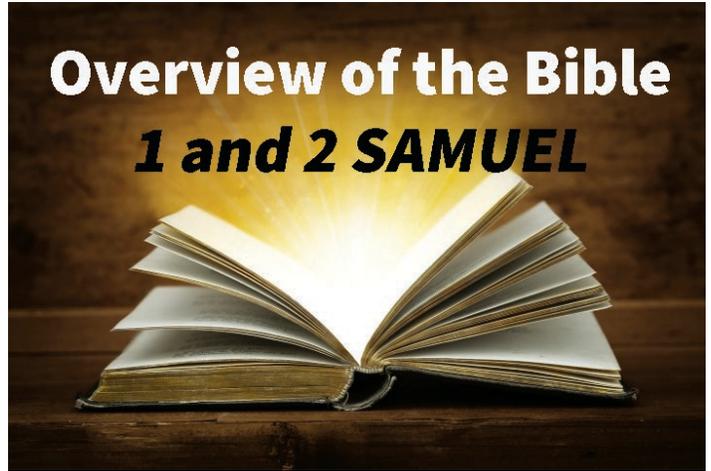


Overview of the Bible

1 and 2 SAMUEL



1 Samuel 13:16–14:23

JONATHAN'S FAITH IGNITES A VICTORY

Lesson 55

Big Idea *Faith in the Lord's great power can be the catalyst for his saving intervention.*

The Text in Context

After announcing the demise of Saul's dynasty, Samuel departs, leaving Saul alone with a mere six hundred troops to face the Philistine army (1 Sam. 13:15). The situation appears to be bleak, especially when the narrator informs us that the Israelite troops are ill equipped for battle due to a Philistine monopoly on iron (vv. 19–22). But sometimes crisis is the seedbed for heroism. Saul's son Jonathan, empowered by his faith in the Lord's ability to deliver his people, steps forward and ignites the battle (14:1–14). The Lord causes the Philistines to panic and gives Israel a great victory (vv. 15–23). While inspiring, the account is tragically ironic. Jonathan possesses unhesitating, courageous faith and would make a fine king for Israel, but we know from the preceding account that Saul has already forfeited his dynasty, and we suspect that Jonathan will never realize his full potential. Furthermore, Saul continues to display his flawed character (vv. 18–19), which quickly dilutes the victory and even jeopardizes his son's life (vv. 24–46), much like Jephthah has done (see Judg. 11). Despite his heroism and faith, Jonathan ends up being a mere literary foil for his father and never ascends to the role of a main character in the narrative or to the throne of Israel. Though he is superior to Saul in character, his destiny is linked with his father's, and they eventually die together on the battlefield (1 Sam. 31).

Archaeological excavations at Tel Qasile in Tel Aviv have uncovered a Philistine settlement dated to the Iron Age (twelfth to tenth century BC). Two clay smelting crucibles were found near the circular kiln, evidence of a bronze-casting workshop. This supports the observation in 1 Samuel 13:19–21 that the Philistines had established metalworking facilities during the time of Saul.

Interpretive Insights

13:16 *Saul and his son Jonathan.* The reference to Jonathan as Saul's son is ironic in light of the fact that the Lord has just rejected Saul's dynasty (vv. 13–14). Earlier in the chapter, Jonathan is mentioned twice (vv. 2–3) but not identified as Saul's son. The narrator waits to identify him as such until after Samuel's announcement, as if to draw attention to the tragic dimension of Saul's sin.

Jonathan has proved (v. 3) and will again prove (14:1–14) that he would make a worthy successor to his father, but sadly this will never be.

14:3 *Ahijah, who was wearing an ephod.* Jonathan prepares to ignite a battle against the Philistines (v. 1), but Saul remains inactive, apparently waiting for an oracle from God (v. 3 refers to the ephod). It is ironic that a priestly descendant of Eli is with Saul, for we have here a king whose dynasty is doomed (13:13–14) collaborating with a priest whose dynasty was doomed (2:30–36).

