

Sermon 15: 1 Samuel 14: The Faith of Saul and Jonathan

OUTLINE

Genuine faith
Religious faith

INTRODUCTION

These last few chapters have been summarising the reign of Saul. If we merely read the last verses of this chapter v47-52, you could imagine an historian speaking of the golden era of Saul's reign, how he fought enemies on every side, how he fought valiantly and hard. But the purpose of the biblical narrative is not merely to report on political successes but to interpret the various actions in light of covenant faithfulness. The last event we looked at was chapter 13 where Jonathan again overcame a Philistine garrison but the great advantage was lost by Saul's disobedience and lack of faith. As we look at another one of Saul's 'victories' we will soon see that it was not due to him that there was success. This chapter shows God giving the victory but gives us two very different types of religion and faith. On the one hand we have the genuine faith of Jonathan which is full of action and confidence, but on the other we see Saul apathetic, indecisive and covered in a veneer of religion.

Our chapter begins with movers and sitters. V1-2, 'One day Jonathan the son of Saul said to the young man who carried his armor, "Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side." But he did not tell his father. 2 Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men.' The Philistines are in the dominant position, they have removed the blacksmiths of the land, the majority of Israel's armies that had been assembled have returned home and only 600 are remaining with Saul in Gibeah. The king should have been busy about his business driving the seed of the serpent from the land, but instead he is found sitting. He is full of inactivity and indecisiveness, we know this because Jonathan the hero of the last story seeks to do the Lord's will but has to hide this fact from his foot-dragging father. The first contrast we find is one of activity versus inactivity.

You will notice that Saul has the trappings of external religion. He does not have a prophet, for Samuel has walked away from him, but he ironically replaced him with the cursed line of Eli, Ahijah who had the ephod with the Urim and Thummim v3. But Jonathan's active faith gives evidence of true faith while Saul's inactivity in the face of duty while being surrounded by the trappings of religion feels official but is kidding no one. Let's look first then at Jonathan.

Genuine faith

In the first place let us familiarise ourselves with the contrary conditions Jonathan's faith overcomes.

Firstly, Jonathan is active when everyone else is passive. He is obviously not taking his cues from others but has an internal motivation that drives him.

Secondly, he is facing a larger army, two against a garrison is very slim odds, but not to Jonathan.

Thirdly, Jonathan is one of two men with a sword and Saul has the other, this lack of weaponry against a well-armed garrison does not stop him.

Fourthly, he decides to fight on the battle ground where the garrison is on a rocky crag and the two facing crags were called Bozez and Seneh meaning slippery and thorny, hardly an ideal position chosen for Jonathan's advantage.

How do these odds sound? What about the odds we face? We are in the minority and on the retreat as Christians. We have been marginalised and disarmed. We face insurmountable tasks like trying to change hearts and minds. We have the thoughts of evolution, atheism, the appeal of materialism and a multitude of obstacles to overcome. Will we sit surrounded by the trappings of religion or will we act? What is it that enables Jonathan to have this faith? Is he a superhero who is just super-confident and we all just need to have a better attitude? No Jonathan is fixed on God, he is filling his heart and mind with the truth about God and it is God who is inspiring this faith in him. When we are facing these odds we cannot merely be positive or have a better attitude, that is empty posturing and when it is tested by real difficulty it will have no substance and the house of cards will come tumbling down. No in order to have a real faith that can tackle real difficulties and trust in God we need a proper view and doctrine of God.

Jonathan's faith is expressed succinctly in v6, 'Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few.'" Four aspects of Jonathan's doctrine of God are expressed in this verse. Firstly, he believes that God is a covenant God. This can be seen in the reference to the philistines as uncircumcised. Jonathan is not insulting their genitalia he is reminding his armour bearer that these Philistines are not the covenant people of God. They have invaded God's land and attacked His people and there are consequences because God is faithful to His covenant and will fight for His people. Jonathan believes that God does not lie, that when God says, 'I will be your God,' and all this entails which includes fighting Israel's enemies. He believes is not lying. That God is a faithful covenant keeping God, or as David summarises it, His steadfast love endures forever. Is this the God we think of in our difficulty? I will never leave or forsake you, all things are working together for good, Lo I am with you always, no one can snatch them out of my hands, etc. whether we face temptation or trial our confidence in God's faithfulness is what will get us through. Those who believe that God is faithful, that His word will not return to Him void, are those who go out and sow it expecting a harvest. Jonathan believes that He has the advantage because God is against the Philistines.

Secondly, Jonathan believes in a sovereign God. 'It may be that the Lord will work for us,' these words reveal an excellent view of God. Idolatrous religions believe that they can control God and force his hand, but Jonathan believes in a God who is sovereign, who does what He pleases. This is not a note of doubt in Jonathan, it is note of faith. He does not doubt the existence of God because He does not fit our expectations, nor does He doubt the goodness of God because God in His wisdom may choose to act differently than expected. Nor does this inability to know God's hidden will cause indecision and inaction, Jonathan knows His duty and trusts in a God who is both free and powerful.

Thirdly, he believes in a powerful God, 'nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.' As Jonathan looks at the situation he knows that God is stronger than all the opposition and can cause one man to overcome many. He believes in the God of the impossible.

