



VOICES FROM THE GRAVE

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The subject of death is one of great interest to most people. Since we will all one day die, and since death is draped in such mystery, we spend a lot of our lives wondering about it. What awaits on the other side of death? If we could communicate with the people who currently reside in the city of the dead, what would they tell us?

The bible records at least three conversations that took place involving people who had already died: voices from beyond the grave. One of them is recorded in 1 Samuel 28. It was the end of King Saul's doomed reign as Israel's first monarch. God had long before rejected Saul and was no longer speaking to him. But Saul was in a bind and desperate for direction as he faced the Philistines. So, he resorted to a witch (or a medium) in Endor. He disguised himself and went to see her and he (and her) got much more than they bargained for. Let's read the story beginning in verse 11: *"Then the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' And he said, 'Bring up Samuel for me.' When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, 'Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!' And the king said to her, 'Do not be afraid. What did you see?' And the woman said to Saul, 'I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.' So he said to her, 'What is his form?' And she said, 'An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.' And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now Samuel said to Saul, 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' ..."*

This chilling scene is quite unusual, and I can assure you Saul did not receive the answer he was looking for. I want to talk with you today about three messages that are coming to us from beyond the grave.

The land of the living is filled with death. All through our lives we are surrounded by death. We pass funeral homes and cemeteries every day. Every family is touched by death every so often. And most of us spend a portion of our lives thinking about, wondering about, and trying to avoid death. As common as death is, it is also one of the most mysterious phenomena in all the world. We who believe the bible understand more about it than anyone else, but even the bible tells us relatively so little about what

occurs in and after death that it is still a mysterious thing. Beyond our morbid curiosities like ‘what does it feel like to die’ and so-forth, several spiritual and philosophical questions usually surround death. Most people ask: “where are the dead?” What happens to us when we die? Are we asleep? Does our spirit go to an intermediate place to await the resurrection of the body and the judgment at the end of time? Or do we immediately go to heaven or hell? Some imagine that human spirits come back and haunt houses, buildings, or graveyards, though the bible gives no such indication. But we’re curious about where the spirits of the dead go. And then another common question is: are the dead conscious of us and aware of what is going on in the world? While I personally believe that the bible teaches the dead are conscious and have memory of things in the world, I don’t believe it necessarily teaches that they are aware of what is taking place now.

But those are questions that we can think about some other time. The question I’m interested in today is: what would the dead say if they could speak to us? While it is not possible to communicate with the dead (contrary to what some say and try to do), in the bible we do have some messages from the dead to the living. And they’re important and urgent messages. They come from the righteous and from the unrighteous dead, but all are relevant and urgent for us today.

The first voice from the dead that I want us to hear is that of the great prophet Samuel. In life, Samuel was one the grandest men to ever live. He was certainly one of the most influential prophets of the Old Testament and was a not only a prophet and a priest but a close counselor to King Saul. Samuel anointed the first succession of kings over the nation of Israel, Saul and later David. His confidence in Saul was misplaced though and he came to regret his involvement with this stubborn and rebellious man. All started well but the relationship quickly soured when Saul presumptuously assumed things that he had no right to assume. In 1 Samuel 13 and then in chapter 15 we read of two events that were representative of Saul’s arrogant and self-centered attitude. In chapter 13, he took it upon himself to offer a sacrifice that he had no right to offer and then in chapter 15, he refused to obey Samuel’s inspired instruction to destroy the wicked Amalekites. Such behavior caused God to reject Saul as king and to reveal plans to take the throne away from Saul and give it to David, whom Saul hated. This marked the end of Saul and Samuel’s relationship. With a broken but indignant heart, Samuel announced God’s judgment upon Saul and turned and walked away never again to go see his former friend, Saul.