14:6 *Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf.* Jonathan respects the Lord's sovereign freedom, but he still takes the initiative to act, with the confidence that the Lord is capable of delivering with even a few. Saul panics when his troops are dwindling, but Jonathan has unwavering, contagious faith in the Lord's power (v. 7).

14:10 *that will be our sign.* The narrator's earlier description of both the Philistine army and Israel's response to it invites us to recall the Midianite crisis faced by Gideon (see the comments on 13:5–7). But unlike Gideon, who needs a sign to buttress his wavering faith before he engages the enemy (Judg. 7:13–14), Jonathan is eager to engage the enemy. His waiting for a sign reflects his desire not to be presumptuous (see v. 6), yet we can tell that Jonathan is just itching to spring into action. Furthermore, his choice of a sign reflects his faith: he assumes that God will be in this business even if the task seems impossible (vv. 8–10). From a human perspective, two men climbing up a cliff to fight with several soldiers waiting for them when they arrive at the top appears to be the height of foolishness, but Jonathan is assessing the situation from the perspective of faith.

Key Themes of 1 Samuel 13:16–14:23

- **In response to Jonathan's faith, the Lord once more demonstrates his ability to deliver Israel from their enemies.**
- **The Lord is an invincible warrior and can deliver by many or by a few.**

the LORD has given them into our hands. Jonathan uses a perfect verbal form, indicating completed action, to describe what the Lord *will* do. This rhetorical use of the verb highlights his certainty of victory because of his faith in God's power. It also echoes the battle cry of Ehud (Judg. 3:28), as well as Deborah's assuring word to Barak (Judg. 4:14) and Gideon's charge to his troops once he received assurance of victory (Judg. 7:15).

14:15 *It was a panic sent by God.* In the Hebrew text the noun translated "panic" occurs twice and its verbal root once. The repetition emphasizes the supernatural fear that the Lord sends upon the Philistines and also highlights the reversal that the Lord has produced. Before the battle, the Israelites are "quaking with fear," but when the Lord intervenes, the Philistines are overcome with terror. ("Quaking with fear" in 13:7 translates the verb *harad*, reused in 14:15 as a verb and in its noun form as "panic.")

14:16 *saw the army melting away.* Prior to this, the verb translated “melting away” appears only in Exodus 15:15 and Joshua 2:9, 24, where it describes the fear of the Canaanites at the news of the Lord’s great victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Its use here may emphasize the extent of the Lord’s victory, placing it in the category of the exodus event. (The depiction of the Philistine army is reminiscent of the description of Pharaoh’s army; see the comment on 13:5 above.)

14:18 *Bring the ark of God.* Saul’s hesitant inactivity contrasts with Jonathan’s aggressive attack. His preoccupation with what he perceives to be proper prebattle ritual causes an unnecessary delay. Saul’s behavior is true to form. Apparently, he feels the need to consult the Lord before attacking, even though it is obvious that the Lord is already at work (v. 16). As noted above (see 13:1–15, under “The Text in Context”), this account is literarily linked to 10:7–8. Saul is in the situation described by Samuel at the time of his commissioning and has had the opportunity to carry out Samuel’s earlier orders (10:7). Now his son Jonathan has already set in motion the attack envisioned by Samuel. Though ordinarily it is proper to consult the Lord, here it is unnecessary, for Saul already has his marching orders.

According to the Hebrew text, he asks for the ark to be brought, but it is more likely that we should read “ephod” here (with the LXX and Josephus). Unless it has been temporarily transported to the battle, the ark is in Kiriath Jearim, located about six miles to the west (see 1 Sam. 7:2), too far away to bring to Saul in time to launch an attack. It is more likely that Ahijah’s ephod, mentioned in verse 3, is in view here since an ephod is used to consult the divine will. The use of the verb “bring” supports this, for it appears with “ephod” as an object elsewhere (1 Sam. 23:9; 30:7).

