

STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 16

1 Samuel 14:1-23

June 4, 2000

Text Comment

- 13:23 The placing of the enemy garrison so close to their territory Jonathan will regard as a provocation requiring a response. Throughout the chapter, Jonathan seems to know exactly what is going on; Saul seems to be in a fog.
- v.2 The pomegranate tree was probably the place where he held court (he is sitting under a tamarisk tree in 22:6). The six hundred men were the same 600 from 13:15.
- v.3 The association of Saul with the rejected house and line of Eli may be intended as a portent by the narrator, who makes a point of mentioning the family line of Ahijah.
- v.4 What seems to be the case is that Jonathan must cross the pass not from one end to another, but from one side to another. He can make his way down to the bottom of the gulch out of sight, hiding behind crags and trees, but when he reaches the bottom he will be exposed.
- v.6 David will say a similar thing when Goliath taunts the Israelites. “Uncircumcised” is a familiar term of derision for the Philistines in Judges and Samuel. Other Semitic peoples practiced circumcision (without the precious associations of God’s covenant with his people and not as a rite for infants), so the use of the term “uncircumcised” for the Philistines may further suggest that they were aliens, that they didn’t belong in the Semitic world. They had, you remember, migrated from points west, especially from Crete.
- v.10 “The Lord has given” is the precise meaning of Jonathan’s name, which is given in its full form in vv. 6 and 8, whereas in the rest of the chapter, it is given in a shortened form. Robert Alter thinks that what we have here is less some form of divination – some sign from the Lord – than simple military pragmatics. If the garrison comes down to them, especially in the confined space of the pass, they will have to repel a frontal attack or flee. If they come up, they can choose their own point of attack and take full advantage of the enemies’ overconfidence. V. 13 may suggest that they still were able to surprise the enemy. But the thought may be also that such an attack was the most foolhardy in human terms, the one least likely of success – attacking a far superior force uphill – and so victory would be most clearly and certainly the Lord’s doing. Jonathan, planning to attack in any case, takes the most difficult option as the proof that the Lord will be with them in victory.
- v.13 Robert Alter suggests that “climbing on hands and knees” clearly indicates that Jonathan did not just walk straight up toward the enemy, but came by a circuitous, hidden route and, though he had been detected before, still effected some surprise. [*Com.*, 78]
- v.15 The same root used in 13:7 to describe the Israelites “quaking in fear” at the approach of the Philistines is used three times in one verse to describe the Philistine reaction to Jonathan’s victory (panic 2x; shook). And, of course, this panic that had seized the army

was from God! It was a reaction far in excess of the stipulated cause, a minor defeat of a single outpost. The Israelites still had no proper weapons to fight with!

- v.18 Saul obviously wants to determine what he is to do. He wants divine guidance. So, the LXX reading that your margin alerts you to is far likelier than the MT which the NIV has given you. The ark at this time was in Kiriath-jearim, not with the army (which it shouldn't have been, of course, as the disaster under Eli proved). What is more, the ark was not used to seek guidance, but the ephod was, for it held the sacred lots, the Urim and the Thummim. That Ahijah wore the ephod has already been mentioned in v. 3.
- v.19 The situation in the field had developed so favorably for Israel that Saul decided no further information was necessary and committed to battle.
- v.20 This happened to the Midianites when Gideon attacked them with his small force and, before that, the Egyptian army had been thrown into confusion while trying to cross the Red Sea in pursuit of Israel (Exodus 14:24).
- v.21 Hebrews in the Philistine army turned on their former confederates and became a fifth column. (A term originally from the Spanish Civil War, the fascist General Mola claimed that he was attacking the besieged Madrid with four columns and a fifth column from within the city; i.e. Franco's supporters in the city.) The German army had this problem in the later months of WWII as conscripted divisions from conquered nations turned on their conquerors. These men were called "Hebrews" because that is how their Philistine masters would have referred to them.
- v.22 I.e. the faint-hearted took courage. Often happens in a battle. A few turn the tide and then the entire army takes courage and surges forward.

Now, if you remember, we have said that this section from chapter 13 through chapter 15 amounts to the account of Saul's reign in First Samuel. Following 16:1 the focus shifts to David. But, we have also said that in this account, we are being given the reason for Saul's rejection. We pointed out last time that his failure at Gilgal was a failure of faith and the narrator shows us that, in part, by comparing Saul unfavorably with Gideon, who faced similarly daunting odds with even less resources and yet, by faith in the Lord, conquered Israel's enemies. Gideon attacked with just 300 men, half the size of Saul's diminished force. Saul had no such faith and instead of attacking, waited in fear. The Gilgal episode, his failure to wait for Samuel, is simply the demonstration of his lack of faith.

