the chapter then pivots entirely to Saul, deferring the David thread to chapters 29–30. The Saul narrative here functions as the theological climax of his trajectory: a king who began with divine favor, systematically dismantled that favor through disobedience, and now finds himself entirely abandoned.

This Text — Intent:

God is confronting the reader with the catastrophic end-state of a life lived in persistent disobedience and self-reliance — not as abstract warning but as a fully dramatized portrait. The intent is not merely to inform but to produce sobering self-examination: the reader is meant to see in Saul's midnight desperation the terminal destination of a pattern that begins long before the crisis. God is also closing the Saul narrative theologically by demonstrating that divine silence in crisis is not random — it is the fruit of prior choices. The passage demands that the reader reckon with what Saul's story actually means: this is not bad luck, not tragedy in the classical sense — it is consequence. The intent is reverent fear and urgent self-examination, not detached observation.

Subject Sentence: Saul's final night — abandoned by God, exposed by the dead, undone by disobedience.

Primary Claim: A life built on selective obedience and self-reliance produces, in its final crisis, a silence from God that no desperate measure can break — and 1 Samuel 28 forces every reader to ask whether they are further along Saul's road than they realize.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity and nature of the apparition (vv. 11–15): The central interpretive question is whether the figure who appears is genuinely Samuel or a demonic counterfeit. Three positions exist among orthodox interpreters.

The *demonic counterfeit* view holds that the medium, functioning through occult means, conjured a demon impersonating Samuel. God would not work through a forbidden channel, and the information conveyed could reflect demonic knowledge rather than divine revelation. This view is held by several patristic interpreters and a minority of modern evangelicals. While it takes seriously the categorical prohibition on necromancy, it strains against the text's own presentation: the woman's terror (v. 12) is best explained as genuine surprise — she expected her familiar arts to produce a controlled result, not an actual apparition. A demonic impersonation would not have frightened the medium herself. The narrative gives no signal that the apparition is fraudulent.

The *divine permission* view — the Reformed and most grammatical-historically defensible reading — holds that God sovereignly permitted Samuel's actual appearance, over and above the medium's conjuring, as a final word of judgment to Saul. This does not validate necromancy; God was not cooperating with Saul's rebellion but was using the occasion to deliver a verdict. The woman's shock (v. 12), Samuel's message (which is entirely consistent with 1 Samuel 15), and the text's straightforward identification of the figure as Samuel all support this reading. The prophetic word delivered is treated as authoritative throughout the remainder of the narrative — it comes to pass exactly as spoken (31:1–6). God can sovereignly act in contexts of human disobedience without endorsing the means.

A third view interprets the passage as a *literary or legendary account* not intended to make historical claims — a reading characteristic of liberal critical scholarship. This requires importing assumptions the text actively resists and abandons the text's own truth claims. It is refuted, not merely qualified.

The preferred Reformed reading: God permitted Samuel's genuine appearance as a final act of sovereign judgment, not as validation of occult practice. The passage is not a manual for communicating with the dead — it is the story of a king receiving his sentence.

The theological function of the divine silence (vv. 6, 15–16): Some Arminian and Wesleyan interpreters read the divine silence as primarily illustrative of the consequences of individual spiritual neglect — a corrective and potentially reversible condition that Saul could have addressed through repentance. This reading acknowledges a genuine truth: the silence is consequential and personal. However, it underweights the covenantal and judicial dimensions of the silence. The text places the silence within a pattern that extends back to chapter 13 and especially chapter 15 — the sin of Gilgal and the sin of Amalek. The silence is not a spiritual drought inviting remediation; it is a judicial sentence. The Reformed reading holds that Saul's abandonment by the Spirit (16:14) and the silence here

are the settled consequence of covenantal unfaithfulness, not merely a correctable spiritual condition.

