

Saul's Reign: Strike 2! (Part 3)

1 Samuel 14:36-46

³⁶ Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them." And they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." But the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here." ³⁷ And Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?" But he did not answer him that day. ³⁸ And Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today.

I am going to finish 1 Samuel 14 this morning, but since we have the Lord's Supper, that means my time is compressed, which means I'm probably going to talk a little faster than normal. Maybe. So you will have to hang in there and let me know after, which some of you are very good at.

I'm not going to give you the whole background to 1 Samuel, of course, but you do need to keep in mind always the purpose. The purpose of the Book of Samuel was to persuade Israel, and ultimately us, that Israel needs a king. Not just any old king, but in fact a very specific king. A king like David, or a king from the Davidic line. About the time this book was written, and it was actually a very political time: Israel had been exiled in Babylon and they were coming back into the land, and they realized that someone now has to be in charge. We have to have a king. By that time two tribes had risen to power, if you will. One was the tribe of Benjamin and one was David [Judah]. So there would have been arguments. Should the king come from Benjamin or should the king come from the line of David? This book is going to make the case as to why the king should come from the line of David. In fact, Israel in chapter 8 asked God. They said, "Give us a king like the other nations." And God said, "You want a king like the other nations? I'll give you a king like the other nations." And he gave them Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. And remember, among other things, Saul was very physically imposing. He was a big man a head taller than everyone else. But he was also extremely spiritually dull. Maybe even calling him spiritually dull is to be charitable. He just didn't get it. He was alternately religious and irreligious. He just never got it. He didn't seem to have a relationship with the Lord.

And so as we entered into chapter 14, remember, Saul has been given a task. He's supposed to engage the Philistines and basically, ultimately conquer them and throw off the Philistine oppression, and he doesn't do that. In fact, Jonathan, his son, does. Remember Jonathan and Saul are almost complete opposites. Jonathan is a man of action and Saul is a man of reaction. Jonathan is a man of faith and Saul is a man of foolishness. And so what happens at the beginning of this chapter is that Jonathan actually provokes the Philistines and Saul, who is sort of a Johnny-come-lately, enters into the fray and then we read in the middle of this chapter that "The Lord saved Israel that day." The job is done. In spite of the job being done (that's what we talked about last week), Saul decides that he's going to go in and impress God or impress somebody and actually engage the Philistines some more. He basically lays this bogus oath on the people. He says, "Cursed be anyone who tastes food until I am avenged on my enemies." Remember his son Jonathan tasted of honey that day. You also remember it caused his men to sin because as soon as he took the reins off, the restraints off and let them eat, they pounced on the animals that they had gotten from the Philistines and ate them "with the blood in them." Saul had to be told, "You know, they are not supposed to do that. That's a sin." So Saul immediately responded, "Stop doing that." He makes a big sort of religious show of it.

Remember last week I gave you three principles instead of points that you can pull out of last week's text. I'm going to do the same this morning. I'm going to give you three principles that are building off of last week's text. So last week, basically, they had defeated the Philistines. The battle was still going on, but they were at the point of rest, if you will. In today's text we're going to look at three different principles, and I'm going to give them to you as I go along.

The first principle is just this: Your impatience with God or your patience with God reveals your assumptions about God. In other words, whether you are patient or not, it tells a lot about what you think about God or what you know about God. We're going to look at and see that in the life of Saul. So your patience or impatience reveals who you are. In verse 36 notice what it says:

³⁶ Then Saul said, “Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them.” And they said, “Do whatever seems good to you.” But the priest said, “Let us draw near to God here.” (ESV)

So they’ve already finished one battle, and if you remember, Saul set up an altar and he worshiped for the first time, which we read last week in the text. Then all of a sudden Saul—very uncharacteristically because he’s generally not a man of action but instead reaction—decides he’s going to take some action. What’s interesting about Saul, you’re going to find out, he, like many of us tends to act when he should be praying and he tends to pray when he should be acting. So Saul all of a sudden comes up with this great idea, and you can almost sense the excitement where he comes to them and says, “Hey, you know what? We beat up the Philistines, let’s go in there at night and really kill them. Let’s go in at night and just rout ‘em and just really drive them into the ground! What do you guys think?” Here’s something interesting to see about Saul’s leadership. Did you notice the response of his soldiers? If Saul was an inspiring leader, if he was any kind of motivating leader, he would have said, “Let’s go kill the Philistines at night.” And they would have said, “Yah-hoo” “Hoo-wah.” Instead, what do they say? They say what every parent hates hearing from their kid: “Whatever.” He says, “Let’s go down and rout the Philistines by night. We’ve done it by day, let’s do it by night now.” And they say, “Do whatever seems good to you. If you go, we’re there. If you don’t, we’re there, but whatever.” There’s absolutely no enthusiasm whatsoever. And then the priest steps in and says, “You know, we’re supposed to pray before we do that. Let us draw near to God.” And you can almost see, because by the later reaction of Saul, that when the priest comes and says, “Let us draw near to God before this,” you almost see Saul rolling his eyes. “Alright, let’s draw near to God.” And then Saul prays and Saul’s prayers reveal everything you need to know about Saul. Notice how Saul prays. He basically asks God two questions that are yes or no and are black and white, and he already knows the answer to them. So look at the questions he asks. It says,

³⁷ And Saul inquired of God, “Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?” (ESV)

“Should I fight the Philistines? Yes or no? And are you going to give us victory? Yes or no?”