That same want of faith on Saul's part is the demonstration of chapter 14 as well, but in this chapter it is demonstrated particularly by contrast. The beginning of this contrast occurs in chapter 13, if you remember, where in v. 3 Jonathan, Saul's son, who appears unannounced in the narrative, attacks a Philistine outpost, just as Saul himself had the opportunity to do in chapter 10 but did not.

Chapter 14 continues the contrast between Jonathan and Saul. We began our studies in Samuel by pointing out that the narrator would often provide his moral and spiritual evaluations of his characters not directly but indirectly, not overtly but subtly. He never comes out and tells us that he is showing us Saul's heart by comparing it with Jonathan's, but there are many indications in the narrative that he wants us to see that he is doing just that.

1. You have a king and a crown-prince.
2. Twelve times in chapters 13-14 the narrator draws attention to their relationship as father and son. Look, for example, at 14:1 where the added words “son of Saul” seem unnecessary and so emphatic.
3. Only Saul and Jonathan, we read in 13:22, had a sword or a spear. So we are left to wonder what each man will do with his weapon.

And then the contrast between the two men is drawn out explicitly in those very terms that show faith in Jonathan and the lack of faith in his father, Saul.

1. Saul’s passivity and inactivity is contrasted with Jonathan’s assertiveness in the face of the enemy. We saw already that Jonathan attacked a Philistine outpost in 13:3 when Saul had shown no intention to do so. But, here, in chapter 14 the point is once again underscored. Jonathan not only attacks, *but he attacks without telling his father of his intention to do so!* That point is made explicitly in 14:1. It seems clear that Jonathan did not tell Saul because he knew that his father would not approve, that Saul would fear the Philistine reprisals, and would forbid his son to provoke the enemy in that way. Or, still would have doubted the possibility of success. Jonathan was doing what his father should have done, as far back as chapter 10, and he has to do it secretly lest his father forbid him. The contrast between 14:1 and 2 is clear and obviously intentional. Saul remains at Gibeah, sitting under a tree, holding court, wanting to be king but quite afraid to assert himself against the enemy. Jonathan, on the contrary, plans a quick strike.
2. Jonathan doesn’t seem to question the need for action and he doesn’t pause to consult the will of God. *He already knows God’s will as his father should have!* Saul, first waits at Gilgal, then sinfully, without Samuel, tries to discern the Lord’s will. Then, even when the rout of the Philistines is on as a result of Jonathan’s audacity, he proposes to consult the divine oracle, but breaks off the consultation in the middle when he realizes that the enemy is already thoroughly beaten. Then, later in the chapter, in v. 36, which we have not yet read, Saul proposes to act without consulting the Lord and has to be corrected by his priest and, then, the Lord does not answer him. Saul is pictured here as confused, uncertain, hesitant, while his son Jonathan is bold, decisive, and certain of his duty. Prayer for God’s will is so much disobedience and infidelity if God’s will should already be known.
3. Depending on how we read 14:9-11, there may be a further detail in this same contrast. Jonathan acts decisively with military considerations uppermost. He has an enemy in front of him, he has a decidedly inferior force, and he takes the steps best calculated to gain him a military advantage. Saul doesn’t seem to be thinking as a commander at all in these chapters. He isn’t seen giving an order or disposing his troops or leading them into battle.
4. There may be a further contrast in the response of Jonathan’s armor-bearer in v. 7. Jonathan was a man who instilled the deepest loyalty in his followers. Saul, in the previous chapter, you remember, had suffered the loss of 1,400 of his 2,000 men. The 1,400 deserted, and the 600 who remained were, we read, “quaking in fear.”
5. But, most decisively, Jonathan’s statement in v. 6 – “Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” – is a devastating indictment of his father’s cowardice and unbelief. In 13:11, Saul, who still had hundreds of men with him, says to Samuel, “When I saw that the men were scattering...” Jonathan, with just himself and his armor bearer, was confident of the Lord’s power and readiness to grant him victory. The Lord, he says, can conquer with a few! It is even more heroic an act of faith on Jonathan’s part because of the “Perhaps...” that Jonathan adds to his wonderful remark. Jonathan is prepared to venture all in the name of the Lord even though he does not know for sure that God will be pleased to grant him a victory against Israel’s enemies. “Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf.” This is

a pure, true faith on Jonathan's part. He is willing to act on behalf of the Lord's honor *whether or not* God will give him victory in his effort. This is very akin to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego at the fiery furnace, if you remember. They told the King that their Lord could certainly save them from the fire if he chose, but even if he did not they would not betray him by worshipping the image of gold that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. [Daniel 3:18] With their "if not" and here with Jonathan's "Perhaps" faithful men protect the sovereign freedom of the Lord their God even as they declare their unconditional loyalty to him. Saul, on the contrary, doesn't act until finally the commotion from the rout of the Philistines, which he had nothing to do with bringing about, is so great that it was impossible for him not to act.