Key Canonical Support

- **1 Samuel 15:23, 26** — Samuel’s original declaration to Saul: “Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.” The judgment in chapter 28 is not new — it is the arrival of what was pronounced in chapter 15. The reader who knows chapter 15 hears chapter 28 as the thunderclap that follows the lightning already seen.
- **Deuteronomy 18:9–14** — The categorical prohibition of necromancy, divination, and consulting the dead. Saul’s action in chapter 28 is not a gray area; it is the precise sin the Law named and condemned. The text assumes the reader knows this, which is why Saul’s own ban on mediums (28:3) makes his midnight visit the most self-condemning act in the chapter.
- **Isaiah 8:19–20** — “When they say to you, ‘Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter’ — should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn for them.” This passage functions as the canonical commentary on Saul’s night at Endor. When God is silent, the answer is not to seek the dead — it is to return to the Word.
- **Proverbs 1:24–28** — “Because I have called and you refused to listen... I also will laugh at your calamity... Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me.” The wisdom tradition names exactly what 1 Samuel 28 dramatizes: the point at which the pattern of ignored divine call produces divine non-response in crisis.
- **Romans 1:24–28** — Paul’s description of divine abandonment (*paredōken* — “God gave them over”) as the judicial consequence of sustained suppression of revealed truth. Saul’s story is not unique — it is the personal dramatization of a theological structure Paul will later articulate: God’s giving over is itself a form of judgment, not merely the absence of blessing.

Aim: To confront the reader with Saul’s end-state as a mirror — not as a spectator’s study of an ancient king’s failure but as an urgent summons to examine whether patterns of selective obedience and divine-silence-by-drift are already underway in their own life.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The Philistines mass for war; Achish tells David he will fight alongside him; David gives an ambiguous reply	Literary bracket — the David thread is introduced here but immediately suspended until chs. 29–30; the focus pivots entirely to Saul
3	Samuel is dead (reminder); Saul had expelled mediums and necromancers from the land	This verse functions as a double irony: Samuel's death drives Saul's desperation; Saul's own law makes his coming action self-condemning
4–5	The Philistines encamp at Shunem; Saul sees the army and is afraid — his heart trembles greatly	The spatial and emotional setting: Saul is terrified before a battle begins
6	Saul inquires of the LORD by dreams, Urim, and prophets — no answer	The threefold silence. The three legitimate channels are exhausted; the divine silence is comprehensive and categorical
7	Saul commands servants to find a medium; they identify a woman at Endor	“Seek for me a woman who is a medium” — the verb used is the same root used for lawful seeking of God; the irony is structural
8	Saul disguises himself, goes by night with two men, asks the woman to consult the dead and bring up Samuel	Disguise by night: shame, secrecy, and desperation are all present; Saul knows what he is doing is wrong
9–10	The woman protests, citing Saul's own ban; Saul swears by the LORD she will not be punished	Invoking the LORD's name in service of a forbidden act — a final theological grotesquerie
11	Saul requests Samuel specifically; the woman complies	
12	The woman sees the apparition and cries out; she realizes Saul is Saul	Her terror indicates genuine, unexpected result — not the controlled familiar she

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		expected; this is the text's internal signal that what appears is real
13–14	The woman describes “a god coming up out of the earth” — an old man wrapped in a robe; Saul recognizes Samuel and bows	The robe detail: the same robe Saul tore in ch. 15 (15:27), perhaps an intentional visual echo of the moment the kingdom was torn from him
15	Samuel asks why Saul has disturbed him; Saul explains the silence and his desperation	Samuel's question is rhetorical — he knows; the dialogue exposes Saul's logic: desperate, isolated, nowhere else to go
16–19	Samuel delivers the verdict: the LORD has departed from Saul and become his enemy; the kingdom has been given to David; Israel will fall to the Philistines; tomorrow Saul and his sons will be with Samuel	The judicial sentence. No hope offered; no path to repentance presented; the word “enemy” (v. 16) — the LORD is now opposed to Saul covenantally
20	Saul falls full length on the ground; no strength left; he had eaten nothing all day	Physical collapse as the body's response to the verdict; the fasting detail may suggest ritual preparation or simply the physical toll of terror
21–23	The woman urges Saul to eat; he refuses; she and the servants press him; he relents and sits on the bed	A strange pastoral moment: a condemned sinner fed by the woman whose arts condemned him further
24–25	The woman slaughters a fattened calf, bakes unleavened bread; they eat; they rise and go before dawn	The last meal of a condemned king; departure before dawn — back into the darkness from which they came

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Bracket: David in Achish’s service — the suspended thread
2	3–6	The Triple Silence: every legitimate channel exhausted
3	7–14	The Forbidden Summons: Saul seeks what the Law forbids
4	15–19	The Verdict: Samuel delivers the sentence — tomorrow
5	20–25	The Collapse: Saul receives the word, is fed, and departs into the dark

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Saul’s final night — abandoned by God, exposed by the dead, undone by disobedience.

