

1 SAMUEL 14

INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues with the events that begun in the previous chapter as I said last time these two chapters belong together. In chapter 13 we noted the result of disobeying the will of God, today we will see the work of faith and the folly of religion.

1. THE WORK OF FAITH (13:23-14:15)

The scene is set for us (13:23) the Philistines decided to keep an eye on the Israelites after Jonathan's previous victory, so they set up an outpost overlooking the ravine that separates Micmash from Geba. In the light of their superior strength we might well ask why they did not overrun Saul's camp and destroy Israel's token opposition. There were probably two reasons for the Philistines hesitating.

Saul was in Geba and the pass between Geba and Micmash was too narrow a strip to use chariots and the Philistines would be at a disadvantage in hand to hand combat because of the prominent position held by Saul. They also hesitated because they knew Saul was a brave man and a skilled general and therefore they thought it wise to delay any attack on Geba; they decided to set up a watch to monitor the movements of Saul's men and to guard the pass. But as it was difficult for the Philistines to attack the Israelites, it was also very difficult for Saul's army to attack the Philistines but with faith all things are possible and Jonathan rather than Saul shows us what happens when faith is exercised.

How was Saul going to react to the Philistines setting up an outpost? His men no doubt looking to him for leadership found that Saul simply stood by and watched no doubt feeling himself too weak in manpower to do anything about the situation. Jonathan decides to do something about the situation. Jonathan had all the qualities that Saul lacked the main one being faith. Jonathan assessed the situation and motivated by faith in his God, conceived a plan.

Without telling his Father Saul, he left camp early one morning in order to attack the Philistine outpost. The key verse in the whole chapter is found in verse 6; his trust was not in his own ability but in the Lord's power and purposes. He reasons that as the Lord is powerful He can save by using many or by using a few so perhaps the Lord will act on Jonathan's behalf. Jonathan and his armour bearer who was obviously motivated by the same faith (v 7) went over to the Philistine outpost.

Jonathan and his armour bearer had a plan in order to ascertain the Lord's will (vs. 8-10). The sign was that if the Philistines invited them up onto the Plateau then they would know that the Lord had given the Philistines into their hands. That is exactly what happened and Jonathan and his armour bearer attacked the outpost and killed 20 Philistines (v 14). The commotion was enough to arouse the Philistines, panic sent from God seized those in the camp and they quickly fled (v 15).

We need to pause here and think about the faith that Jonathan displayed and the results it achieved or I should say look what God achieved through a man or men of faith. What was it that motivated Jonathan to act against the odds? It was his strong belief in the power of God.

Jonathan was not looking at the circumstances but to God, he had a clear conviction that nothing can hinder the Lord from saving his people because Jonathan believed that his God was indeed God and therefore able to do anything He pleases. It was this conviction that stirred him to action but action that was not presumptuous.

He uses the word “perhaps” (v 6) for he did not assume that the Lord would act on their behalf although he had good reasons for thinking so, for it was the Lord’s land and He had given it to Israel to occupy, yet Jonathan does not presume he knows how the Lord will act in any given situation. However it was because of his confidence in God’s power that he takes action. Jonathan knew that God can do great things with very limited resources and his prayer is that in this case he might act but they will never know unless they actually go and take action.

The church of Jesus Christ needs men and women who have faith like Jonathan and his armour bearer. We need as a church to have confidence in our God we need to know that nothing can hinder the Lord from saving. He can save by using many or by using few that is his choice but for us we must believe that He can save and nothing and no one can hinder him.

It is one thing to say we believe this but it is something else to **really** believe it and our actions will demonstrate what we really do believe about our God. Jonathan told his armour bearer what he was about to do because of his confidence in the Lord’s sovereignty and power. Do we really believe that God can save in Wensleydale by using few of us? For some of us we may believe that the Lord can save, but that we are too few to make an impact in this area.

If only we had more resources with more people with different gifts then perhaps we could make a greater impact. If we only had a different Pastor with different gifts then perhaps things would be different in our locality. We may even envy those churches that have such resources. But we must remember it makes no difference to the Lord whether He uses a few of us or many, for his power is the same. His salvation does not depend on human resources or human gifts and abilities but it depends on God’s power. True faith says God can save as He chooses using whomever He chooses, for there is nothing that can hinder him and therefore because of that we must act in faith and we must take the gospel to all people in the knowledge that God can save all people.

He can do that by using us with all our limitations and smallness but it only takes a little faith in a great God to accomplish much for Him.

But there is another aspect of Jonathan’s faith that I have already mentioned and I want us to think about and it is the fact that He does not presume that He knows the Lord’s mind. Just because Jonathan is taking action does not mean that the Lord **must** act on his behalf. Jonathan believes that the Lord is able to save Israel with only a few people but he cannot assume that will happen so he says perhaps the Lord will act on our behalf.

This is a good dose of realism when it comes to faith. There are many Christians who think that to talk like Jonathan is not real faith but it is expressing doubt. They say that faith must always be dogmatic, certain and positive. But those qualities may not be faith at all, but arrogance. The word “perhaps” is part of true faith, Jonathan believed that God is powerful and could use him and his armour bearer to rescue Israel but at the same time he gives God the freedom as God to do as He pleases. True faith can never dictate to God as if the Lord is our message boy to do our bidding. True faith recognises its degree of ignorance in the various situations of life for who knows what the Lord’s will is in every situation? But at the same time true faith acts because it is certain of what it knows to be true in this case that nothing can hinder the Lord from saving.

