

Saul's Reign: *Strike 2!*

1 Samuel 14:1-23

¹ 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." But he did not tell his father. ² 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, ³ 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. And the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. ⁴ Within the passes, by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistine garrison, 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. ⁵ The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba. ⁶ 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." (ESV)

I can't give you the whole background of the Book of Samuel, but you need some of it in order to ease into what we're talking about this week. Remember last week I promised you that I was going to give you the best election coverage ever. Here. And I wasn't talking about American politics, but in fact Israel's king. You see, the Book of Judges, the historical context for the book that we're talking about now, had basically one consistent theme, and that theme was that Israel needs a king. The very last line of the Book of Judges says, "Now Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The Book of Samuel picks up on that theme. Israel needs a king, but it adds a little nuance. The nuance is just this—that Israel needs not just a king, but they need a very specific kind of king. They need a king like David. And so as we work through this book, what the book is going to do is give us reasons why David or someone from David's line ought to be Israel's king and conversely, why Saul should not be Israel's king. Remember, Saul was the first king of Israel, and really, in chapter 12, that's where we ended last fall about this time. We ended in chapter 12, and that's where Samuel turned things over to Saul, and basically handing over the reigns of Israel's leadership to him.

Last week we saw that basically on Saul's first day on the job he lost everything. Right? He blew it completely and in chapters 13, 14, and 15 what the author of this book is really doing is giving us three different episodes in the life of Saul that make the case for why he should not be the king of Israel. Thus, strike one, strike two, next week strike 2-1/2 and the week after, strike 3. We are going to see why Saul should not be Israel's king. One of the things we saw was last week's sermon in the text of chapter 13. Basically Saul was supposed to provoke the Philistines with whom Israel was at war. Then afterward he was supposed to wait seven days for Samuel to come and offer a sacrifice and give him instruction. Well, Saul sort-of provoked the Philistines. His son Jonathan actually did. Saul took credit for it and then Saul did the right thing—initially He waited for seven days and one minute. In other words he was supposed to wait for Samuel the prophet to come for seven days, and at seven days and one minute Saul decided he needed to do something else. He waited long enough and he needed to take some action. You remember the reason he needed to take the action was because once the Philistines were provoked, Saul and Jonathan only had three battalions, if you will, of infantrymen. And the Philistine response to their provocation was to respond with thirty units of chariots, six units of cavalry, and more foot soldiers than could be numbered. It says they were like "the sand of the seashore." So Israel now was in trouble. In fact they were in so much trouble that as soon as that happened, remember it says that all Israel hid. Some hid in rocks, some hid in crags, some hid in holes in the ground, some hid in cisterns, some hid, you know, behind the barn. Wherever they could hide, they hid. And when they were out of hiding spots, whoever was left over ran. They took off and Saul was left with 600 people. He was supposed to wait for Samuel the prophet to give him instruction. He doesn't. He waits seven days like he's supposed to, and as soon as Samuel's a little bit late, he offers these burnt offerings that he's not supposed to do.

This is the kind of thing that makes me identify with Saul. When I was in high school, everything I did wrong I got caught for. Everything. So Saul offers this sacrifice that he's not supposed to offer, and before the smoke is not even finished billowing up, Samuel shows up. Saul's busted. Samuel said, "What are you doing? In Saul's answer to Samuel we see a snapshot of Saul's character, but also we see where things are going to be going for the rest of this book, at least as far as Saul is concerned. Saul knew he was doing wrong by offering these sacrifices, and yet what we saw Saul do was make excuses or give explanations for his sin instead of owning his sin. In other words he wasn't willing to own up to the fact that, "You know what? I messed up." Instead he

made all these different excuses for what he did. Samuel's response to Saul was, "You foolish man. You've lost the kingdom. If you had obeyed, the kingdom would have continued along your line forever, but since you disobeyed, the kingdom is no longer going to be in your hands, and one of your sons is not always going to sit on the throne. In fact you are rejected as king over Israel."

Now he's rejected by God but he's still got a job to do. He's sort of a lame duck king now. What we didn't talk about last week but leads into this week is where we are now. Basically we're going to look at three things this morning. We're going to look first at just the context. After we look at the context, we're going to look at the wisdom of faith and the folly of grace.