Primary Claim: A life built on selective obedience and self-reliance produces, in its final crisis, a silence from God that no desperate measure can break — and 1 Samuel 28 forces every reader to ask whether they are further along Saul’s road than they realize.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) The silence of God in crisis is often not random — trace it backward.

When God seems silent in a moment of desperation, the first question is not “Why won’t God answer?” but “What has my pattern of response to Him been in the quiet years before this crisis?” Saul’s threefold silence in verse 6 did not arise from nothing — it arrived as the terminal expression of a pattern established in chapters 13 and 15, when Saul substituted his own judgment for explicit divine command. The reader who experiences divine silence in a trial must resist the temptation to treat the silence as arbitrary or unexplained and instead examine honestly whether there are unaddressed patterns of selective obedience — places where God’s word has been heard and set aside — that have already been quietly closing the channels.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) Fear of circumstances drives us to substitutes; fear of God drives us to His word. Saul’s heart “trembled greatly” at the sight of the Philistine army (v.

5). That fear — the fear of what can harm the body, destroy the kingdom, end the life — propelled him past every boundary he himself had established. The medium at Endor is what overwhelming circumstantial fear always produces: a substitute for God that promises information and control without the cost of submission. Where in your life has fear of a situation become more powerful than fear of God? That is the precise moment Saul's logic becomes your logic — and Isaiah 8:19–20 names the only alternative: “Should not a people inquire of their God?”

3. (*Will/Behavior*) Do not wait for the crisis to establish patterns of genuine seeking.

Saul sought the LORD in verse 6 — but it was crisis-seeking after years of partial-seeking, and the channels were already closed. The application is concrete and preventative: now, before the crisis, establish the patterns of seeking that will still be open when the crisis arrives. This is not about earning divine favor — it is about whether you are the kind of person, through sustained practice, who knows how to actually hear God's voice when everything is at stake. Dreams, Urim, prophets — Saul had access to all three legitimate channels and found them silent. The reader who has neglected Scripture, prayer, and the counsel of the community of faith for months or years should not be surprised when those channels feel muted in the emergency.

4. (*Mind/Belief*) Saul's story exposes the self-deception of partial obedience — it

always feels like enough until it isn't. First Samuel 15 shows Saul genuinely believing he had obeyed — he spared the best of the sheep for sacrifice, after all. The tragedy of Saul is not the tragedy of a man who openly rejected God; it is the tragedy of a man who consistently believed his version of obedience was adequate. This is the most personally uncomfortable dimension of the chapter for churchgoing readers: the people most at risk of Saul's end-state are not irreligious outsiders but those who attend, participate, serve, and still quietly reserve the right to adjudicate which commands they will fully keep. Ask honestly: where are you currently rationalizing a Gilgal or an Amalek?

5. (*Affections/Worship*) The gospel does not eliminate Saul's warning — it makes it

more urgent. Saul's story is not superseded by grace in the sense that the New Covenant makes it irrelevant. The writer of Hebrews uses Israel's wilderness failures and the Davidic covenant's instability to drive readers toward Christ as the only King who does not fail — but he does not eliminate the warning function of the Old Testament narrative. The reader who rests in Christ's obedience rather than their own must understand that the very security of that rest is what makes the warning against Saul's pattern urgent, not optional. You are not Saul — but you are capable of Saul's patterns. The grace that protects you from Saul's terminal sentence is not a license for Saul's incremental habits.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 28 teaches that God's silence is not a malfunction of the divine communication system — it is itself a form of divine speech. The comprehensive silence of verse 6 (dreams, Urim, prophets — all three channels closed) is