The comparison between the two men may be indirect. The narrator may never come right out and tell us that Saul hadn't Jonathan's faith. But the comparison between the two men is obvious and devastating to Saul's reputation nonetheless.

What we have in chapter 14, then, is a demonstration of Jonathan's faith and Saul's lack of faith, his unbelief. But we have that demonstration, as so often in the Bible and in human life, not in the confession of words, but in the deeds done or not done. "Show me your faith by your deeds," James says. "Faith without works is dead," James says. And he might just as well be summing up the lesson of 1 Samuel 13-14.

We are getting a lot of this lesson in Samuel and John these days. The Lord also had to deal with people who protested their faith but whose works found them out as unbelievers still. That is alright. We need to have this pounded into our minds always. Faith without works is dead. We cannot take comfort, you and I, nor can our children, from right doctrine, right belief, the saying of the right words, if we are not willing to live for God. Had you asked Saul questions when he was at Gilgal and then at Gibeah – questions about his faith in God and love for God – I'm sure he would have given you satisfactory answers. But he had no living, no real and authentic faith, and his refusal, his unwillingness to obey the Lord, to act on the Lord's summons, to place his confidence in the Lord's provision and promise of blessing, gave him away as an unbeliever.

There is always the danger of *Sandemanianism*. This was the name for this viewpoint as it was taught by a Scot by the name of Robert Sandeman during the days of the Great Awakening. In an effort to protect the simplicity of faith and justification by faith alone and not by works, the Sandemanians defined faith as solely right belief, the acceptance of the truth of the facts of the gospel: Christ's death and resurrection. In this way, the door was opened to what, in 20th century American evangelicalism, would be called the "carnal Christian theory." That is, the theory that one could be a true Christian through right belief, even if he did not walk faithfully with the Lord, even if he did not obey God's commandments, even if he did not, in other words, *practice* his faith. There is a part of us all that wants that to be true. That we can be saved and sure of heaven without having to surrender our lives to the command of Jesus Christ. That is why this doctrine, call it Sandemanianism or Antinomianism or whatever, surfaces repeatedly in the history of Christian thought. But the Bible is too clear, too forthright, too emphatic in its teaching that faith must work, true faith will work, authentic faith always proves itself in works of obedience and service rendered to God. Saul and his non-working faith is but one of a great many examples to go with the explicit teaching of the Bible.

It is interesting, by the way, that our secular culture has largely embraced a Sandemanian view of salvation. In our culture, more and more, a person is regarded as pure, as good, as worthy, *if he has the right beliefs, the right convictions*, whether or not he acts in a good, moral, and worthy

way. The left absolves our President of his moral lapses because his social-political convictions are the approved ones. And the right has been quick to overlook the immorality and cruelty of dictators because they were anti-Communist. Our political theology is the theology of Sandemanianism. You are saved by your beliefs whether or not you act in a way that is right and pure. But, of course, that is not the way God judges human lives. Right belief without right action makes you *more* evil, not less, for you know the good and do it not.

In the Bible the word “love” can refer to pure adoration or evil lust. But the Bible clearly knows the difference between the two, commends the one and condemns the other. In the same way, the word “faith” in the Bible can be used, as it is in John for example, of an intellectual assent or outward enthusiasm that does not touch the will and does not produce a living, acting loyalty to God and Christ or it can be used to mean a life-changing loyalty to God. The Bible knows the difference between the two and says that one faith is false and the other is true, one does not save and the other does.

I want to finish this evening simply by reminding you of the quality of that work that proved Jonathan’s faith. It was an act taken in loyalty to God, in obedience to his summons and calling, *but it was also an act taken in defiance of the visible, tangible circumstances that Jonathan faced.* This is the problem too often with our faith. It exercises itself primarily in terms of things that are still to some extent predictable, accountable, visible.

It is right, of course, for the sake of our faith in Christ, to go to church, to love our wives, to come to prayer meeting, to discipline and train our children, to be honest at work, to be kind to others, to be generous to the needy. Those are all important dimensions of true Christian living. But, an unbeliever might, for other reasons, do the same things, or, at least, appear to do them.