What's the context here? Why are things so bad here, or are they bad? One thing we didn't talk about last week but is important to know this week is after Samuel came and told Saul, "You lost the kingdom," he just left. He left. He didn't give him any instruction. He didn't tell him what to do. In other words he didn't say, "You've lost the kingdom but since I'm here I'm going to go ahead and tell you how to fight this battle." He tells him, "You lost the kingdom" and then Samuel just disappears. He leaves him. There's something else that makes it seem quite hopeless for Israel. Now, Samuel has left. He's gone so there's no priestly direction. At the end of chapter 13 which I didn't look at there's some editorial comments, if you will, that are very important as well. If you have a Bible, in chapter 13 verse 19, there's this comment.

¹⁹ Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears."²⁰ But every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, or his sickle. (ESV)

In other words, the Philistines of the ancient Near East had mastered metallurgy, and they had mastered iron. And so Israel's not only outnumbered about ten to one, and that's with chariots and horses and soldiers as far as you could see, but has vastly inferior weapons. You see part of the Philistine oppression (remember they were oppressing Israel): they would not let Israel have iron or iron weapons because they didn't want them to rise up and use them against them. And so not only are the Philistines outnumbering Israel by an infinite number it seems, but the Philistines also have iron weapons and the Israelites have none. They have plowshares, if you will. So it's pretty bad. An innumerable foe, superior weapons, could things get worse? The answer: of course they can. They can always get worse. You see as you look at chapter 14 you basically see three things that are part of the context. You see the plan. Jonathan is going to have to plan. You see the players and you see the place. So in this context, the Philistines are domination. Look at verse 1 of chapter 14. It says,

¹ 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." But he did not tell his father. ² 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, ³ including Ahijah the son of Ahitub . . .

So the plan is just this. Jonathan says to his armor-bearer, "Let's go to the Philistine garrison." If you think about it that's really not much of a plan. But that's the plan. You got one guy and his armor bearer. He says, "Let's go confront the Philistines."

What you see in the first few verses here is a drastic contrast between Jonathan and Saul. You see Jonathan is a fairly new player. He's introduced to us in this chapter, and Jonathan and Saul could not be any different. You know the old cliché where they say, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." You read this and it's very clear Jonathan didn't even come from the same tree it seems, as Saul. He's completely different. Jonathan (we're going to see this over and over), is a man of faith and is a man of action on one hand. On the other hand Saul, his father, is a man of folly and he's a man of reaction. Saul is a man of folly and he's a man of reaction. So you have Jonathan who is here and then you have Saul. Jonathan's important for another reason, because remember we're making the case that David ought to be king, and imagine a scenario like this. If you saw the Democratic National Convention, I forget which night it was, but there was this really sweet scene where Barack Obama was on the big screen monitor and his young daughters were speaking to him. And as they spoke to him it was as if there were not 25 million people looking. They were just talking to their daddy. The youngest one seemed very precocious. She said, "Where are you, Daddy?" And he said, "I'm in St. Louis" and they're going back and forth. And imagine the horror if he said, "Good night, honey, I love you" and she had responded and said, "Good night

Daddy. Go McCain!" Would that be horrifying, or what? Or imagine if John McCain's children came onto a news show and they said, "You know what, my father's the most honorable man I've ever met in my life. He's the most faithful patriot I've ever met in my life. In spite of that, I'm voting for Barack Obama." Would that be a field day in the news? Would not that be horrifying? The reason Jonathan is so important to the Book of Samuel is because Jonathan is Saul's son and yet Jonathan, the son of one candidate (for lack of a better word) endorses the opponent. Jonathan is going to endorse David as king. That's important because as you look at Jonathan's actions, there actually a foreshadowing of David's action, and Jonathan's words are a foreshadowing of David's words.