The ephod was a special garment worn by the high priest. Exodus 28 gives some idea of how it might have looked, also noting that the breastplate that housed the Urim and Thummim was fastened to it. The Urim and Thummim were used to make inquiries of the Lord.

14:23 *on that day the LORD saved Israel.* The use of the verb “saved/rescued” (*yashaʿ*) may echo the exodus (cf. Exod. 14:30) and Gideon’s victory over the Midianites (Judg. 7:7), two events alluded to already in the account (see the comments on 13:5–7 above). It also recalls what the people ask Samuel to pray for (1 Sam. 7:8) and Jonathan’s assuring word to his armor-bearer before the battle (1 Sam. 14:6).

Theological Insights

With its allusions to earlier events in Israel’s history, especially the exodus and Gideon’s victory over the Midianites, this account demonstrates that the God of Moses and Gideon is still alive and well, fully capable of accomplishing great victories for his people. Like the Egyptians at the Red Sea, the Philistines come against Israel with chariots, but the Lord rescues his people. Like the Midianites in Gideon’s day, the Philistines are as numerous as the sand on the seashore, causing the Israelites to tremble in fear. But working in conjunction with Jonathan’s courageous act of faith, the Lord throws the Philistine army into a panic. This story, like many others in the Former Prophets before and after this, illustrates the point that the Lord does not need a powerful army to win battles and deliver his people. As Jonathan declares, he can save “by many or by few.” What is important is the presence of faith, which can serve as a catalyst for divine intervention. For the exiles, this account, like the

story of Saul's victory over the Ammonites, is yet another reminder that the Lord is fully capable of delivering them and making them secure, even when they feel weak and powerless before the foreign nations.

Teaching the Text

1. ***Faith in the Lord's great power can be the catalyst for his saving intervention.*** This account is related thematically to the stories of the Lord's victories recorded in chapters 7 and 11. Chapter 7 focuses on Israel's repentance as a prerequisite for divine intervention, while chapter 11 highlights divine enablement as the key to victory. In chapter 14 the narrator emphasizes Jonathan's faith as a catalyst for divine intervention. Like Ehud before him, he has unwavering faith that prompts him to courageously ignite a conflict with the enemy. Neither Ehud nor Jonathan is mentioned in Hebrews 11, but they too "through faith conquered kingdoms" (Heb. 11:33).

2. ***The Lord is an invincible warrior and can deliver by many or by a few.*** The Lord's ability as a mighty warrior has been affirmed and amply illustrated earlier in 1 Samuel (2:10; 7:10; 11:13; 12:11), but this account stresses his capacity to deliver even in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

SAUL DILUTES A VICTORY

Big Idea *A preoccupation with one's own honor can dilute divine blessing.*

The Text in Context

The preceding account ended with the Lord's giving Israel a great victory, despite Saul's hesitant actions. In this next story we see Saul continue to retard the action rather than advance it. This account highlights one of Saul's major weaknesses and leadership flaws—one that has already emerged in earlier accounts and will prove fatal in the next chapter. Saul is preoccupied, perhaps even obsessed, with religious formalism. Certainly, ritual and formalism have their place, and perhaps we can view Saul as simply naive. However, the narrator seems to view this tendency in a more negative light. Saul's preoccupation with worship does not result in his attacking the Philistine outpost (cf. 10:7–8 with 10:13–16) after the threefold sign has been fulfilled. Thus, his worship, something commendable when viewed in isolation, seems to replace military action: *instead* of beginning the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines, Saul goes up to the high place (apparently to worship). Later his concern for ritual prompts him to offer up sacrifices, rather than waiting for Samuel to arrive as he has been instructed (13:8–10). Here in chapter 14 his preoccupation with formalism first causes him to delay the attack against the Philistines as he seeks a divine oracle (14:18–19) and then leads to a series of rash oaths (vv. 24, 39, 44). As stated above, this account is literarily linked to 10:7–8. Saul now has the opportunity to carry out Samuel's earlier orders (10:7–8). In fact, his son Jonathan has set in motion the attack envisioned by Samuel. While ordinarily it is proper to consult the Lord, it is unnecessary to do so in this case: Saul already has his marching orders. To make matters even worse, the turmoil within the Israelite army allows the Philistines to escape and prevents Israel from winning a total victory (14:6). The report in verse 46 becomes

