

Saul's Reign: Strike 2 1/2!

1 Samuel 14:23-46

²³ So the Lord saved Israel that day. And the battle passed beyond Beth-aven. ²⁴ And the men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies." So none of the people had tasted food. ²⁵ Now when all the people came to the forest, behold, there was honey on the ground. ²⁶ And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping, but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath. ²⁷ But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath, so he put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes became bright. (ESV)

When I started this series a few weeks ago I promised you that you'd get the best election coverage ever. You are getting the best election coverage ever, not because of me, but because it's here in the Bible. Of course I'm not talking about the election of a Republican or Democrat, but the election or selection by God of Israel's king. So by way of background, what is this all about? Remember that Israel was formed when God originally called them out into basically twelve tribes. Thirteen if you consider that the last one was split into two half tribes, but let's just go with twelve for right now. As time went on, eventually they were sent into exile into Babylon in about 550 B.C. Israel had gotten to the point where they had—I'm going to call it for the lack of a better term—"a two party system." After they were exiled into Babylon because of their sin, when they came back to Israel they needed to decide, "We need a king again. Someone needs to take over. Who is it going to be?" There are basically two arguments. One argument was, "We need a king like the Benjamites because it was a Davidic king who got us into trouble in the first place." The other side of the argument was, "No, we still need a king like David." That's about the time this book, 1 Samuel, was written. It was written to make the case that Israel in fact does need a king. In fact it needs a king like David in spite of the foibles of some of his heirs. So that's where we are now. The book is making a point that Israel needs a king like David, and up to this point, if you remember, we started looking at Israel's first king. Israel asked God, "Give us a king like the other nations." He gave them a king like the other nations. He said, "You want one, you got one." And they got Saul, a Benjamite, by the way. So Saul was given to them like the other nations. Remember Saul was physically imposing on one hand, but on the other hand he's extremely spiritually dull. If you want to be nice you call him spiritually dull. If you want to be more mean about it you'd say, "He just doesn't get it at all." Saul doesn't understand what it means to have a relationship with God. He doesn't understand God's promises. And so from chapters 13 to 15 the author of this book is giving us basically three major reasons, or three snapshots, or three political ads, if you will, that say, "Here's why Saul should not be the king." Or at least someone from his line should not be the king.

Last week as we started in this chapter we saw a stark contrast between Saul and his son, Jonathan. Jonathan is a man of action and he's a man of faith, and Saul is a man of reaction and he is a man of folly. In fact I've been choked up in my studies sometimes because when you think about Jonathan, he really should have been the king. He could have been the king. He could have done a great job as the king and yet it's his father. Last week, remember, Jonathan had, by faith, gone and confronted the Philistines who they were at war with. And remember his great line? He tells his armor-bearer, "Who knows, the Lord can save by many or by few." In other words, "He can save if he wants to. Maybe he will, maybe he won't. The only way we're going to know is if we step out in faith." Jonathan does. The Philistines are cast into mayhem and chaos. Saul comes and joins the battle late. The verdict on that portion of the story is interesting. It's almost like an editorial comment that doesn't belong in the text. After the Philistines are routed and war is still going on, in verse 23 it says,

²³ So the Lord saved Israel that day . . . (ESV)

If you are just reading this as history, and if you are trying to be chronological, that line shouldn't be there because the battle is not over. So, right in mid-battle when the Philistines are not completely defeated, why do you have this statement that, "the Lord saved Israel that day"? He finished the job as complete. It was done. And that's what we're going to look at today because the rest of the text we're going to look at today is really defined by that verse. And so another thing I'm going to do a little differently this morning is instead of giving you three points, I'm going to give you three principles that I'm pulling out of here, and I'm going to give them to you as we come to them.

So what's the first principle we're going to look at today? It's just this: If you try and finish something that has already been completed, it means either one of two things, or both. It means either you don't understand that which was completed or you don't believe it was completed. I'll say that one more time. Whenever you try and finish something that is completed either you don't understand that it has already been completed or you don't believe that it has already been completed. We'll look and see how Saul evidences that. Starting at verse 24, it says,

²⁴ And the men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies." (ESV)

So here we have this picture of Saul. The author is trying to make a point. We know for a fact that the Lord saved Israel that day and immediately after that you see a couple things. The first thing is that you hear that Israel was hard pressed that day. That should make your eyes go "oooh" if you know Hebrew. You see the language that's used here where it says, "Israel is hard pressed" is the same

language that is used when we talk about Israel under the oppression of the Philistines. In other words, Israel's experience under Saul's leadership is exactly the same as their experience under Philistine oppression. That's not a good thing. And that's not someone whom you'd want to be your king. So Israel's experience under Saul is qualitatively no different than their experience under the Philistines. What's interesting is that although the Lord had finished that day, and although the battle was completed as far as it was a done deal, in the midst of it Saul decides that he's now going to get on board and he's going to be religious. The men are hard pressed and Saul lays an oath on his men, and lays this curse upon them should they eat any food. The question is, "Why does he do that if the battle is already completed?" The answer is that there may be a couple of reasons.

