

LOOKING AT THINGS NOT SEEN

Introduction

God is true. Satan is a liar. Those are two of the most fundamental facts of life. And God's people have to decide on a daily basis which to believe. Sometimes Christians are in a situation where all hope seems to be lost – 'Master, do you not care that we perish?' When that happens we have a choice – be demoralised and lower our expectations, or have faith in Christ and attempt great things for him. Here we have an example of that choice.

A story of two men

They were father and son, ruler and subject, King Saul and Jonathan.

Saul was the God-appointed leader of Israel. As such he had great authority – that is significant when we think of what Jonathan did.

Saul's main task when he took office was to protect his people from their enemies. That is also significant.

So is the fact that Israel were in a special relationship with God – his people in a unique sense.

We come to the story at a time when Saul appears to be failing. He has had victories, and has taken initiatives, but now he seems cowed and beaten. Chapter 13 mentions a failed attempt to free Israel from their Philistine neighbours. It resulted in a fresh invasion by 30k troops against Saul's 3k. He can only watch helplessly as three bands of raiders take over the surrounding countryside.

If Saul was discouraged it is no surprise that his army fled and by verse 16 he has only 600. Perhaps the number is intended as a hint – who found his army reduced to 600 men? Who did it? And what was the outcome? In Gideon's case faith in God produced a great victory; in Saul's case faith was conspicuous by its absence.

The writer concludes his description by mentioning that the Philistines had all the blacksmiths, consequently Israel had few weapons – only Saul and Jonathan had swords. A demoralised leader; a panicking army; and the enemy had robbed them of their weapons.

This scenario might sound familiar. It may be a Christian parent or church leader, or someone thinking about secular trends. It is easy to be discouraged. It may feel like you are abandoned. The weapons you think you need are not available. Meet King Saul.

Now think about Jonathan. He was in the same situation. He felt the suffering of his people. He was grieved at the way God seemed to be mocked. He knew their weakness more than most.

But instead of despairing Jonathan acted. In fact, it was an earlier action of his that had triggered the crisis. His father probably thought, 'Why does my son not settle for the way things are? At least that would be easier than what is happening now.'

We meet Jonathan when he is planning a second attack on the Philistines. With no army. It seems utter madness.

The historian mentions, 'But he did not tell his father'. His father would probably have stopped him. We could say he went without authority, and remember – God is a God of order not of confusion.

Although he acted without authority he did not act alone. He told his armour-bearer what he planned and the man responded with enthusiasm – ‘another nutter’, people would have said if they knew.

He did not ask for God’s guidance although the priest was present. Why not? He already had it. The situation of God’s people was guidance enough. Sometimes we make the mistake of looking for guidance when the thing is perfectly obvious.

But there is such a thing as general guidance, where we know the direction of travel. Specific guidance is another matter. Abraham is a case in point – ‘he went out not knowing where he was going’. Jonathan looked for God to guide in the details by how the Philistine garrison would respond to his challenge. Sometimes we know the principle, and should act on it, but the details will come later – a test of faith.

The only thing left was to do it!

And the result was a great victory that left the people of God free for a time from foreign oppression.

What made the difference?

The first difference between the two men (and what they achieved) is summed up in Jonathan’s attitude expressed in verse 6: ‘It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few’.

While Saul looked at the circumstances Jonathan looked at the LORD. Saul made his decisions only on the basis of evidence he could see around him. Jonathan also took account of God, his covenant, his power, and his faithfulness. To God numbers do not matter.

Jonathan believed that God might work – ‘who knows?’ he said. He knew that God’s honour was at stake, and the people God loved were suffering. He knew God was in covenant with his people, there was a presumption that God would help them (as he had often done before).

Saul might have thought his son a fool for not judging the prospects on the basis of circumstances. Jonathan might have thought his father a fool for not judging on the basis of what God had said and done. There was no middle ground between the two positions. Faith or unbelief – it’s that simple.

What are our expectations? Do we assume things will always be as they are today? Or do we fail to see why God would not act on his Word? If we take him seriously (and let’s not call ourselves Christian if we don’t) is there not a presumption that: he will save sinners; he will build up his church; he will answer his people’s prayers? That is the only biblical position.

By contrast, Saul looked only at the circumstances – no wonder he was discouraged! And he could not appeal to God’s covenant because he had broken it – a guilty conscience cannot bring itself to appeal to God and trust him.

The second thing that made the difference was God’s action. As soon as Jonathan acted God did. He gave success when he attacked the hilltop garrison. Then he gave an earthquake, and he set the Philistine army into an irrational and unnatural panic – there is such a thing. And he put it into the heart of Saul’s runaway soldiers to come back and help their comrades. If it was not God – who was it?

The danger is that we read this and smile, and say, 'nice story'; that was then, this is now. Did the Holy Spirit have such things recorded to tantalise us or to transform us? The only reasonable response to the story on our part is a change of attitude and conduct.

God vindicated Jonathan and saved his people. He can do that again. But we must imitate Jonathan.

Lessons for us

To be realistic about life we need to take into consideration the things of God – things that are unseen. READ 2 Corinthians 4:18. We need to know his Word – find what we can reasonably expect. Think about his covenant commitment. Think about what he has done in the past. And act on it.

This applies to anyone who is still a stranger to Christ; circumstances might suggest it doesn't matter. God's word and people's experience shows that it does. It may seem impossible to ever find peace in Christ; it is not – it happens every day. It applies when a Christian is tempted to give up; 'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world'. It applies if we have any concern about God's kingdom – someone's conversion, the cause of truth, etc; we are not fighting alone – Christ has all power in heaven and on earth.

When we are acting in accordance with what God has promised the potential is limitless. Any situation can be turned round. God's revealed purpose is to grow his kingdom and 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. Christ has won the victory over the powers of darkness by his cross; our calling is to gather the spoils of his victory. The Holy Spirit dwells among his people; he may be grieved but he applies the redemption of Christ.

So we should consider our situation carefully – as individuals and churches. What issues do we face? In our personal life? In family life? In church life?

Is there already clear guidance as to what we should do? Are there like-minded people who will support you (though David did not have any when he faced Goliath)?

Will the authority structure help you or hinder you? If it is taking the side of the enemy you cannot expect it to help, only to keep the peace with the enemy. In exceptional cases you may have to ignore it or go against it. Remember the ultimate authority is God, and we are not necessarily bound to obey a delegated authority that is working against him (Peter and John – 'Which is better? To obey God or you?').

If it is Christ's will as revealed in scripture you will find you have Christ's support even though there was no sign of it when you started.

Compromising or courageous? Defeatist or determined? Choosing who we will serve is more than a decision in principle – it is the action that faith prompts us to take.

'It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few.' Do it.