tragically ironic when we read shortly after this of the Philistines' mustering their troops to attack Israel yet again (17:1).

Historical and Cultural Background

It is uncertain how the lot casting (14:41–42) operates. However, if we reconstruct the original text on the basis of the Septuagint, we get a better idea of what may be happening. Verses 41–42 should read as follows (*italic words from LXX*):

Saul said to the LORD God of Israel: "*Why have you not answered your servant today? If this iniquity is in me or in Jonathan my son, O LORD God of Israel, give Urim. But if this iniquity is in your people Israel, give Thummim.*" And Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot, and the men were cleared. (v. 41)

Saul said: "Cast the lot between me and Jonathan my son! *Let him whom the LORD takes die!*" And though the soldiers said to him, "*Let it not be so,*" Saul prevailed upon them, and they cast lots between him and Jonathan his son. And Jonathan was taken. (v. 42)

Key Themes of 1 Samuel 14:24–52

- Saul's preoccupation with personal vengeance prevents Israel from winning a total victory and jeopardizes his own son's life.
- Saul's preoccupation with religious formalism, especially in the form of a rash oath, inhibits the work of God.

Interpretive Insights

14:24 *the Israelites were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath.* As translated by the NIV, "distress" refers to the army's fatigue due to the fact that Saul's oath deprives them of the nourishment and strength they need. However, the subject-fronted disjunctive clause at the beginning of verse 24 may signal a flashback to events before the battle. In this case Israel's distress is its fear of the Philistines (see 13:6). One could then translate verse 24b, "so Saul bound" (there is no causal connector "because" in the Hebrew text). In this case the distress is not the result of the oath, but the distress precipitates the oath. So, while Jonathan is igniting a battle with his heroic act of faith, Saul is playing mind games with his army and trying to frighten them into action through a self-serving curse. Perhaps he is even trying to draw God into battle rather than following God into battle (as Jonathan and later David do).

I have avenged myself on my enemies! The emphasis on personal vengeance (v. 24) is reminiscent of Samson (see Judg. 15:7; 16:28) but may also echo the actions of Gideon (8:4–21), Abimelek (9:31–50), and Jephthah (12:1–6). Saul's self-serving motivation stands in contrast to the perspectives of Jonathan (v. 10) and the narrator (v. 23), both of whom view this as the Lord's battle. The oath is the latest in a line of foolish vows and oaths (Josh. 9:15; Judg. 11:30–31; 21:1, 5, 18) and casts Saul in a very negative light.

14:29 *My father has made trouble.* The Hebrew word translated "made trouble" (*'akar*) is used to describe the effect of disobedient Achan's sin on Israel (Josh. 7:25; cf. 6:18). Jephthah also uses it in accusing his daughter of bringing trouble upon him when she greets him after his victory (Judg. 11:35). Both Jephthah and Saul make rash formal statements of personal obligation that affect their

children. In Jephthah's case, he accuses his daughter of troubling him and then offers her up as a whole burnt offering in fulfillment of his vow (v. 39; cf. vv. 30–31). In Saul's case, the situation is similar but plays out differently.

14:32 *and ate them, together with the blood.* The weary and hungry men butchered the animals on the ground and failed to drain the blood from the meat in accordance with the Mosaic law (see Lev. 19:26; Deut. 12:23–27; also Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11). When informed of this cultic violation, Saul accuses the men of violating the covenant, but it is his rash oath that has brought them to the point of such desperation.