First of all, it may be helpful to know the difference between an oath and a vow. What is an oath? An oath is basically when you're calling down some kind of promise or you're making some kind of promise and you're calling down God as the judge. When you call down an oath, either this or that, and if you don't do that, the person who's going to be your judge and your executioner is going to be God Himself. That's what an oath is. A vow, on the other hand, is more voluntary. A vow is when you basically are making a promise to another person. Like, "I vow I'm not going to do this until that." So it's a voluntary thing, whereas with an oath you don't really have a choice. If you do this or don't do that, you're going to be cursed by God.

And so Saul takes the harsher of the options, for one. Now, part of me, the cynical side, says the reason that he did that was because he's such a poor leader that if he had made it a vow—in other words if Saul had stood up and led by example and said, "All right, boys, here's how it's going to be. I'm not going to eat anything until we finish this thing with the Philistines. Who's with me?"—he would have been standing there just like I am now, looking at a crowd with their hands down. It would have made him look pretty bad, and Saul probably knew that.

So why did he use a curse instead of a vow? The other reason is because he was trying to motivate them by fear. "If you don't do this, God is going to judge you." What's interesting is that Saul is the only king in the Old Testament who does this. He's the only king that actually makes people take an oath with the threat of a curse. The question is, "Does he have the authority to do that?" We're not going to look at that right now; we don't have time. But the issue is, he does it because either he's trying to motivate them by fear, which I'm sure he does, or the other thing is he's trying to impress God. Actually, most commentators would say, "That's actually what Saul is trying to do." It's like someone who comes at the end of a battle and the battle is already won, and he comes and makes a very flashy show. Right at the beginning of the movie "Gladiator," there's this huge battle scene and Russell Crow is Maximus Decimus. They are fighting Hun and there's mayhem everywhere. Then the son of Maximum comes in at the very end (the battle is over) and he jumps off his steed, and he's dressed, and he pulls out his sword and says, "Where's the battle? I'm ready to fight!" He's trying to impress everybody and they just sort of roll their eyes and say, "It's done." In a sense that's what Saul is trying to do. "Let me show you how faithful I am. I'm going to lay upon you a curse by God that we are going to go down and rout the Philistines, and the curse is such that if anyone eats before we finish the job, he'll die." Now what's the folly in this? Either Saul doesn't understand that God has already finished the job or he doesn't believe that God has already finished the job. Therefore, all of his religious showiness is worthless. All of his religion, all of his pomp, all of his flare, all of his trying to impress people with how harsh he can be is absolutely worthless because he's trying to finish something that is already completed. By making this oath what he shows is that he does not understand that. By being really religious he shows that he does not understand that God has already won the battle for him. It would almost be laughable until you begin to think about yourself and realize that you and I do the exact same thing. You and I do the exact same thing. You see, if you fast forward to us, we have a king as well. We have someone who has fought a battle for us and won and has completely finished it. His name is Jesus, and the battle He fought was for your very soul. Jesus went to the cross and at the cross God laid every bit of your sin upon Him and it was paid for completely and utterly, and in return He credits to your account every bit of the righteousness of Jesus. You cannot become any more righteous in the sight of God than you already are, if in fact you have trusted Christ. In other words, the victory is won. The battle is won. The job, as far as you are concerned, is done. Your paperwork basically, in God's sight, says you are completely and utterly righteous. There's nothing else you can do to complete that. So the question for you, the question for me, is, "Why do you and I spend so much time trying to finish what God has already completed?" Almost every problem that you and I have, and I mean not just those within, but also when things from without hit us and the way we respond, almost all of it comes down to the fact that we don't understand what God has done for us in Christ, or we don't believe what God has done for us in Christ.

Have you ever committed some sin that you're really embarrassed about and then did something really religious the next day to make up for it? You do something and you think, "Man, I'm going to go home and read the whole Book of Romans today." Or you say, "I'm going to have a quiet time every day this week." You're hoping that by your religion God is going to forgive you because of the transgression you committed on Monday evening. When you do that, what you're saying is, "God, I don't believe that at the cross you took care of my sin." Either that or "I don't understand it." So the question is, "Do you?" Do you act really religious because you're not quite sure that the job is finished? My job as a pastor, as a preacher is to tell you that it has been finished. In Jesus you have won.