Finally Jonathan believes in a saving God. He is a God who does save by many or by few. He is not a God who is unfeeling towards our need but a God who is touched with the feeling of our infirmity and who has acted to deliver.

He had this sight of God but we should have it all the more clearly in light of Christ. Is God faithful to His covenants and promises? As we see what God has done in Christ we see that all the promises of God are amen in Him. Is God sovereign and free in His actions? We see that God has sovereignly determined His purposes and performed them in Christ. Is God powerful? We see that through the one man Jesus Christ He has through death brought life, through defeat brought victory, through judgement brought justification. Our view of God should be clearer than Jonathan's and our actions as confident of God's blessing. It is this alone which can lead us to as William Carey put it, 'expect great things; attempt great things.' We serve a God who is willing to serve, powerful to fulfil His will and faithful to fulfil His promises.

The Lord was faithful to Jonathan and we see that they were able to overcome 20 men in a short space, v14, and then God sent an earthquake and panic broke out, v15. The phrase, 'a very great panic' is literally a trembling of God.

Religious faith

Meanwhile Saul gets word of what is going on, v16. He first finds out who is missing v17. Then Saul asks for the Ark to be brought forth, v18. It sounds a little bit like an earlier episode when the Ark was used as a rabbit foot against the Philistines. Saul was likely seeking for the Urim and Thummim to be consulted before the Ark. But when the opportunity looked too good to be true, Saul told the priest to withdraw his hand and decided to attack anyway, v19. It is obvious that he wanted the will of God to secure blessing but since the situation appears to be tipping in his favour then he doesn't need to know God's will. Religious faith uses God to bless our own plans instead of seeking God's plans.

Israel itself seems to have the same sort of faith. Now that things look like the Israelites are going to win, they bet on the winning horse and get into the fight. The cowardly faith of the Israelites, v22 is a stark contrast to the brave faith of Jonathan. Religious faith is only willing to risk it when it looks like a sure thing. Its confidence is not in the invisible God but the visible odds they can measure and foretell.

The detail of the narrative expands and the pace slows down when the text is trying to emphasize something. We have had some detail in the exchange between Jonathan and his armour bearer, though the battle and rout are described quickly, but in v24-46 the detail once again increases and the pace slows as we zoom in on Saul's false religion. It starts and ends with two rash vows. V24, 'And the men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies." So none of the people had tasted food.' What is our theology of vows? We believe that it is appropriate to make vows in certain solemn situations like marriage, however, we are never to vow anything that God has not required. We see in Lev. 5 that there were certain vows that were wrongfully uttered and one could be forgiven and released from them. Saul's oath is an abuse of his role as king and it places the burden of a curse on essential things like food. This is an illegitimate oath because it is an unreasonable one the Lord has not required. Especially heinous about this oath is the fact that Saul is inflicting it for selfish reasons. We see that he places the people under a curse in order that he could satisfy himself against his enemies. It was not a case of bringing justice on God's enemies but something done in spite.

The text lists various effects from this rash action. Firstly, the hero of this story, the one who has true faith and has acted valiantly for God is indicted. Here is the first evidence that

Saul has been rash and heavy handed. Jonathan when going through a forest takes some honey and receives the benefit of the sugar.

Secondly, we see that the defeat of the Philistines as with first time Jonathan overcame a philistine garrison is minimized because the people are too faint to seal the victory, v30, 'How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great.'

Thirdly, the people are made to sin because they were famished and fell upon the spoil and ate it with the blood still in it. V31-32, 'They struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. And the people were very faint. 32 The people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground. And the people ate them with the blood.'

This is typical of man-made religion it indicts those who follow God correctly, it minimises the effectiveness of God's people, and it causes God's people to sin.

Then we see Saul building his first altar to the Lord, as a an effort to clean up the mess he had caused, v33-35.

Saul wants to carry on pressing the advantage so that every Philistine is destroyed, v36.

But the priest suggests that they should seek God's will, v37. Saul capitulates but God gives him no answer. You get a real sense of Saul entering into a rage as his desires are frustrated and he puts on his judging cap. What follows is a sad situation where both Jonathan and Saul are pronounced as cursed by God, a foreboding scene that will end with both dying in battle. We see that Saul goes hard after sin in others here, and is ready with more vows to punish the 'evil doer'. He claims that if even Jonathan is guilty he will die, v39. He splits the people up between his family and the people, and his family is taken by lot, and finally the lot takes Jonathan as the one who sinned. Instead of Saul repenting of his sinful vow, he like Jephthah pushes on thinking God will be pleased with such nonsense. The people have to rescue Jonathan. The irony is that during the proceedings, Saul says, v44, 'And Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan.'" The irony is that the curse does ultimately fall on Saul for the people talk him out of killing his own son. The end result is that once again the Philistines are not finally defeated and everyone goes home.

The chapter ends with a summary of Saul's reign listing all the ways in which he fought for Israel. There is a list of his children and wives. And if any secular historian had read this section one would think Saul had been a good king. However, Saul was a bad king, he was used despite his false religion. This chapter has been a lesson for us on what sort of faith we need to practice and the God who we should be focused on.