

BY MANY OR BY FEW

1 Samuel 14:1-23

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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” (1 Sam. 14:6).

In Samuel 14 introduces us to one of the most beautiful characters in all of Scripture, Jonathan the son of King Saul. Jonathan is not one of the primary figures in 1 Samuel, but he plays an important role in so many different situations that we get to now know him well. In none of these accounts does Jonathan display the least vice; always he acts according to a bold faith and a keen devotion to the Lord and his servants. We know that Jonathan must have been a sinner, yet in his biblical portrayal we see a shining model of Christian manhood, faithful friendship, and devoted service to the cause of the Lord.

FAITH CONTRASTED

The writer of Samuel frequently makes his points through the use of contrast and comparison. The writer will frequently place two figures side-by-side, providing parallel details that make clear the issues of faith and unbelief, virtue and sin. In this chapter, the two contrasting figures are King Saul and Jonathan.

First, King 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, including Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of the LORD in Shiloh, wearing an ephod” (1 Sam. 14:2-3). This description is given as a portrait of official spiritual malaise. Having attempted to lead the

people on God’s behalf, Saul had failed utterly. His first strike against the Philistines had provoked their massive retaliation and his failure to obey God’s Word had led to his rejection by the Lord (1 Sam. 13:13-14). His present setting reflects both of these sad realities. Beset with an enemy vastly superior in both numbers and armament, Saul is cornered on the outskirts of his capital with a mere six hundred soldiers who, according to 1 Samuel 13:22, lack even the basic weaponry of swords or spears. Accordingly, Saul takes no military initiative; Jonathan’s ability to slip from his camp unobserved suggests that Saul’s followers were so dispirited that they failed even to post proper sentries.

On the spiritual plane, Saul’s situation is even worse. Saul has set up his court, following tradition by taking his seat beneath or beside a notable tree. With him is Saul’s royal chaplain, a proper descendant of the high priestly line wearing the sacred ephod, the holy apron with its Urim and Thummim for seeking the Lord’s will. So far, so good – until we learn the identity of this priest: Ahijah, the grandson of wicked Phinehas, of the rejected and cursed house of Eli, the nephew of “the glory has departed” Ichabod. These details are not randomly inserted into the biblical text. Rather they make a point about Saul’s standing. David Jobling writes, “His own royal glory gone, where else would we expect Saul to be than with a relative of ‘Glory gone.’”¹ Saul, having replaced the dynamic counsel of Samuel with the disgraced counsel of the house of Eli, has lost his way and is able to do little more than grasp at the tattered shreds of his lost credibility.

In contrast is Saul’s own son, Jonathan. Jonathan does not surround himself with royal courtiers but goes only in the company of his armor-bearer. Jonathan is the one man other than Saul in Israel’s army to possess proper battle equipment, and he employs his sword not by sheathing it in besieged safety but by wielding it in daring faith. While Saul sits, Jonathan acts. While Saul’s pious inactivity inspires no help from the Lord, Jonathan’s faith-driven initiative receives God’s mighty aid. “Whereas Saul the commander publicly

¹ Cited in Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 209.

dishonored the Lord through fear-inspired disobedience, Jonathan the warrior would bring honor to the Lord through his fearless faith.”²

FAITH DARING

Jonathan’s famous deed, resulting in so great a deliverance for his people, began with the royal prince’s simple desire to do something for the sake of the Lord and his people. “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’” (1 Sam. 14:1). Jonathan had no definite plan. Rather, wearied by inactivity, he simply went out to look for an opportunity to take action.