I told those at first service, "I hate this about Presbyterians because I am one." (Then I sort of recanted and said I like saying it, to be honest with you.) According to the theological tradition and the Biblical tradition that Presbyterians embrace, Presbyterians should be talking about victory more than any other people. And yet it's almost like we're afraid. You are afraid to talk about victory. The interesting thing is that we could talk about victory according to the way we understand the gospel, not because it's something we're

striving for, but because of something that has been accomplished. In other words, what it means to live the victorious life is not to be good and hope for the best. What it means to live the victorious life is to look at the cross and understand that Jesus has accomplished everything and won this dramatic, great victory for you, and now, what it means to live victoriously is to live in that. What happens when you don't?

Before we move on to that, let's go back to the text of Jonathan's critique of his father. One of the most devastating arguments against Saul being king is the fact that his own child endorses the other candidate. Notice how Jonathan responds to what Saul has done. It says in verse 25,

²⁵ Now when all the people came to the forest, behold, there was honey on the ground. ²⁶ And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping, but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath. ²⁷ But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath, so he put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes became bright. ²⁸ Then one of the people said, "Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food this day.'" And the people were faint. ²⁹ Then Jonathan said, "My father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. ³⁰ How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great." (ESV)

So what's Jonathan's commentary? It's always interesting to me when you read between the lines. Jonathan puts his staff into the honey, tastes the honey, and then the people around him tell him about the curse. If I was Jonathan I'd feel like, "Dude! You saw me doing it." But they didn't. So he eats it and then they say, "Your father said cursed be the man who eats." Jonathan's commentary is devastating to Saul. But it's also devastating to us in a lot of ways. The first thing he says about Saul is, "My father has troubled Israel." That's not something you want to be accused of. If you look farther back in the Book of Joshua, there was this guy Achan, and Israel is supposed to attack and not take any of the treasure. Achan does take some, and all of Israel suffers because of one man's sin. Or when you can look at Ahab and Elijah. When someone is a "troubler" of Israel, that is not good. Jonathan says, "My father has caused trouble for Israel." More than that, because of what he has done, the battle has not been as great with the Philistines.

Now that is backwards from everything you and I ever think about the way we live the gospel. What do I mean by that? God, the Lord, saved Israel that day, and the victory was not as good because Saul tried to make it better. In other words, do you want to cause yourself distress? Do you want to cause yourself problems? Do you want to make the victory that you have in Jesus less than what it is? Then try and add to it. Be religious. If you want to destroy your relationship to God, just try and be religious and try and kill yourself pleasing him. And when you go to heaven some day, if you've trusted Jesus, sure. But the victory here and now will not have been as great. And there's more to that because of where the text is. The first principle is: If you've tried to finish what is completed either you don't understand or you don't believe. The second principle that we're going to look at is just this: Unbelief always leads to one of two things or both. The best possible scenario where unbelief can take you is distress. The worst possible scenario is more sin, or some combination of the above. So unbelief always leads to either personal or corporate distress, or personal or corporate sin, and that's what happens next as we look at the text. Notice in verse 31, it says,

³¹ They struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. And the people were very faint. ³² The people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground. And the people ate them with the blood. ³³ Then they told Saul, "Behold, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood." And he said, "You have dealt treacherously; roll a great stone to me here." ³⁴ And Saul said, "Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, 'Let every man bring his ox or his sheep and slaughter them here and eat, and do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood.'" . . . (ESV)

So what's happening here? How does Saul's unbelief or misunderstanding lead to distress and greater sin? Notice again how this paragraph starts, "And the people were distressed." It's the same language. The people were hard pressed. Remember, under Saul it's like being under the Philistines. The author wants us to remember that. And so as soon as Saul's men whom he'd laid this bogus oath upon come into the camp, the battle is over for the day. Notice what it says, that they took their time and perused what was there? No. As soon as the darkness hit, it says they pounced on the oxen and the sheep. There's almost an implication here that Saul was among them. It doesn't say they did this and Saul did that. They were all doing this. They pounced on the sheep, then it has this spot where you hear in a horror movie the drastic music and it says, "and they ate with the blood." What's the problem there, besides the fact that eating these animals "with the blood" is a violation of Old Testament law? Really what it means, practically speaking, although it was a violation of the law is that they had not bled the animals correctly. I know many of you are hunters or have hunted or grew up on farms, and when you slaughter an animal you elevate it. You either hang it or you lift it up and tilt it somehow, and you bleed it properly, and then you eat it. These men were so hungry that they pounced on these oxen and sheep and while they were on the ground, they just started cutting into them and preparing them. So they sinned. That's sin, whether they knew it or not. But what's more interesting here is that Saul has to be told. Saul is there with everybody. He sees everyone pouncing on the oxen and sheep and doesn't say a word until someone comes to him, and notice what they say, it says,

³³ Then they told Saul, "Behold, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood." (ESV)

And notice Saul's response.