There's something worse here in this particular passage that we see about Saul. Jonathan is this man of action. He's getting ready to go, but notice who is accompanying Saul. Jonathan is ready to take action. Saul on the other hand is sitting. He's holding royal court. He's living in the pomegranate cave. Probably a better translation is that he was sitting under the pomegranate tree, which is what kings would do when they were holding royal court. And, he's got with him in that royal court the 600 men who were left, and he's got an advisor, a priest, and when Israel might have read this to begin with, they would have shuddered because did you notice who his priestly advisor is now that Samuel is gone? Let me read it to you. It says,

² . . . *The people who were with him were about six hundred men,* ³ *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. And the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. (ESV)*

So if you're in Israel and your thinking is hopeless now because the Philistine numbers are immeasurable, their weapons are superior, and you've got a king who is rejected by God, could it get any worse than that? Of course it could. You see, because not only do you have a rejected king, but the king is being counseled by a rejected priest. Ahijah is the great-great-grandson of Eli, and the author goes at length to let us know that. Remember the first eight chapters of this book were basically about Eli and his wicked sons, one of whom was Phinehas. The sons were so wicked that Eli's household was rejected from the priesthood forever. In fact they were so wicked they were one of the reasons Israel asked for a king because they couldn't abide by his wicked sons ruling over them any more. So what the author wants us to know is here you have a rejected king who is being counseled by the rejected priestly household. Could it get any worse? Yeah, a little bit. We're setting the context. You have a rejected king, a rejected priest, an innumerable Philistine army, and then the last little bit here before Jonathan goes up. It says,

⁴ *Within the passes, by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistine garrison, 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.*

Jonathan hatches this plan, "We're going to go and check out the Philistine garrison." But in Jonathan's way, there's an obstacle to his plan, and basically it's a wadi. If you don't know what a wadi is, it's sort of a small valley with maybe a creek going through it. On each side there were rocky crags. Where it says, "the one's name was Bozez" that means something like slippery, and on the other side, "Seneh" means something like thorny. In other words, as far as Jonathan was concerned, actually carrying out this plan of just going over and checking out the Philistines was nearly impossible. It was hopeless. So the question arises in your mind and in context of completely and utterly hopeless situations, is there any hope? Is there? You have to ask yourself. The only hope would be if maybe there's one faithful man that can act on your behalf, who could actually carry things out on your behalf. Then you might have some hope. But it all depends on God, doesn't it? It depends on if there is God, but also if He's willing to act. And that's where we go next, when we begin to look at the wisdom of faith, when we look at what Jonathan does. So let's look next at the wisdom of faith, starting in verse 6.

⁶ *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." (ESV)*

So Jonathan is getting ready to take action against the Philistines by himself. But his actions are based on something he believes about the character of God. Jonathan believes something about God that both enables him and empowers him to actually carry out what would by all measures a crackpot scheme. And what is it that

Jonathan believes about God that enables him to even consider something crazy like this? The answer is in verse 6. The answer is that God can save by many or God can save by few. In other words, even in the midst of the most hopeless situation, in the midst of the most despairing situation where there is no way out, God has the ability to save. He can save if he wants to, and he can save by many, or he can save by few. Jonathan believes that. And really Jonathan's words almost harken back, if you look back to the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 20, where God says to Israel, "When you get into the land and when you confront your enemies, do not be afraid of them because I will deliver you. I delivered you from the land of Egypt." So Jonathan knows that God can deliver whenever and wherever He wants, and He can deliver anyone out of any situation. On the other hand, Jonathan is also humble because he doesn't say, "God has to deliver us by many or by few. If we just do the right thing, if we're just religious enough, God will be constrained to do something for us." You see this over and over again in the life of Saul, and you saw it in the life of Israel and Eli and all these others, that whenever they got in trouble, they thought if we just bring the Ark to the front then that will make God have to deliver us, or if we just be religious, God will have to act. Jonathan knows that God is not constrained by our religion. So Jonathan says, "He can save by many or by few" but just prior to that how does he put it? He says, "Perhaps." Or, "Maybe" that he will deliver us. In other words I know He can deliver us, and maybe He will. Jonathan is not saying that God has to because he did something, but there is also something else. Jonathan not only believes that God can deliver and he believes that he may or may not deliver, but Jonathan also knows something else. He knows that the only way he is going to be able to know for sure whether God will or God won't, is that he is going to have to take some action on His behalf. In other words, notice what he says. He says,

⁶ . . . "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." (ESV)

In other words, you can't know God's faithfulness. You can't know whether God will save out of a hopeless situation unless you actually put faith in Him and take some action. You see, Jonathan is taking the most incredible, crazy risk here, it would seem, but if you listen to Jonathan, does it sound like it's a risk to him at all? Does he sound like he's jittery? Does he say, "I don't know about this plan. I heard this stuff about God." He says, "God can deliver if He wants to. The only way we'll know is if we go out." And there's something to be said there about risk.