The opposing armies were situated across a valley several miles north of Jerusalem at a place where the ascent on both sides was particularly daunting. It was probably because of this difficult terrain that Saul had retreated his force here and also why the Philistines had contented themselves with besieging rather than assaulting the Israelites. This is what Jonathan observed when he went forth: “There was a rocky crag on the one side and a rocky crag on the other side. The name of the one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh. The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba” (1 Sam. 14:4-5). The names for these crags, roughly equivalent to Slippery (Bozez) and Thorny (Seneh) describe their inaccessibility. Between these steep ascents the Wadi Suweinit cuts its narrow and deep trough towards the Jordan River. In short, any military assessment of the approaches to either camp would declare them inaccessible.³

It is obvious that everyone else on both sides viewed this situation as shutting out any possibility for effective action against the other. But Jonathan thought differently. He was of the daring sort of person who imagines possibilities where others see only barriers. Thus, 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” (1 Sam. 14:6).

² Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 155.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 112.

Behind Jonathan's daring actions was the simple conviction of his faith: "nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few." In other words, Jonathan realized that salvation is not a matter of human factors but of divine grace and power alone. If the Lord should be pleased to use Jonathan to gain a victory for Israel, then it did not really matter what forces were arrayed against him or the difficulty of the terrain. His faith did not rely on favorable circumstances but looked to God and his might.

Where did Jonathan gain this bold perspective on God? The answer is probably from the record of God's dealings with his people over the years. The whole record of the period of the judges, Israel's recent history, showed that when it pleased the Lord to deliver Israel, he could very well arrange it by a few or even a single bold believer. Ehud had gone alone into the stronghold of Eglon of Moab and slew the oppressor of his people (Judg. 3:16-30). Then Shamgar arose "who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel" (Jud. 3:31).

Perhaps most famous was God's deliverance of Israel from the Midianites through Gideon. Israel's situation under the Midianites was similar to their present plight under the Philistines: "because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds," for the Midianite raiders would descend to steal all their crops and run off with their livestock, laying waste the land (Jud. 6:2-5). Saul's present stronghold may well have been constructed during this time. Gideon himself was hiding in a winepress when an angel called him forth to lead Israel. Then, after Gideon's first strike, against an altar to Baal, 32,000 Israelites gathered to his call. But the Lord considered this too many for his purposes, so that 22,000 departed. This was still too many, so the Lord sent them down to the water nearby to be tested: everyone who lapped the water from their hands would remain; those who knelt to drink directly from the stream would go home (Jud. 7:5-6). This reduced the number to a mere 300 stalwart Israelites, and with them the Lord utterly routed the great Midianite host.

There are so many parallels in this chapter to Gideon's victory over the Midianites that Jonathan may well be referring to that earlier

episode, concluding from it and other examples that “nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6).

This suggests that one way for us to strengthen our faith is to consider how our situation mirrors that of others in the Bible, and to remember how God delivered his people of old. Moses and the Israelites had their backs to the Red Sea with the army of Pharaoh bearing down, and the Lord parted the waves to pass his people through, then to crash down on their pursuing enemies. Likewise, God will often provide an unforeseen way of escape for his beleaguered people today. Sennacherib’s host surrounded Jerusalem, but when Hezekiah took their taunts before the Lord in prayer, the angel of God came to strike down the Assyrian army of 185,000 (Isa. 37:36). So today, “the prayer of a righteous person has great power” (Ja. 5:16). Earlier still, when Joseph refused to offend the Lord by sinning with his master’s wife, for which he was thrown into Pharaoh’s dungeon under false accusation, God not only arranged for his release but used this dark trial to elevate Joseph to a place of high influence in the nation. Likewise, we should trust God to use our afflictions to reveal his grace and power. These and many other biblical examples have parallels in the affairs of God’s people today, great and small, and should fuel the fires of a bold and daring faith.

Recalling these examples and focusing his faith on God’s sovereign might, Jonathan resolved to make himself available for the Lord’s use. He was undoubtedly aware of the demoralization of their army and he set forth to see if the Lord could use him to change the situation. This is the kind of daring initiative that is so needed in the church. Jonathan combined personal initiative with trustful hope in the Lord’s blessing as he sought to advance the cause of the Lord and his people.