As time went on, Saul’s life became a pitiful spectacle. In 1 Samuel 28, Saul is faced once again with the formidable foe of Israel, the Philistines. He needs direction. He needs counsel, but God has long since ceased talking to Saul. God had moved out of Saul’s administration a long time ago. So, with no word from God and no prophet Samuel with whom to consult, he resorts to the necromancer of Endor; a witch who claimed to be able to call people up from the dead. Now, she didn’t really have that power and neither does anybody else regardless of what they may claim, but nonetheless people thought she could and so they would go and see her when they wanted to communicate with the dead. Ironically, Saul had outlawed such activities in the kingdom but now he himself in desperation is resorting to this Satanic and pagan practice. So, late one night, he puts on a disguise and goes to this witch’s cave in Endor.

The woman, I think was a little suspicious to start with and thought that this tall visitor was an informant who would report her illegal activity to the king. But Saul assured her that no harm would come to her and so she asks, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” And he said, “Bring Samuel up for me.” Just reading that sends a chill up my spine. Now these supposed soothsayers would usually put on a convincing show. The setting such as this cave would be dark and mysterious and spooky. And these hucksters would often use ventriloquism and make it appear that sounds were coming up out of a hole or crack in

the earth. I suppose she was going to do something along that line and so she begins her supposed divinations. But all the sudden, God took over and the bible says, "When the woman SAW Samuel, she shrieked!" Now, commentators and scholars debate what really happened here. Some maintain that the witch only thought it was Samuel. Others think she possessed Satanic power. I think it was a miracle of God, however. I believe that God made an exception in this case and really did cause Samuel in some form to appear from beyond the grave. Exceptions don't make rules. They're just that: they're exceptions. And God had a special purpose, and He had His own reasons relating to Saul for causing this to happen.

Well, when she screamed, Saul said "what did you see!?" And the old witch scared out of her wits said to Saul, "I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth." So, he said to her "What is his form?" (What does he look like?). And she said, "An old man is coming up and he is covered with a mantle." And Saul knew it must be Samuel. And Samuel perturbed said "why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" And Saul explained that he was distressed because the Philistines were again making war with him and since God was no longer speaking to him, he wanted Samuel to tell him what to do. But instead of the help he was looking for, Saul instead got a dreadful warning. Samuel reminded him that God's judgment was upon him for his sins and that he would lose the battle the next day but worst of all, so far as Saul was concerned, Samuel said "And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me." In other words, the death bell began to toll for Saul and the bible says that Saul fell out flat on the ground "and was dreadfully afraid because of the words of Samuel." These were chilling words from the dead prophet but they are also, in a sense, a message to the living today. "Thou and thy sons shall be with me." Samuel's body was in the grave and his spirit in the unseen realm of the dead and his warning simply meant that Saul was going to die.

We all need to be reminded of the certainty of death as the Hebrew writer calls our attention to the fact in Hebrews 9:27, "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." and as Joshua told the people when he gathered them together before his death in Joshua 23:14, saying, "Behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth..." We all need to be reminded of that but especially they who are living like Saul lived: in rebellion to God. Many who are unprepared for death refuse to think about it. They refuse to face the possibility of what comes after death. If they think about it at all, they put it far off into the future. Or they deceive themselves into believing that when death occurs, it will all work out and be alright. But after death, comes the judgment, said the writer of Hebrews. And Samuel told Saul "TOMORROW you will be with me."

Friend, at best, everyone is "near" to death. If you live a week, a year, or fifty years from now, it still will seemingly be only a 'tomorrow' or a short time until we die. For Saul, the next day brought him no tomorrow. And for tens and even hundreds of thousands of people around the globe today there will be no tomorrow. Cancer, heart attacks, stroke, aneurisms, blood clots that you don't even know are there, car accidents, natural disasters, freak accidents, and on and on we could go are all there lurking in the icy cold shadows waiting to reach out and claim as many as 150,000 victims per day. And one of these days, you'll be one of those statistics. Samuel's immediate warning to Saul should serve as a warning to all sinners today that death is coming. A reckoning day is approaching. The voice of Samuel from the grave warns of the certainty of death.

