

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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1st Samuel Chapter 14

Jonathan's Victory

[NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

I was recently reading an article about the first two countries to defend the men's Football World Cup. The Italian team achieved this rare feat in the 1930s and their head coach was considered a visionary of football tactics, who was well ahead of his time. Despite their remarkable achievement, it is overshadowed by the link with fascism that surrounded the team. As such their achievement is not celebrated as much as the Brazilian team's same feat a few decades later. It was the Italian's association that took away some of the success of their achievement in their case.

Associations of different kinds can have a detrimental impact on achievements that may otherwise have been considered great. Sometimes this is due to a negative association as we have seen in the story I have related. Other times it is just because something is considered more entertaining or popular. An example of the latter is the legend of King Arthur versus the reality of King Alfred. The first is most probably a figure of myths and loosely based on someone who lived in that time. On the other hand, King Alfred the Great was a real person - king of part of England around the eighth century. Alfred was in many respects a very successful and useful king. But how many have heard of him? Their time frames were very similar, but King Arthur is certainly more known about than King Alfred, simply because he is more suitable for stories of heroes and other such things.

This may seem a strange start to our topic, but they came to mind when I first started looking at the chapter we are to consider. If we were to ask a Sunday school child about great victories where the odds were stacked against God's people, but, through God's help, they won a great victory, we would hear of David and Goliath, Samson, the crossing the Red Sea, or the battle of Jericho, to name a few. I wonder how many would come up with Jonathan's victory in chapter 14 of 1st Samuel?

The victory of Jonathan over the Philistines is a remarkable story, but it is rarely a subject of children's Bible story books or Christian ministry. Why would this be when God used Jonathan to win a great victory over the enemies of God's people? It cannot be doubted that God won the victory that day, not Jonathan. I would venture to suggest that it is a matter of association that is the problem. Were Jonathan's victory one of those we read of in the book of Judges it would probably be more widely enjoyed. But it is not the case. Jonathan's victory is associated with a rejected King of Israel – Saul's rash disobedience is on show even in the light of this great feat of God. Soon after chapter 14, Saul begins to decline more rapidly, and perhaps it is this that causes this story to be somewhat overlooked. It is good, however, that we can look at this story now and see some lessons that can be taken from it.

I will spend a bit of time today in giving a brief overview before looking at some of the key lessons that came to me whilst I was studying this chapter.

The Narrative – Jonathan’s Victory

Our scene follows on from Saul’s unlawful sacrifice at Gilgal in chapter 13. We see here in chapter 14 that Saul had brought the priest and the ephod with him. The Ark of the Covenant was also there as we learn later in the chapter. The description is a little strange in many respects. Everything is there that is required - the means of speaking with God to know what to do. The two armies are also present. Saul wants to appear zealous for the LORD, but does not appear eager to act or trust God to deliver him, so he waits.

Jonathan, along with his armour bearer, leaves the encampment to go and see the Philistine army. Those who remain do not know of Jonathan’s departure. We do not know exactly why Jonathan left alone. But perhaps there was the possibility that Jonathan, who had already shown his trust in God’s deliverance for Israel against their enemies, did not want his desire to see the Philistine garrison to be vetoed by his father. Saul had already shown a tendency to delay and hold back when action was required. Later chapters in First Samuel, as well as this one, show that Saul was also becoming more suspicious of any plans that were not his own, as well as those that may detract from his own successes.

We pick up the narrative at verse 6 of 1 Samuel chapter 14, which lays out the remarkable actions of Jonathan:

“Then Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armour, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will work for us. For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few.” So his armourbearer said to him, “Do all that is in your heart. Go then; here I am with you, according to your heart.” Then Jonathan said, “Very well, let us cross over to these men, and we will show ourselves to them. If they say thus to us, ‘Wait until we come to you,’ then we will stand still in our place and not go up to them. But if they say thus, ‘Come up to us,’ then we will go up. For the Lord has delivered them into our hand, and this will be a sign to us.” So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines. And the Philistines said, “Look, the Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden.” Then the men of the garrison called to Jonathan and his armourbearer, and said, “Come up to us, and we will show you something.” Jonathan said to his armourbearer, “Come up after me, for the Lord has delivered them into the hand of Israel.” And Jonathan climbed up on his hands and knees with his armourbearer after him; and they fell before Jonathan. And as he came after him, his armourbearer killed them. That first slaughter which Jonathan and his armourbearer made was about twenty men within about half an acre of land. And there was trembling in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and the raiders also trembled; and the earth quaked, so that it was a very great trembling. Now the watchmen of Saul in Gibeah of Benjamin looked, and there was the multitude, melting away; and they went here and there” (vv.6-16).

It is worth remembering that chapter 13 verse 22 states that only Saul and Jonathan had weapons; and there is nothing to suggest that the situation had changed much. Despite so few weapons being available, there were still more than enough there for God to use to give Israel a great victory.