It is too easy, and too common, today for churches to do nothing in the face of great needs, waiting for increased staffing, improved funding, enlarged membership, and denominational approval. Like Saul under the pomegranate tree, such Christians will always find their challenges too daunting to encourage action. Better for Christians to act daringly, acknowledging the possibility – even the certainty – of failure should the Lord not help, but knowing that God is often pleased to bless bold initiative in faith.

William Carey launched a generation of missions with his message: “Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God.” Carey himself overcame great odds and official discouragement to launch the first successful mission to India. Likewise, William Wilberforce faced down the entrenched and moneyed political forces of England to stamp out the trading of slaves. George Muller considered the vast plight of orphans in 19th century England – an overwhelming problem – and by the power of prayer he succeeded in raising and educating over 23,000 orphans in a Christian environment. Today, it is because the Jonathan-like daring of God-trusting believers that Christians are answering the crisis of AIDS and orphans in Africa, responding to the epidemic of unwanted pregnancies in America, and delivering the gospel of God’s grace deep into Moslem lands at the risk of their lives.

Jonathan reminds us that Christians do not have to have the answers to prayers before us to act daringly in faith. All we truly need is a faith that believes that our God is able to triumph by many or by few,. It is by this faith that Christians have dared great things for God that and shaken the nations. By this same faith that all Christians should dare to live boldly for God, stand firmly for truth, and speak lovingly to our neighbors about the gospel and salvation. William Blaikie thus writes that “the true secret of all spiritual success lies in our seeking to be instruments in God’s hands, and in our lending ourselves to Him, to do in us and by us whatever is good in His sight.”⁴

FAITH TRIUMPHING

It is important that we realize that Jonathan was not claiming for himself some special place in God’s plan of salvation. Jonathan did not take up the mantle of a Gideon and place it on his own shoulders. Rather, he simply said, “It may be that the LORD will work for us” (1 Sam. 14:6). Jonathan was offering himself to the Lord, not demanding of the Lord. Such a faith will often attract followers, and Jonathan’s armor-bearer was eager to accompany him: “Do all that is in your heart. Do as you wish. Behold, I am with you heart and soul” (1 Sam. 14:7).

⁴ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 228.

As the two men approached the Philistine side of the wadi, Jonathan proposed a resolution: “Behold, we will cross over to the men, and we will show ourselves to them. If they say to us, 'Wait until we come to you,' then we will stand still in our place, and we will not go up to them. But if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up, for the LORD has given them into our hand. And this shall be the sign to us” (1 Sam. 14:8-10).

Does this indicate that Jonathan had some revelation from God, either in advance or as he was approaching the Philistines? There is nothing in the text to suggest that this is the case, although remembering Gideon’s fleece (Jud. 6:34-40), Jonathan may have been asking the Lord for a sign of his aid. Moreover, it is likely that Jonathan combined this request for a sign with some military savvy. If the Philistines were to allow Jonathan to come into their midst in the narrow and difficult path, then he might have a chance to deal with them one-by-one, in a place where numbers could yield little influence. Cromwell famously commanded his troops: “Trust the Lord, and keep your powder dry!” Likewise, Jonathan was looking to the Lord for help, but he anticipated that help to arrive in ways that would provide a practical advantage to his arms. An analogy for us today would be for us to ask in prayer for an opening to our ministry or our witness, being eager to see God’s hand in our early success and being ready to leap into the opportunities that God provides. Jonathan’s sign amounted to a prayer that the Lord would give him a military advantage, and by expecting God’s help he was ready to act boldly when it came.

In accordance with this plan, Jonathan and his armor-bearer “showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 14:11). Seeing these mere two Israelite soldiers, the haughty Philistines mocked them: “Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves” (1 Sam. 14:11). It was this very disgrace that Jonathan hoped to rectify with his bold attack. Sure enough, “the men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armor-bearer and said, ‘Come up to us, and we will show you a thing’” (1 Sam. 14:12). Why wouldn’t the Philistines jeer and mock the Israelites, who had shown nothing but cowardice? But Jonathan was elated – God had granted

his sign! To his comrade, he cried, “Come up after me, for the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel” (1 Sam. 14:12).

