

# Ever Meet a Witch?

Exodus 22:16–20, Matthew 18:7–9

We began our examination of this passage last week, considering sexual purity. Today we come to verse 16, which the King James Version starkly translates as “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Hence, our title: “Ever Meet a Witch?”

Before you answer the question, a brief explanation may be in order.

To many people a witch is a person with evil powers, popularly depicted as a woman in a black cloak and pointed hat, flying on a broomstick. This is *not* the sense in which the term is used in our text. Both the NKJV and ESV have “You shall not permit a *sorceress* to live.” The word translated “sorceress” means “a mutterer of charms.”<sup>1</sup> In our text the word is feminine, but the masculine form is used as well.<sup>2</sup> In Exodus 7:11 we read that “Pharaoh . . . called the wise men and the *sorcerers*; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments.” Whether such a person had actual help from evil spirits, or only professed to work magic by their aid, it was a sin against God. It was a renunciation of the true God, Jehovah, and an invocation of a power other than his. To attempt to foretell the future by evil spirits was as much rebellion against God as idolatry or blasphemy, and deserved the same punishment.

I have three points this morning: (1) Tempting you to forsake God; (2) Tempting you to adopt an alien world-and-life view; (3) Attempting to neutralize your witness. First,

## 1. Tempting you to forsake God

Hear our text once again: “You shall not permit a *sorceress* to live.” Do not forget the context. This is part of what the Bible calls “the Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 24:7), the very first part of the written Scripture. After God had thundered his Ten Commandments over Mount Sinai, the people, terrified, appealed to Moses, telling him, “Do not let God speak with us directly. Rather, you go to God, and have him speak with you. Then come and tell us what he said. Don’t let him speak to us directly any more, or we will die.” Moses went up on Mount Sinai. There, God spoke to him. When he came down from the mount, he wrote in a book what God had said to him, and when he had finished writing, he called the people together and read it in their hearing. Here we have the first written Scripture, and the first public reading of Scripture. The people heard it from Moses’ mouth. Its sound was to reverberate in their ears and sound forth from their mouths. They were to be the people of the Book, the people whose national identity was bound up with the written word of Almighty God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellicott’s Commentary, Ex. 22:18, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/exodus/22-18.htm> accessed 5-31-24

<sup>2</sup> קִשְׁפָּה practice sorcery, Ex. 7:11, 2 Chron. 33:6, Mal. 3:5 (Brown, Driver, Briggs lexicon, Logos Bible Software)

The Book of the Covenant comprises the text of Exodus 21–23. What we have here are case laws—specific cases that are instructions to the judges, incorporating eternal principles of justice that are reflections of God’s perfect character. The principles are universal, applying to all men and women everywhere, in every time and place, and are to be applied by the judges to other similar cases they may encounter. Many of the specific cases we encounter in chapter 22 are further explanations and applications of the eighth commandment, “Thou shalt not steal,” the commandment that establishes private property: “If a man steals an ox or a sheep . . . If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed . . . If a man delivers to his neighbor a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any animal to keep, and it dies, is hurt, or driven away, no one seeing it,” etc. “The cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whomever the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor . . . he shall make restitution.” The text at the beginning of today’s reading, “If a man entices a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her,” has to do with stealing a woman’s virginity, as we saw last week.

Today’s text, “You shall not permit a sorceress to live,” likewise has to do with stealing—stealing the glory of God, who alone knows the future. A people’s going to a sorcerer or sorceress is an attempt to find out the future apart from the God who alone knows the future. The Bible teaches that God alone knows the future; he knows it with certainty. Isaiah 46 declares, “I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.’” Only God can declare the future. Only God can declare the end from the beginning.

The Bible reveals what is going to happen in the future. What is going to happen is a playing out of the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Christ the righteous Judge is going to return to bless his people and curse his enemies.

The apostle Paul wrote: “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1). This speaks of a final judgment where all human beings, living and dead, will appear before Christ and hear his final sentence. All human beings intuitively know that this is true. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:31–32).

We know that this is so because Scripture reveals this. But sinful men are not satisfied with this knowledge. They want specifics: when and how. So along comes someone who claims to know the future, and people flock to hear her. They sit

enthralled in their seats as the clever liar promises to give specific information that God has withheld.

“The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). God’s knowledge is comprehensive and exhaustive. He knows everything about the future, but in his perfect wisdom he has not revealed everything about the future in the Bible. Rather, he has revealed just those things he wants us to know; the rest are the property of our holy God, and to pretend to reveal them is a stealing or taking away the glory of God and attempting to give it to another.

“I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images” (Isa. 42:8).

“The prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die” (Deut. 18:20).

Not everyone that claims to have inside information about the future is going to admit, “I am a sorceress. I’m just making this up.” In fact, men and women who purport to give inside information about the future may pretend to be Christians. They may associate with Christians. They may hobnob with famous televangelists. They may appear on the most popular talkshows. Yet in claiming to have inside information about the future they are really tempting you to forsake God, to gain spiritual benefit from something *other* than the Gospel.

Oh, dear brother or sister, though the laws of the State of Michigan may not criminalize the practice of sorcery, it remains true that in the mind of Almighty God a sorceress should not live. If one such gains your ear, you should forsake it immediately. Consider the words of our New Testament text: “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.”