You know, before Judy and I moved to Seattle, we were in Atlanta at a church called Intown Community Church, which was part of a ministry called Perimeter Ministries. And 30 or 35 years ago a guy moved to Atlanta, Georgia, named Randy Pope with this motto. He's going to plant one church and his motto was, "Attempt something so great for God that it is doomed to fail unless God be in it." Attempt something so great for God that it is doomed to fail unless God be in it. And now, 30 years later, there are 23 more churches in the Atlanta area that they have planted. They have six or seven church planters in residence ready to go and also they send people to places like Seattle, maybe, and all through the rest of the world. I talk to the Session oftentimes, or elders, about BHAGS—Big Hairy Audacious Goals. But the only way we can have a Big Hairy Audacious Goal is if you believe that God is the only one who can do it. And so I just say that besides the fact that you hired me, we don't tend to be a very risky congregation. I'm going to throw you a bone and say, "With me you took a big one." But outside of that, we don't tend to take risk very much. We're certainly faithful, the question is are we thinking big? Are we saying, "We're going to do this, we're going to do that, we're going to plant churches, we're going to do things that are so big that unless God's in them they're doomed to fail." That's what Jonathan is doing right here. He's saying, "There's absolutely no hope in the world unless God is in this, and the only way we're going to know if God's in it is if we step out and challenge the Philistines." And so he comes up with this test. Part of the reason I had to cut this sermon in half is that there's so much here. I could probably have cut it in quarters. As far as Jonathan is concerned, the authors want you to think of Gideon. And of Saul, he wants you to think of Jephtha (if you're familiar with the Book of Judges). So Jonathan comes up with this test and he basically says that, "We're going to step out and show ourselves to the Philistines, and if they say, "Hey, wait right there. We're going to come over to you," we're going to know that God is not in it. But if we step out and they say, "Hey, you come over to us," the Lord has delivered them into our hands. He doesn't say the Lord will at that point. He knows that once he's moved, the Lord has done it. It's a done deal. Notice what happens. I'll start in verse 10. He's talking to his armor-bearer.

¹⁰ 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. " ¹¹ So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines. And the Philistines

said, "Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves." ¹² And the men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armor-bearer and said, "Come up to us, and we will show you a thing." And Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, "Come up after me, for the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel." ¹³ Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, and his armor-bearer after him. And they fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer killed them after him. ¹⁴ And that first strike, which Jonathan and his armor-bearer made, killed about twenty men within as it were half a furrow's length in an acre of land. ¹⁵ 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. (ESV)

So Jonathan lays out his test. He steps up to the Philistines. The author also wants us to think of David and Goliath here. Because Jonathan shows himself and the Philistines immediately begin to mock. They say, "Hey look. The Israelites that were hiding in holes have shown themselves." And they say, "Come up here so we can teach you a lesson." Little did they know Jonathan is now looking at his armor-bearer and saying, "It's a 'Go,' boy." I mean like, "We're on!" And then Jonathan goes. If you read closely it says they crawled up on their hands and feet, so it wasn't an easy task. So, by the time Jonathan had crossed these crags, crawled up on his hands and feet, he would have been exhausted, humanly speaking. Yet when they get to the top of the hill, they decimate this outpost of Philistines, killing 20 of them. In the process of killing 20 of them, God adds a little bit of theatrics, which is pretty cool, right? He causes the earth to quake. There's an earthquake. And now because of what Jonathan has done, because of one man's faithfulness, God has acted and the earth is quaking and there's mayhem and chaos in the camp of the Philistines. It's exciting, and all of a sudden you go from Jonathan who has just defeated all these Philistines to Saul. What's he doing? Sitting there. When you look at what God does with Jonathan, you see the wisdom of faith. With Saul you see the folly of grace because notice what happens with Saul, verse 16.

¹⁶ And the watchmen of Saul in Gibeah of Benjamin looked, and behold, the multitude was dispersing here and there. ¹⁷ Then Saul said to the people who were with him, "Count and see who has gone from us." And when they had counted, behold, Jonathan and his armor-bearer were not there. ¹⁸ So Saul said to Ahijah, "Bring the ark of God here." For the ark of God went at that time with the people of Israel. ¹⁹ Now 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."