But to set out, two against an outpost garrison, because one believes in the power and the promise of God – that is another thing altogether. That is faith working *in defiance of sight and expectation.* Saul would have refused Jonathan’s request to make his commando raid, precisely because reason told him it would fail. Only faith knew that two with God were far more powerful than many without God.

In the ordinary run of life there are many things in the life of faith that are not so obviously the demonstrations of faith. One can come to church in faith or not (though, to be sure, the one with true faith looks for things and receives things in worship the one without faith knows nothing of). But there ought always to be that in our life of faith which does objectively demonstrate our real, living confidence in the Word of God. Dr. Schaeffer used to say that we ought always to be praying for certain things that would never be expected to come to pass *until and unless God should intervene.* If faith can move mountains, as our Savior said it can, then surely we ought to be praying for certain mountains to be moved and then acting on that prayer by putting our shoulder to that mountain and beginning to shove. We must always say and mean Jonathan’s “Perhaps,” but Jonathan is proof that if we act in faith in agreement with God’s will, even very unlikely things will happen and things very difficult of achievement will come to pass. If all we achieve in life can be explained by sight and sense, then what is faith for and what is its demonstration?

We have been reading after dinner Monday nights at my mother’s a little biography of Sundar Singh, the famous Christian Sadhu of India and one of the great Christians of the 20th century. If you remember his story, as a boy, Sundar was brought to faith in Christ out of a wealthy Sikh family that opposed his conversion at every turn. On one occasion they even tried to poison him.

Better dead than a Christian. He became a Christian sadhu, or holy man, traveling the country – not only India, but Nepal and Tibet – preaching Christ to people who very often treated him terribly for bringing his unwelcome message. Thrown into prisons and jails repeatedly. Stoned, bones broken, having to fend for himself, often hungry, often cold. In danger of wild animals and snakes on his travels through the jungle. Hated by religious leaders, set upon by mobs. Indeed, what is so remarkable about Sundar Singh's solitary life is that he continued to preach Christ to the unwilling and the unwelcoming from the beginning of his Christian life to his death. His life is the story of one remarkable deliverance after another, with many sufferings faithfully borne along the way.

On one occasion, by the order of the chief lama of a Tibetan community he was thrown into a dry well, the lid of which was then securely locked. Here he was left to die, like many others before him, whose bones and rotting flesh lay at the bottom of that well. On the third night, when he had been crying out to God in prayer, he heard someone unlocking the lid of the well and removing it. Then a voice spoke, telling him to take hold of the rope that was being lowered. He found a loop at the bottom of the rope in which he could place his foot and he was drawn up, the lid was replaced and locked. When he looked around to thank his rescuer he could find no one. He had gone. When morning came he resumed preaching in the village where he had been arrested three days before. News was brought to the lama that the man who had been thrown into the execution-well was preaching again. Sundar Singh was brought before him and questioned and he told the story of his release. The lama declared that someone must have got hold of the key, but when a search was made for what was believed to be the only key, it was found, still attached to the lama's own belt. What is the explanation of such an event? I do not know. But I am sure that Sundar Singh's faith, active and working in prayer – and Sundar was always careful to add Jonathan's "perhaps" – is all the explanation we need.

All the while Sundar was traveling and preaching the gospel, he was also praying for his own family that had cursed him and thrown him out when he became a Christian at 15 years of age. He lived his life as an itinerant preacher. Many became Christians through his preaching. But, all the while, he prayed for his family. Fourteen years after his own conversion, his father became a Christian as well. In the later years of the Sadhu's ministry his father was his chief supporter.

I read a story like that of Sundar Singh's and I must and you must immediately think this: what is there in my life that I am seeking and praying for that only God can accomplish? Surely our own sanctification and every good work. But what is there outwardly and objectively that we are seeking – where is the Philistine garrison that must be taken by just two men in my life and where is it in your life? Such a thing can be found everywhere: the salvation of that family member or friend; the mending of that relationship; the healing of that marriage; the overcoming of that sin, that compulsive behavior; whatever it may be. We pray and then we work.

All through the Bible we are urged to presume upon the veracity of God, to take his astonishing promises at face value and to move mountains. We must be seeking to move mountains. In our prayer and in our work there must be that that everyone knows and everyone can see only God can do. Saul didn't believe that God would. Jonathan did and look what he accomplished. God is promising to us that if we would seek to move mountains in his name and in his strength, he will, if not always, he will certainly sometimes move them for us to let us know and everyone know how blessed are those who trust in him.