As this was happening, we again see delay in the camp. In past battles as soon as it became clear that the enemy was beaten, the Israelites tended to rise up immediately knowing that it was God who was giving them the victory. But here, there is first some unnecessary effort to see who was missing. The Ark and priest are brought forward to enquire of God, but before they get any further, Saul decides to wait to see what will happen. After a while though, there is a general move by the Israelite army towards the battle; and as they progress, others who had previously deserted to the Philistines, turn to join them as they advance. Meanwhile it seems that Jonathan has stopped his efforts as the Philistines were busy destroying themselves. I surmise this is based upon the fact that Jonathan joins the Israelite army later in the chapter (verse 27) as it advances.

The Narrative – Saul’s Vow

If only our chapter ended at the first half of verse 23. But from this point on Saul’s desire is to take his part in the victory. Unfortunately his rash and foolish statement, aimed at an appearance of zeal for God, caused a downward spiral for the Israelites. Saul makes the vow in verse 24:

“And the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, “Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies.” So none of the people tasted food.”

Saul’s army is now greatly disadvantaged. He had watched the battle for too long, and joining late meant that the army was already fatigued. Now they were prevented from taking any of the goodness of the land. God had promised the nation a land flowing with milk and honey. Indeed it was, but Saul’s decision prevented them from benefiting from God’s provision for them.

The next problem then comes when Jonathan joins the others and unknowingly condemns himself by taking honey from the land and thereby falling under the curse of Saul’s vow. The one by whom God had won the victory had now become condemned to death because of one rash comment. How much it reminds us of the folly of Jephthah’s tragic vow in Judges chapter 11. In that case one man lost his daughter due to his rash statement and was devastated by his own foolishness. There are some who have suggested that Saul in his burgeoning jealousy perhaps had hoped that this might be the actual outcome, but we shall never know. Jonathan though is not shy in stating how plain stupid the vow had been.

Then in verses 30 to 33, we have an awful scene where the people, faint from the battle and not allowed to have sustenance, now fall upon the spoil and in desperation eat whatever they can get their hands on. In following the rash vow of Saul, they have now been driven to outright sin and breaking one of the very key laws that God had laid down for them. The sin is so great that even Saul acknowledges that they are sinning and begins his attempts to rectify the situation.

At this point the victory God had given the Israelites is prematurely over. There could be no more pursuit of the enemy because the sin that had overtaken them had to be dealt with and God’s mind had to be sought. Saul is still acting hesitantly, not knowing exactly what to do and it is the priest who suggests that God be enquired of. Before long, the truth of Jonathan’s breaking of Saul’s vow is revealed but the people do not support the notion of Jonathan being put to death as they recognised his part in the victory that had been won. Jonathan is ransomed by the people and the two armies go their separate ways.

The narrative of the chapter ends with a brief overview of Saul’s ongoing battles with the Philistines as well as a number of other enemies of God’s people. There is also a short statement about Saul’s family.

Narrative Lessons – God’s Strength, not ours

There are lots of points that could be made about this remarkable chapter. Although there are many lessons to learn about Saul’s conduct, much of it stems from other chapters. From chapter 14, I will focus on one of the more particularly helpful aspects, which is God’s deliverance and victory in the most incredible of circumstances. Jonathan sometimes gets a bad press because he did not leave his father and join with David’s men. Because of this there is a suggestion that he had a weak faith. But if we go down that line of thought, we may well start to think that David himself had even weaker faith. Men of God do make mistakes or do not always act in ways we would expect. But the principle of what makes a man of God is based upon their faith in God. In our chapter there is no doubting that Jonathan demonstrated this characteristic in his actions.

From a military strategy point-of-view, Jonathan’s thought of a few defeating many is not really very sensible. Certain circumstances have to be met to even have a chance. The idea of just openly going out to battle is just outlandish, and not a wise military strategy. But Jonathan is clear as to who is really behind the battle, and therefore he is confident of the outcome. His confidence is not based upon Israel’s past experience though. Their last battles of that nature had been many generations ago; and recent events had proved to be unsuccessful as we see from earlier chapters of 1 Samuel. It seems though that Jonathan was using his knowledge of the word of God itself as his basis. Perhaps at some point Samuel himself had read Leviticus 26:8 or Joshua 23:10 to Jonathan. It appears that Jonathan put his trust in the Word of God, and relied upon the fact that God does what He says He will do.

However, what is good about the whole attitude of Jonathan is that he made himself available for God. He approaches the army of the Philistines with an eagerness to view the enemies of God. Once there, Jonathan makes himself available to be used by God. The circumstances do not deter him, as he is trusting in God for the victory. But Jonathan does not pursue his own plans and hope God backs them up. He still waits for God’s guidance and direction; and God is able to use this for His own glory and victory. Jonathan did not hesitate to act when God’s direction is given.

We are unlikely to be called to battle in the same way that Jonathan did, but the principles Jonathan displays can still be applied in our walk with God:

1. He made himself available to be used by God.
2. He waited for the guidance of God before acting.
3. He acted only when the guidance was given.