These are the words of our Lord. He wants us to be willing to part even with that which is most precious to us, rather than disobey him. If you are tempted to listen to a person who purports to have inside information about the future, do not forget our text. No matter how popular a sorcerer or sorceress may be, or how many of your friends think it’s just great, your responsibility is to listen to Christ. Do not permit a sorcerer or sorceress to live in your attention or in your thinking. Cast down every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Jesus Christ. Amen!

Second,

## **2. Tempting you to adopt an alien world-and-life view**

The activity of the sorceress involves the trading and trafficking of purportedly inside information about the future, but the seeking of such information is a temptation to adopt an alien world-and-life view: that there is truth outside of Christ.

Jesus himself said, “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” The Bible reveals that the Lord Jesus is the way to the Father, the only way of salvation. All of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death. We deserve hellfire, but while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. His gift is eternal life. If we receive him, we are saved; if we reject him, we are lost eternally. Jesus is the truth. We live in a world where there is great deception. There are many religions, and each has its adherents and defenders. Yet the truth of Christ is not limited to the realm of salvation, narrowly considered. As the Psalmist observed in Psalm 119, “I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way.” Whatever does not conform to the truth of Christ is by definition error. The devil is the great deceiver. He is a liar and the father of lies. He was a murderer from the beginning and abode not in the truth. His desire is to make merchandise of you and get you to take your eyes off Christ. He wants to take you with him to the lake of fire.

Satan’s world-and-life view is the very opposite of Christ’s. Christ wants you to walk in the way of God’s commandments; Satan wants you to walk in the way of disobedience. Christ wants you to esteem the words of his mouth more than fine gold; Satan wants you to believe his lie. Christ wants you to walk the way of self-abasement and humble service; Satan wants you to think that everything revolves around *you*. Christ teaches that submission to his word and law are the essence of happiness; Satan wants you to think that unless you get your own way, you will never be happy. Christ wants you to know that he *alone* is the way to God; Satan wants you to believe that there are *many* different paths to God. The Bible says, “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 16:25). Satan says, “You shall *not* surely die; God is just trying to cheat you out of fulfillment and happiness; follow me instead; I’ll teach you how to have a really good time.”

Satan’s world-and-life view teaches that there are no moral absolutes. You can live life any way you want. Biblical morality is repressive. You can be whatever you want to be. Some people are trapped in the wrong body. You can choose your own gender. You can love whomever you want. This life is all there is. There are no heaven and hell. There are no consequences for your actions. These all are Satan’s lies.

Thirdly,

## **3. Attempting to neutralize your witness**

Our text warns against the dangers of seeking truth anywhere other than in God himself. A sorceress is a teacher advocating for a false religion, and should not be permitted to live. Under Old Testament law, men and women who advocated for an alien belief system and rebellion against Jehovah were to be put to death, for loyalty to the God of heaven was paramount. They could worship their false gods in secret, but not evangelize for their false religions.

Deuteronomy 18:9ff. gives the rationale: “When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you.”

A “sorceress” is what the older translations called a witch. John Wycliffe’s translation (1382!) of our text had “Thou shalt not suffer *witches* to live.”<sup>3</sup> Enemies of the Gospel use the so-called Salem witch trials (which were *not* conducted according to biblical law) to ridicule the point of our text. But the underlying idea is that God cared about his covenant people and wanted to protect them from those who wanted to corrupt the true religion.

In 2 Chronicles 33:6 we read that wicked king Manasseh “practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and *sorcery*, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger.” Note the references to soothsaying, witchcraft, sorcery, mediums and spiritists. Manasseh, concerned lest he might miss something, wanted to cover all the bases, so he consulted them all. But while there may be subtle differences between these various deceivers, the point of our text is not to isolate or highlight one category of spiritual deception and say, “You shall not permit a *sorceress* to live—but soothsayers, witches, mediums and spiritists are OK.” No! Rather, the intent of our text is to outlaw all human attempts to figure out the future *apart from* the Word of God. *All* such attempts are worthy of the death penalty.

And remember that this text is a case law that requires the work of a duly-appointed judge. “You shall not permit a sorceress to live” does not authorize vigilanteism, or taking the law into our own hands. Under the laws of ancient Israel a sorceress would have to be arrested and appear in the courtroom of a duly-appointed judge. There would have to be a trial, a reading of the charges,

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<sup>3</sup> “Thou shalt not suffer witchis to lyue.” <https://www.textusreceptusbibles.com/Wycliffe/2/22> accessed 5-30-25

witnesses, cross-examination, the application of the law, a determining of guilt, and sentencing. The law would have to be followed; no step could be omitted. Everything must be done decently and in order.

While punishment for advocating for a false religion is not part of our civil law codes today, our text should surely encourage church elders and heads of families not to allow activities that subvert the wholesome teaching of Scripture.

Our Larger Catechism calls for “the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry” (Q&A 108). Heads of families should exercise appropriate oversight over the kinds of magazines, books, video games and entertainments that are permitted in the home. When covenant children spend more time with the entertainments of this world than with the pure teaching of the Word of God, the results are disastrous. A Christian family should be a place of refuge from worldly influences. As we will see this afternoon, God calls for his Word to be on the lips and tongues of his people—not just in a book on a shelf but in the everyday conversation of families.

Ever meet a witch? Not every witch identifies as such. Some are much more subtle. They don’t post a warning: “Hey, I’m out to destroy the faith of your children; beware.” This is why elders and heads of families must be “wise as serpents, harmless as doves.”

May God grant us all wisdom to be watchful to protect the faith of our covenant children, lest Satan ensnare them, to the destruction of their souls. Amen.