14:37 *Will you give them into Israel's hand?* Saul's request is ironic in light of the fact that the Lord has already handed the Philistines over to Israel (vv. 10, 12).

But God did not answer him that day. The Lord's silence in response to Saul's inquiry foreshadows the final days of Saul's life, when the Lord will cut off all communication with him (1 Sam. 28:6, 15). The divine silence also contrasts Saul with Samuel, who receives a divine response before engaging the Philistines in battle (7:9), and with David, who receives an assuring oracle that the Lord will give the Philistines into his hand (23:4).

14:39 *he must die.* The original oath pronounces a curse on the violator (v. 24) but does not specifically mention execution or death. In verse 39 Saul may be expanding the oath to include death. Saul's willingness to sacrifice his own son casts him in the role of a new Jephthah and is entirely consistent with what has occurred in chapter 13, where Saul ruins his son's future (13:13–14).

14:45 *So the men rescued Jonathan.* The men's oath (see "as surely as the LORD lives") trumps Saul's oath (v. 39). They state that Jonathan has accomplished his exploits "with God's help": "He has worked with God this day" (AT). Their argument is reminiscent of Saul's after his victory over the Ammonites (cf. 11:13). But now Saul is ready to kill his own son for unknowingly violating Saul's rash oath. The deterioration in Saul's leadership capacity is striking.

Theological Insights

The narrator's pro-David/anti-Saul agenda begins to gain momentum: he depicts Saul as being preoccupied with religious formalism and his own interests. After his earlier victory over the Ammonites, Saul is very much aware that the Lord has rescued Israel (11:13). But he views this battle against the Philistines primarily as an opportunity for personal vengeance (14:24). Though the Lord has given the Philistines into Israel's hand (vv. 10, 12), Saul seems unaware of that fact (v. 37). In the end he tries to execute the hero of the day, prompting his entire army to oppose him (vv. 44–45). He hardly appears to be a quality leader. In fact, he resembles several of the judges. A preoccupation with one's own interests and with pursuing vengeance also plagues Gideon (Judg. 8:4–21), Jephthah (12:1–6), and Samson (see Judg. 15:7; 16:28), as well as the rogue anti judge Abimelech (9:31–50). Saul's foolish oath, like Jephthah's rash vow, demonstrates a woeful lack of

foresight and brings nothing but trouble in its wake. For the exiles, the lesson of this story is clear: Israel needs leaders who will pursue the Lord's work rather than their own agenda, as Saul does.

Teaching the Text

1. *God desires to bless his people, but they may dilute his blessing if they become preoccupied with their own honor.* By his hesitant, cautious behavior and his preoccupation with his own honor, Saul turns what could have been total victory into something far less. He allows the priest to divert him from completing the God-given victory (cf. vv. 15, 20, 23); he delays and tries to kill his own son, God's co-warrior (v. 45), and he allows the enemy to escape and fight another day (v. 46; cf. 17:1). Saul's obsession with personal honor dilutes the victory and brings nothing but trouble to Israel.

2. *God desires to bless his people, but they may inhibit his work if they become too preoccupied with religious formalism.* The story also warns its audience, whether ancient or modern, about the dangers of a preoccupation with religious formalism. For Saul, this takes the form of making rash oaths (1 Sam. 14:24, 39, 44), offering ill-advised sacrifices (vv. 34–35), and seeking unnecessary oracles (v. 37; cf. vv. 18–19). In any given modern culture, one needs to determine what might correspond to these actions. While seeking oracles and offering animal sacrifices are not a part of modern Christian religious expression, people today sometimes become paralyzed while waiting on the Lord or seeking the Lord's "will" when it is obvious what God is doing, and it is clear that they need to get involved in his work.¹

¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., [1 & 2 Samuel](#), ed. Mark L. Strauss, John H. Walton, and Rosalie de Rosset, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 92–97.