not God's absence but God's answer, and the answer is covenantal: Saul has forfeited the relational standing required for the channels to function. This passage also establishes that God's sovereignty extends even over the means of His judgment — He can use a forbidden consultation to deliver a final, authoritative verdict, without endorsing the means through which the opportunity arose. Samuel's word in verses 16–19 arrives with prophetic authority and comes to pass without alteration (1 Samuel 31), establishing that God's judicial sentence is not a threat to be negotiated but a determination already made. The passage also teaches the non-neutrality of disobedience: Saul's sin did not simply weaken his relationship with God — verse 16 describes the LORD as having “turned from” Saul and “become his enemy,” language of active covenantal opposition that strips away any illusion that habitual disobedience merely produces a tepid or neutral God.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: First Samuel 28 functions within the canon as a sustained illustration of the doctrine of divine reprobation at the level of the theocratic kingdom — not in the sense of eternal predestination necessarily, but in the sense that God's withdrawal of His Spirit from Saul (16:14) and the judicial silence of chapter 28 together display the biblical pattern of God giving over those who persistently reject His covenantal claim. This is the same structure Paul invokes with *paredōken* in Romans 1 and that Proverbs 1 articulates in wisdom categories. Reformed soteriology does not need to press Saul into a proof text for individual reprobation, but it does read his story as a canonical illustration of the biblical principle that grace is not infinitely elastic in the face of sustained resistance — that there is a point at which God's ongoing call becomes God's settled judgment. The passage also grounds the Reformed insistence that sanctification is not optional or peripheral to the Christian life: it demonstrates, from the negative direction, that the pattern of one's life during the ordinary years shapes the structure of one's relationship with God in the extraordinary moment. Finally, Saul's story drives the reader toward David — and typologically toward Christ — as the only king who fully and finally keeps the covenant, the only one in whose obedience the channels of divine communication remain perpetually open.

Main Takeaway

The most dangerous place to be is not in open rebellion against God but in years-long patterns of selective obedience — telling yourself you are mostly following, mostly seeking, mostly yielded — while quietly holding back the Agag. Saul did not end at Endor because he stopped believing in God; he ended there because he never fully submitted to God, and the cumulative weight of a thousand small self-exemptions closed the channels one by one until the silence was total. Do not wait until you are lying full-length on the ground before the dawn to ask what patterns in your ordinary life have been slowly, quietly moving

you toward this destination. The time to examine that question is now, while the channels are still open.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating this as primarily a passage about the occult.** The prohibition on necromancy is present and should be acknowledged — but it is not the passage’s primary concern. If the sermon becomes a warning against Ouija boards and fortune tellers, the preacher has missed the theological weight entirely. The visit to Endor is the symptom; the disease is Saul’s long history of selective obedience. A sermon that spends its energy on the occult leaves the congregation congratulating themselves for not consulting mediums while evading the more threatening question about their own Saul-like patterns.
- **Treating Saul primarily as a victim of tragic circumstances.** There is genuine pathos in this chapter — Saul’s collapse in verse 20 is not unmoved prose — but the Reformed reader must resist importing Greek tragic categories. Saul is not undone by fate, hubris in the classical sense, or circumstances beyond his control. The text is explicit that the silence, the sentence, and the defeat are the consequence of his own disobedience (vv. 17–18). A preacher who generates sympathy for Saul without driving that sympathy toward sober self-examination has given the congregation an emotional experience without a searching one.
- **Debating the apparition at the expense of the message.** Some teachers will spend the bulk of their time on the question of whether the figure is really Samuel or a demonic impersonation — and while this is a legitimate textual question (addressed in the Interpretive Evaluation), it must not consume the exposition. The text treats the message as authoritative regardless of what one concludes about the mechanics. A congregation that leaves discussing “Was it really Samuel?” has been offered an intellectual puzzle instead of a confronting word.
- **Failing to connect the silence in verse 6 to the decisions in chapters 13 and 15.** The silence of verse 6 is incomprehensible without its backstory. A preacher who introduces this chapter as a stand-alone episode — “Saul is afraid and God won’t answer” — will inevitably produce a sermon that feels unfair to Saul, or worse, implies that God’s silence is arbitrary. The silence has a history, and the preacher must tell it. This chapter is the harvest of seeds sown in chapters 13 and 15.
- **Moralizing the application to “obey God or bad things happen.”** The Clowney anti-moralism principle applies sharply here. The sermon must not collapse to “obey God so you don’t end up like Saul.” That framing produces fear-based compliance, not gospel-rooted transformation. The application must diagnose the root: what kind of worship, what kind of trust-structure, would have produced a different Saul? The problem is not that Saul did wrong things — it is that Saul was

the kind of person who prioritized self-preservation, public approval, and pragmatic calculation over submission to the covenant God. The gospel addresses that root.

- **Using this passage to pronounce judgment on specific individuals who “must be under God’s silence.”** Preachers and teachers must guard against using Saul’s story to diagnose particular people in the congregation as having crossed a point of no return. The passage is a mirror for self-examination, not a diagnostic tool for judging others. The application is first-person and reflexive, not third-person and accusatory.