So Saul, again a man of reaction, is sitting there. The watchmen see the Philistine camp is in chaos, they come and tell Saul, and the first thing he does is want to know who caused that. "Tell me who's gone?" They tell him it's Jonathan and his armor-bearer, and initially Saul does the right thing. Initially. But in two verses you see who Saul is pretty clearly. You see the same chapter in Deuteronomy that says, "Don't be afraid of those who are in the land for I have given them into your hand." It also says, "Before the army goes into battle you should consult with the Lord and you should receive the priestly address. And so Saul initially—as soon as he hears this—he says, "Bring the Ark of God here." We're going okay now, Saul. So he brings the Ark of God here. He does the religious thing, but we know it's not the thing of faith because as soon as the Ark comes, we don't know what the priest had been doing, but now he's preparing. And as he's preparing, Saul looks across and sees that the tumult in the Philistine camp is rising. Things are getting more and more grave, so instead of doing the right thing (consulting God), which may have taken a few more minutes, he tells the priest, "Withdraw your hand. We don't have time to consult with God right now. We don't have time for Him." Basically Saul did the right thing because it was the religious thing to do. I mean that's what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to bring the Ark and do the whole thing, and then you go into battle, and Saul was not even patient enough to do that. And what that tells us is that Saul's relationship with God was one based on religion and not one based on faith. When you look at Jonathan you see someone who acts by faith and someone who says, "You know, the Lord might do it or might not do it." And when you look at Saul you see someone you says, "I did this. Why aren't you answering me?" We're going to find later on in this chapter, he prays. He does actually inquire of God, and when God doesn't immediately answer, Saul gets angry and takes things into his own hands again. In other words, that's a great thing to ask yourself in the midst of trials and troubles and turmoils. Maybe you consider yourself a pretty faithful person, and when things start to get a little hard, do you immediately grab the reins again or do you trust in Jesus? I can't answer that for you. But as we go through this story what happens is that basically Saul comes and they rout the Philistines and the Philistines are thrown into confusion. We find out a little bit more information here in that some of the Israelites that fled had apparently joined up with the Philistines, and now those Israelites are fighting the Philistines, those who had hid in holes are fighting the

Philistines, and then the culmination of this chapter is what? So, on that day, Saul the great and powerful, Saul the faithful, delivered Israel from her foe. Is that the verdict or the end of this story? Absolutely not. Notice how the story ends. It says in verse 23,

²³ *So the Lord saved Israel that day . . .*

The Lord saved Israel, not Saul. That's where you start to see the folly of grace. The folly of grace is seen in two ways. Part of the folly of grace is just this. Ask yourself the question, "Is the Lord able to save from the deepest despair and out of the midst of the most utter hopelessness by just the actions of one man?" Humanly speaking, that's foolish isn't it? And yet when you consider the gospel of Jesus and you consider the hopelessness of your heart and the hopelessness of your soul whether you're a Christian or not, God has done just that. He has saved you through the actions of one faithful man. Jesus. And Paul would say in I Corinthians and other places, "And that to the world's eyes is foolish – that is just folly." And yet the gospel says that that is your only hope in life, your only comfort in life. But there's another aspect of the folly of grace, and it's just this. It's that God can make a straight blow with a crooked stick. I'll say that again. God can make a straight blow with a crooked stick. And by that, He can use even Saul to achieve His victories. And that should encourage you because if you're like me and you read a text like this . . . I'm going to be honest with you. I identify oftentimes a lot more with Saul than I do with Jonathan. I'm religious in starts and fits. I'm faithful in fits and starts. I'm in and I'm out, and sometimes I really believe and other times I'm not sure, and most of the time I'm just trying to hold on myself. And yet the beauty of the gospel is that God's willing to use even someone like me. And He's willing to use even someone like you. Have you ever felt like you were the worst parent in the world? (I never have; I'm asking you.) Or that you didn't know what you were doing at your job and you're in over your head in all these different areas and with health and with money and everything else? The folly of the gospel is that God can use us even in the midst of those situations. The more we become like that one faithful man who actually delivered us to begin with: Jesus himself. So think about that.