³³ . . . *“You have dealt treacherously; roll a great stone to me here.” (ESV)*

As I read this passage this week it reminded me of a counseling class I took in seminary. Basically the professor read to us a study that was done about parenting skills and how different parenting skills affect the way children turn out when they grow up. It was extremely interesting because on one hand you have parents who are extremely lax. They were extremely sort of libertarian in their parenting. The kids could do whatever they wanted. There was absolutely zero discipline in the house. When those children grew up, generally speaking, they turned out fine. On the other hand they looked at parents of children in which the parents were extremely strict. The children couldn't blink without permission from the parents. The children were just sort of under threat all the time. When you look at those kids, when they grew up they generally turned out fine and well adjusted. In other words, if you were consistent in being a lax parent the kids turn out fine. If you're consistent in being an overbearing strict parent, generally speaking your kids turn out fine. The kids that were totally messed up in this study were kids who had completely inconsistent parents. That one moment the parents were completely lax, and then in the blink of an eye the parents were completely strict. The kids never knew which was which. Those kids grew up disturbed. That made me think of Saul and Saul's leadership style because on one hand, Saul is saying, "Let's go, boys. Meat is back on the menu, boys. Pounce." Then as soon as people say, "You know, Saul, these guys are eating the meat with the blood in it. That's a sin against God," then he immediately switches to, "You're acting treacherously. Roll the great stone to me." He's completely inconsistent in his leadership. Because he's so completely inconsistent in his leadership, the people are distressed.

It also says a lot about Saul's faith. Notice that Saul didn't get religion here until he got caught. Is that how you are? As soon as Saul got caught and he found out that the men were sinning, then he acted righteous. Then he sort of was like, "Oh, we need to do something about this. Roll a great stone here. Tell the people they're acting treacherously." And so he does that. But it tells us the commentary on the fact that Saul doesn't get it. Why is Saul so inconsistent with his leadership? Why are you and I inconsistent in our parenting? Why are you and I inconsistent at our workplace and in everything we do? In Saul's case it's because he is not grounded in his relationship with the true king, God. In other words, because Saul is not grounded and defined by his relationship with the true king, he can't help but be all over the map. He doesn't know if he needs to please Him or not. In a sense Saul is treating God as if God were inconsistent when in fact it's Saul who is inconsistent. That leads to the final point here. It's one of these verses you can overlook, but really it's one of the most damning verses in this whole text about Saul because it teaches a lot about him. It leads to our last principle. The last principle is just this. If worship does not define your life, then your life will define your worship, and therefore your worship will just be an afterthought. Right? If your worship doesn't define your life, then your life will define your worship, and because of that, worship is going to become to you simply an afterthought. By worship I don't mean just going to church, I mean everything you do, whether you're an accountant or a business person or a machinist, anything that you do – if you view that as worship, then it defines your life. Or if you just say, "Man, I just gotta get through life in order to get to church on Sunday, then I'll worship." It doesn't work that way. Notice it's again one of these almost editorial comments. It says in verse 35,

³⁵ *And Saul built an altar to the Lord; it was the first altar that he built to the Lord. (ESV)*

Now whoever wrote this book (we don't know who) in that sentence completely disrespects Saul. I mean he just totally threw Saul down the stairs, under the bus (pick your metaphor), but he's just completely done it to Saul. In the narrative we've read it's sort of crunched together so it seems like everything is happening in one day. And yet, it probably happened over a course of weeks or months. Or, some people said this whole event could have actually been stretched out to have taken up two years. So, here we have Saul after the battle has started, after there have been several skirmishes, after his oath, after the curse, after his men have pounced on the animals and then he has had to rebuke them by being caught himself. After everything has happened, then Saul builds an altar. We know it was the first time. Why? Because the writer rats him out. You see it would not have been uncommon for a king to get to the end of a long day of battle and tell the priest, "Build an altar. We're going to worship the Lord here." If the writer had put a period at that point, Saul would have been okay. But he says, "Saul then built an altar 'comma' it was the first time he ever built an altar." In other words, Saul's life was not defined by his relationship to his God and worship of that God in everything he'd do. Instead Saul's relationship to God was defined by his life. In other words he got around to his relationship with God when he had time for it. It was an afterthought. So after he finished everything else, then he worshiped. What does that tell us about Saul? You see, if you're in Israel, what kind of king do you want? Do you want a king who is completely a man after God's own heart, who is completely in sync with God, whose life is defined by worship, or do you want a king for whom worship is an afterthought? The question also for you and me is, "What kind of life do you want?" Do you want a life that's defined by worship, a life that grows out of your worship, a life that grows out of your understanding of the gospel? Or do you just want to go on living some kind of rat race like you go through Monday through Saturday and for six days and 23 hours a week you're in distress, and then you come to church and you put it all aside for an hour? That's cool. Then as soon as you go home you're back on the treadmill. It doesn't have to be that way. The reason it doesn't have to be that way goes all the way back to the first point. Do you remember what God has done? Do you remember he's already won the victory now? You and I just have to live in it. Think about that.