Picture Jonathan now, as he began his two-man assault on the Philistine heights. Having presented himself to the sentries, he now disappears from their sight as he began climbing “on his hands and feet” (1 Sam. 14:13) up the steep face. Meanwhile, the Philistines have returned to their affairs, not worrying about the threat of two men along this route of approach. But then Jonathan scales over the top of the crag named “Slippery”, and before the Philistines know what has hit them Jonathan assails them with his sword. One-by-one, the Israelite hero fells his enemies, with his armor-bearer coming behind to finish them off. Before long, there were “twenty men who would never teach a Hebrew another lesson.”⁵

So it is that the faith that dares often triumphs. Jonathan’s commando raid might be explained by entirely human factors: one well-trained and well-armed assailant comes by a difficult route, springs upon his enemies and gains an immediate advantage. Jonathan, of course, would have nothing of this view. His theological perspective was immediately reinforced by more dramatic help from the Lord: “And there was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and even the raiders trembled, the earth quaked, and it became a very great panic” (1 Sam. 14:15). Notice that Jonathan’s assault brought about a general panic among the Philistines. Notice, too, that God added the dramatic effects of an earthquake to spur the Philistines into “a very great panic.” Military history recalls many flank attacks that broke an army, but none of them were launched by a single man and his armor-bearer. This was God at work, with Jonathan as he had been with Gideon before, clouding the minds of Israel’s foes and driving them in panicked fear.

FAITH RALLYING

Jonathan’s faith gave him a daring boldness. That faith produced an important triumph for God’s people. Furthermore, Jonathan’s faith succeeded in rallying the flagging hearts of all Israel, so that the

⁵ Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*, 114.

nation was inspired to action. Faith dares, faith often triumphs, and faith rallies the people of God.

With this in mind, the scene returns to Saul's camp: "The watchmen of Saul in Gibeah of Benjamin looked, and behold, the multitude was dispersing here and there" (1 Sam. 14:16). These sentries had not been vigilant enough to notice Jonathan's departure, but the stampede of Philistines was too obvious for even them to miss. Saul responded by seeking out who was responsible: "Count and see who has gone from us" (1 Sam. 14:17). The muster revealed that Jonathan and his armor-bearer were gone.

At this point, we see yet another contrast between Saul and his son. Saul no doubt remembered the trouble he had gotten into previously when he did not follow the proper procedures for dealing with the Lord. He knew as well that Israel was not to advance into battle without divine confirmation through the high priest (Dt. 20:4-5). "So Saul said to Ahijah, 'Bring the ark of God here'" (1 Sam. 14:18). We can imagine Saul pacing, casting his eye first to the priest and then across the wadi where Jonathan was routing the Philistines. Finally, "while Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the camp of the Philistines increased more and more. So Saul said to the priest, 'Withdraw your hand'" (1 Sam. 14:19). God was not speaking to Saul and the priestly rituals were taking too long! By biblical standards, this interruption in divinely-ordained procedures provided one more proof of Saul's spiritual incompetence. Gordon Keddie puts his finger on the problem, writing: "Saul gives us the impression that he felt he was supposed to be 'religious' and observe certain conventions at the appropriate times, but really had not deep convictions of his own. He used religion, as opposed to living a personal faith in the Lord."⁶ What a contrast there is between Saul's religion and Jonathan's bold faith!

But even Saul's royal incompetence was not enough to stem the tide of victory for the Israelites that day. Saul's confidence was rallied by Jonathan's faith, so that the king sprang to action with all his forces (1 Sam. 14:20). Among the Philistines had been a number of

⁶ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 133.