When we think of Romans 12 verse 1, that we are to present ourselves as living sacrifices, such a course of action is a good way to achieve this. I think my second point is particularly important for us today, as it is something that many of us struggle with. Our tendency is to decide what we want to do and then hope that God will validate our decision. Jonathan did not do this in our story today. Jonathan’s victory is the title of our talk, but spiritual battles are only won through His strength, not ours. How can it be claimed as God’s victory in our lives if all we want Him to do is validate our own ideas and plans? God would be simply acting as a Benefactor in such circumstances. If we want God to have the glory and we the victory in our lives, we must allow Him to guide our path for us.

Narrative Lessons – Folly of vows

This leads us nicely into another key lesson from our chapter, learning from Saul’s rash vow. The Old Testament does not say one shouldn’t make a vow, but it is very clear about the fact that it must not be taken lightly. But for the most part they are to be made by an individual. There is no precedent for making a vow on behalf of others. It is usually a vow for an individual to perform some task. By the time we get to the New Testament, we have the instruction from the Lord Jesus

in Matthew chapter 5, verses 33 & 37, where the Lord says that you should be trustworthy and just do that which you mean to do rather than make vows. This principle is naturally better and therefore we should not take our lead from the Old Testament examples of vows.

What we can certainly do though, is look at the poor mindset of Saul in this instance. The vow was symptomatic of a man who was eager to have all the success for himself. Its place in our narrative is completely unnecessary as the battle was clearly already won and the Israelites were just to pursue the routed enemy. But Saul wanted to have his part of the glory. His words in verse 24, “before I have taken vengeance on my enemies” help us to see this. Vengeance in the Bible is usually attributed to God. The well-known verse in Romans 12 verse 19 states that vengeance is God’s work and not ours. Saul had no remit to make such a statement. Then we have the thought of the Philistines being his enemies. In both statements we see that Saul has given himself the place of God, both in how people are considered, and in his ability to meet out punishment on them. No part in what Saul does or says acknowledges God and His rightful place. It is all about Saul. By putting himself first instead of God he leads the nation to an even graver sin and confers judgement upon Jonathan.

Finally, on this point we see that he has no understanding about who God really is. Even Jonathan realised the error that Saul has made. The people realise the folly of it in verse 45 and refuse to allow Jonathan to suffer death for not sticking to Saul’s vow. But what about Saul? As I see it, he never accepts he is to blame, nor admits to taking the wrong path and not putting God first. Saul goes from dithering to blunder and there is no sense of his own error. We could look to David who was a man after God’s own heart. He was not perfect but when he made an error, he accepted it and acknowledged his guilt and failure before God. He sought God’s forgiveness and kindness again. However, Saul doesn’t really seem to care! Everything seems a façade with an effort to not look bad, looking to be the centre of attention.

We are all capable of doing this and we should look at this example to see what can go wrong if we undertake such a stance as this in our lives. Let us put God first and make ourselves available to Him rather than look to put ourselves front and centre.

Narrative Lessons – A Numbers Game?

There is just one more point that I was drawn to as I was looking through the chapter, and that was to do with those who joined with the Israelites as they began to advance on the Philistines. I found this a very interesting event. Prior to all of this, there had been many who had hidden themselves or had deserted Israel. Upon seeing the outcome of the battle, they suddenly turn up again on Israel’s side. It is not the returning of people who had fled that I find an issue. It was the unreserved welcome they had upon their return.

If we think of other battles from times of Judges, there are occasions where many of the men who had come forward were sent home. Sometimes it was even said that any who were afraid should return. God only wanted people who were whole heartedly ready for the battle to fight for him. In this case the victory had already been achieved by two men. There was no need for these others to join the battle. But there was no question about whether they should join in. Were these people of the right mindset for these things? Were they the right calibre of person? Saul seems more than happy for them to join up again. It shows to me a lack of conviction that God is able to win the victory and also it is playing a numbers game. Saul wanted as many as possible to join them to win the battle by human means. In essence he was prepared to sacrifice the integrity of his army by adding those who had abandoned and rejected those who had remained, all in the hope that it would guarantee him a positive result.

We can be a bit like this in our own lives. If we think about salvation, we see that everything has been provided for us. The Lord Jesus came into the world to die for us thus giving us free access

to God through his blood. He has already won the victory and has provided all that we need, we can therefore fully rely on Him for all our needs. But we still plan and determine things according to our own agenda. How often we worry about numbers? Does my local church have enough of this group or that type of people? Does it provide this, that and the other? People sometimes compromise on what is taught or what is scriptural because they like the fact that there are more people at a particular place. Or perhaps we gauge a work that we are involved in based on those who are supporting it or the number of people who show an interest? Christianity is not a numbers game. If we try to make it so, we are using things other than God himself to measure our success. We should try to, like Jonathan, make ourselves available to God and let Him use us to fulfil His plans and for His glory. If we use the things of the world as our marker, we are more likely to fail as Saul did in our chapter.

Conclusion

Our chapter is about a victory that God worked completely against the odds, and a victory lost when people tried to do it on their own. But let us remember the example of Jonathan - to make ourselves available to God and to trust Him to guide us to work for Him in our lives.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Jonathan's Victory, 1 Samuel Chapter 14, talk number T1315 in our Samuel to King David series.

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