And then there is another voice that speaks from the great beyond and it affirms that there is EXISTENCE after death. Not only is there a continued existence, but there is also a conscious and aware existence after death. In the 16th chapter of Luke, Jesus lifted back the veil that separated time and eternity and showed us two men who once lived but had both died. One was a poor beggar that laid outside the gate

of a rich man's palatial estate begging for crumbs to eat. He finally died and Jesus said in verse 22 that angels came and bore his spirit off to the peace and rest of Abraham's bosom in Paradise. But then it tersely says, "The rich man also died and was buried." And listen to verse 23: "And being in torments in Hades (which refers to the unseen realm of the dead), he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." He was very much aware of what had happened and where he was. He also had memory of his life on earth. Seeing Abraham, he begged for mercy and relief and that Lazarus might be sent to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue because he was being tormented by the flames. But it was not to be. And then he remembered his five brothers he left behind on earth and begged for him to send Lazarus back from the grave to warn them to repent and not come to where he was. But Abraham said if they wouldn't listen to Moses and the prophets then neither would they listen though one rose from the dead.

Here is a man who was awake, he was aware, he could feel, he could suffer, he could worry, he could dread, he could converse, but he could not leave, and he could not overturn the judgment that he was now facing because of the life that he lived on earth. Now friend, this conversation was recited by Christ to warn the Pharisee's who refused to believe in Him but it's recorded in scripture to warn us as well that there is an existence after death. Death ends nothing except for our time on this earth. There was a time when you did not exist but there will never come a day when you will not be someplace in a conscious state.

Many if not most believe that the story of Lazarus and the rich man describes an intermediate state of the dead between death and the resurrection at the last day but the bible also teaches that at the last day when Jesus returns and the dead are raised and we each one stand before Him to receive our eternal sentence that "these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:46) and the words everlasting and eternal in that verse are the same word in the original text. When we leave the physical realm of time and space, there is a metaphysical realm of eternity which, as the word itself suggests, will have no end. The rich man speaks from the grave and tells us there is existence beyond death.

And then there is one more voice coming from the city of the dead: the voice of Abel. And he tells us about PREPARING for death. In Hebrews 11:4, the bible says: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks."

Abel was of the second generation of humankind and he and his brother Cain set precedents for all people of all time that there are two ways to worship God: One God will accept and the other He will not. God established in the beginning the requirement of blood sacrifice to atone for sin. This must have been revealed to them because the record says that Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain and he did it "by faith". Since faith comes through hearing and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17), then it must be inferred that God had revealed to Abel what kind of sacrifice he was to bring to the altar. To do something by faith means to believe and act according to what God has said. So, in other words, Abel obeyed God and Cain did not. He brought a vegetable offering instead which God rejected. You likely know the story that Cain was angry when God rejected his offering and he rose up and killed his brother Abel. Well, the bible says that "he being dead still speaks."

These two brothers provide a great contrast that is still seen in the human race today. The way of Abel is the way of faith and obedience to God's commands and the way of Cain (as it is called in scripture) represents the way of human opinion, human effort, substitution, and disobedience. Cain represents

those who refuse to humble themselves and submit to God and Cain represents those who approach God though the way God has appointed – through faith in Christ and obedience to His will.

The message of righteous Abel is the witness of obedient faith. The bible shows us that a yielding, submitting, trusting, and obedient faith is reckoned for righteousness in the eyes of God. If somehow, one could come back from the grave today and speak to us or speak to the world at large, we would be very interested in what they have to say. But all of us should be willing to listen to these voices who did and do speak from the dead in God's word because they're speaking the eternal truth in all candor and honesty and in great concern for our eternal souls. Hear the voice of Samuel concerning the certainty of death. Believe the voice of the rich man and know that there is life and conscious existence after death and for most people it will not a pleasant existence. And then heed the voice of Abel and prepare for death by believing, trusting, and obeying the word of God. Place your faith in the Christ and be obedient to the gospel message repenting of your sins, confessing His name, and being united with Him in baptism so that your sins can be washed away and begin worshipping and serving Him according to His word. And I pray you'll consider doing that today.

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