Hebrews who previously had joined the enemy's host, but who now joined with Jonathan. Likewise, "when all the men of Israel who had hidden themselves in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too followed hard after them in the battle" (1 Sam. 14:21-22). What a victory faith had won for Jonathan! He had not only won over against the Philistines but had won the Israelites back to the cause of the Lord. How often it is the faith of just one man or woman that will rekindle the faith of others. Indeed, there can never be a shortage of bold, Jonathan-like examples of daring faith in the church, spurring God's people to act boldly in reliance on his might.

Most importantly, Jonathan's faith had brought the Lord's help. Here we see yet another parallel between Jonathan and Gideon. When Gideon's small force encircled the Midianite army, brandishing their torches and shouting on command, the Midianites fled in panic and even assailed one another in the confusion. Likewise, Gideon's God-empowered assault brought a self-destructive confusion upon the Philistines: "behold, every Philistine's sword was against his fellow, and there was very great confusion" (1 Sam. 14:20). The situation began with the dismal fact that in all Israel only Saul and Jonathan possessed swords. But while Saul kept his sword sheathed, Jonathan offered his sword in faith to the Lord. The Lord, in reply, was able to bring all the swords that Israel needed into the battle, even those that would be wielded by the Philistines against themselves. Truly, Jonathan's faith was proved true: "nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6).

ONE MAN WITH GOD

The passage concludes with the proper postscript: "So the LORD saved Israel that day," driving the enemy far away. While the praise rightly redounds to God alone – for who authored Jonathan's faith if not the Lord, who answered his prayer, and who used his otherwise suicidal assault to route a whole army – we nonetheless are invited to reflect upon the faith of young Jonathan. Do we believe, as he believed, that circumstances do not determine outcomes where God is involved? Do we believe in the possibility of God acting in our circumstances: opening doors for evangelism,

providing resources for ministry, offering his might to give success where otherwise would only be failure? If we believe these things then we will not sit in idle despondency as forces hostile to Christianity sweep our generation. We will play the part of Saul neither in his inaction nor in his pragmatic, unprincipled religion. Rather, if we are inspired by Jonathan's faith, we will do like Jonathan in offering ourselves to the Lord's service, stepping forward into the scene of action, praying for the Lord to give openings and strength, and leaping into the opportunities that the Lord provides, confident of his grace to empower our efforts.

A man who stood forth for the Lord in his generation was John Knox. An early adherent to the Reformation gospel in Scotland, Knox joined forces with the persecuted band of gospel preachers, narrowly escaping with his life. Exiled in Geneva, he grew strong in faith under the ministry of John Calvin, seeing firsthand the power of God to transform a whole society. Returning to his homeland, he boldly advanced the Reformation cause, both sending forth the gospel message and aggressively opposing the religious perversions that dominated in the land. Under his leadership, Scotland emerged from the darkness of medieval Roman Catholicism.

How did John Knox accomplish so much? His own answer was given in memorable words, recalling us to the earlier example of faithful Jonathan: Knox declared, "one man with God is always in the majority." So it was for Jonathan: one man, accompanied by only one comrade, but aided by the thunder of Almighty God, routed a vast host beset against his people.

What will God do today through single men and women who stand in the power of God for the cause of gospel truth and grace in our times? We will never know unless we, like Jonathan, step forward into the world, offering ourselves to God, believing that he can save with few just as well as with many, saying, "It may be that the Lord will work for us" (1 Sam. 14:6), as he has so often worked for his daring people before. Jonathan's example challenges us to be daring in giving and bold in our commitment to worldwide missions, church-planting, and other works of gospel growth. It speaks to our boldness in witness the gospel – as a church and as Christian individuals. It speaks boldly to our stand against the powers of sin and the advance of spiritual

darkness in our times. Let us not sit under the tree, despondent for evil. But let us go forth in faith, knowing that with God we will certainly be a majority, for if it is his gracious will, “nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6).