But true faith is always submissive to the will and purposes of God and can never presume that it knows what God’s will is in every situation and circumstance. Let me give you an example of this. A church may plan to hold a week of evangelistic events. It works hard and prays much and it preaches the gospel clearly throughout the week. Can the church presume that because they have done all that they can, that the Lord will save some?

It might expect the Lord to do so because the gospel is being preached and it is the power of God unto salvation; but surely it cannot presume that is what will happen. Perhaps the Lord will be

pleased to use that week of outreach to save sinners but there is no guarantee. If the Lord chooses not to save, was there something wrong with their faith? Of course not; the church acted in faith by holding those evangelistic events and by praying; but they simply had to submit to God's will and to do that involves faith. True faith believes what the Bible says about God and acts on what is true but at the same time it never presumes that God will act favourably in any given situation.

But there is something else in these verses that we must notice before we consider the rest of the chapter. Jonathan's faith in God did not mean that he left it all to God, he had a plan, a strategy which although needed God's help, it was his plan. In other words faith does not excuse our lack of planning and preparation. We need to have strategies which of course are prayed about and are subject to God's guiding; but then we need to act.

That is why as a church we produce an evangelism programme. That is our plan and our strategy is to reach all the various age groups with the gospel with an attractive programme. It would be foolish in the extreme to believe God is all powerful and can save using limited resources and then do nothing about it. It is foolish to say God can save whoever He pleases and then not plan to take the gospel to our community.

God saves sinners through the resources that are available and therefore we must use what God has given to us in order to reach lost people with the gospel and to do that we must think pray and plan.

2. THE FOLLY OF RELIGION (vs. 15-23)

With the Philistine forces terrified and on the run, the time seemed right for the Israelites to attack. However according to Deuteronomy 20:4-5 no Israelite army was to enter battle until the priest had consulted God and addressed the people in order to encourage them to trust God. Saul was obviously aware of this requirement so he sent for Ahijah the priest to bring him the ark of God (v 18).

His intention was to seek the Lord's guidance so that the priest could address the people and assure them of victory. However as Saul and the priest were talking the fear and chaos in the Philistine camp increased; Saul seeing the opportunity to make the most of the situation tells Ahijah not to bother with that religious routine (v 19). It seemed a good military move to side step God's pattern for war, but Saul's decision simply highlights why he was no longer fit to be king, he was side stepping God in his pursuit to do the right thing.

However, amazingly, God overrules in this situation for when Saul and his army reached the Philistines he found them fighting themselves (v 20), chaos and confusion reigned and this self destruction can be attributed to a blunder that the Philistines had made earlier when they permitted some Hebrews with divided loyalties to join their ranks (v 21). Now wearing Philistine markings and wielding Philistine weapons they turn on the Philistines and start to fight for Israel. It turned out to be a disastrous decision as far as the Philistines were concerned. The Philistines retreated and as they did so, those Israelites who were cowards and had hidden themselves for fear of the Philistines joined the ranks of Saul (v 22) but interestingly the writer does not give the credit for the victory to Saul instead it was the Lord who rescued Israel that day (v 23). In so doing he was reinforcing what Jonathan already knew that nothing could hinder the Lord from saving whether by many or by few.

However the battle is not yet over and we will look at the rest of the chapter next time but for now let us look at the folly of Saul and his religion. It seems that by sending for the Priest and in his desire to consult the Lord through the means set up by the Lord; Saul is trying to keep at least a formality of religion.

He knew the right things he had to do, but when it seemed to him that he was about to lose a golden opportunity by sticking to religious convention then he soon ditches those conventions for his own purposes.

There can be no doubt that Saul was trying to do the right thing in going after the Philistines and waiting on the Priest to go through the religious process; but all that would have taken time and time was vital nevertheless you get the impression that Saul was only trying to observe religious convention rather than having convictions about what he was doing. Was he really interested in finding the Lord's mind in the matter? It does not seem like it, as he took action without a decisive answer from the Lord on the matter. There are many in our land and even in our town and perhaps in our building who try to hold to some sort of formal religious convention but they have no conviction about it.

They might come to church out of habit but if church is not convenient for them at any time then it simply gets put to one side. If a family commitment is taking place at the same time as church then the family will always win. They abide by certain religious rules and conventions but if they interfere with their lives or get in the way of what they really want to do, then they have no problem laying aside their religious conventions.

Just like Saul such people think that religion is there to be used for their own convenience. But of course the true problem with such people is that they have a form of godliness but they do not know its power (2 Timothy 3:5). They have a formal religion but no relationship with Jesus Christ the Saviour. The consequence of such a religion is that we do what Saul does. When it is convenient to us or it furthers our purposes, then we use our religion.

However we readily ditch our religion in favour of our goals when it is not convenient or it is a hindrance to us. Of course some genuine Christians who have fallen away in their walk with God can do that as well they begin to put themselves before the Lord, their word becomes law rather than the Lord's word. However someone who has a true relationship with God through Christ and is walking faithfully with him in fellowship desires more than anything to obey God in everything even when it is inconvenient to do so or when it does not seem to fit into our purposes and our goals.

As I draw this to a conclusion which person best fits you today? Are you like Jonathan who trusts in God's power and sovereign purposes and acts in faith according to what you believe even when that does not seem to make good sense? Could it be that you are like Saul who has a form of religion but no reality or that you had a reality but the cares of this world has squeezed that out of you and you no longer put the Lord or his word before your own desires?

If you are like Saul you need to repent and seek the reality that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. If you are like Jonathan then you need to continue to encourage yourself with this truth that "nothing can hinder the Lord from saving whether by many or by few" (v 6). We need to act in faith on the basis of what we know to be true, praying that "perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf" and save some if not many from our community.

May God grant to us faith to believe and courage to act?

Amen