Now how do we know that Saul is just going through the motions here and that he’s really not engaging? It’s because he’s asking yes or no questions to things that he already knows. God has already told him to engage the Philistines so you don’t need to ask that question. That’s a yes. God has already promised him that he would give him victory. That’s a yes. So why is Saul praying? Because the priest told him he had to. What does it reveal about God’s character? What does he expect from God? You see, instead of seeing God as father, as king, as the one who defines his life, Saul instead apparently sees God as sort of a Magic 8 ball. Right? Most of you are familiar with the Magic 8 ball? You get it, use it in college to figure who you’re going to go out on a date with. “Should I ask Judy to marry me?” [shakes his hand with an imaginary Magic 8 ball and looks at it three times] “All right, I guess I will.” “Should I take this girl out?” And you shake it and it will give you an answer, “No,” or it will give you the answer, “Maybe.” What’s up with that? Then you shake it and it gives you the answer, “Yes.” The problem with the Magic 8 ball is if it does not give you the response you want, what do you do? You keep shaking! Should you have even wasted your time shaking the Magic 8 ball in the first place? No. Guess what? I know this is going to come as a surprise from me. God is not a Magic 8 ball. Most of us ask, “Should I do this or that?” You don’t need to ask Him to do what you already know you should be doing. The question is, as Jonathan said, “We’re going to go down and battle these Philistines and God can deliver us. Maybe He will. Maybe He won’t.” In a sense that was almost a prayer of Jonathan. Perhaps he will deliver us when we go and do something in obedience to Him. What’s interesting is God’s response to Saul, and Saul’s response to God. It says,

³⁷ . . . But he did not answer him that day. (ESV)

God did not answer him. And so what did Saul immediately do? Having no immediate response from God, he makes a bogus assumption. There must have been some sin in the camp. Let’s for example assume that I am Saul and you are the soldiers. It must have been some sin that one of you committed, that God is not answering me. He makes a bogus assumption because he does not understand Who God is. You see, your patience or your impatience in the way you pray or don’t pray reveals Who you think God is. Because Saul thinks God is either a Magic 8 ball, or He is very capricious and petty and needs to be pleased in order to do things for you, Saul is completely wrong in his assumptions. So the question is, “What do you do when God is silent when you pray?” What is the purpose of God’s silence? Does it have any purpose?

You know, I can't tell you what God's silence is when we pray and we say, "God, why aren't You doing this?" I can't tell you what the purpose is, but I can tell you what the purpose of His silence is not. The purpose of God's silence when we pray and cry out to Him is not because He doesn't care, and it is not because He does not have a plan. How do we know that? Because if you fast-forward a few thousand years and look at another king who prayed very desperately and got a silent answer, what happened? That king of course is Jesus. Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? He knew that physically He was facing crucifixion, a brutal, hard death. He knew spiritually He was facing drinking the full cup of the wrath of God. He knew both of those things were His mission. Yet He went in the Garden and prayed, and He said, "Lord, if there be any way that this cup pass from me, please make it pass." What was the answer? Nothing. Silence. Jesus prayed three times, "If there's any way that the cup might pass from me, please let it pass." Three times he asked and three times he heard silence.

Think of a Jesus who's like Saul. Should I go to the cross? Yes or no? Should I bear the sins of the world? Yes or no? OK, You didn't answer, I guess I'm at Plan B. Jesus didn't do that. Jesus went to the cross because of His response to God's silence? He said, "Not my will, but your will be done." I know what I'm supposed to do. Hearing no answer, I'm going to keep doing what I am supposed to do and if you see fit to deliver me, deliver me. And if not, don't. But what we see in the midst of God's silence, what we can derive from His silence is not that He didn't care. It's because He cared enough to give His son so that you and I might have deliverance from all of our sins. And how was Jesus able to do that? It's because Jesus had proper assumptions about Who God was. He knew that God was His father. He knew that God was always going to do the right thing. He knew that God was always good. You remember in 1 Peter chapter 2 it says the way Jesus was able to endure all this is that He kept entrusting Himself to God Who judges justly. In other words, Jesus kept reminding Himself over and over and over again of the goodness of God. And I know lots of you out there, you've been praying for things and you're saying, "God, why won't You answer? Why won't You deliver me? Why won't You do something about this?" All I can tell you is that I know what the reason for His silence is not. It's not because He does not care, and it's not because He does not have a plan, and it's not because He's not planning something great. So what happens if you're not like Christ? What happens if you're impatient with God? It reveals bogus things about God. That leads to our next principle. Saul has made bogus assumptions about God that we see through his prayer. That's the second principle: Bogus assumptions about God almost always lead to foolish actions. Notice what Saul does next.

³⁸ And Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today. ³⁹ For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die." But there was not a man among all the people who answered him.

Again, notice the support Saul has. For one, Saul is making a bogus assumption. It's not unprecedented for God to punish the nation of Israel because of the sin of one person. What is unprecedented is for a king to assume that's the case and to step forward and begin casting lots about it as if he were the one who was going to decide. Not only that, but remember (and I don't have time to go into it) that the writer of this book goes to great lengths to show us how Jonathan is very much like the good judges in the Book of Judges like Gideon, and how Saul is very much like the bad judges. If you have time later today, look up the judge, Jephthah. The vow that he made that, "Whatever comes out of my tent after this battle, I will sacrifice." What do you know, he comes home and his daughter walks out.

So, is Saul trying to impress God or is he trying to impress the people? Notice what he says, "Even if it is my son Jonathan, he will die today." I don't have time to read through the text, but basically what Saul does is set up a dice game, if you will. Lots. And the way they would cast lots would be to see if the sin was in the people of Israel or if it was in the royal family. So they cast the lot and it showed that the sin is within the royal family. Then they cast the lot again and it reveals that Jonathan, maybe, is the one. But notice first the enthusiasm and the support that Saul has gotten from his people. When Saul makes this rank proclamation, that "Even if it be my son Jonathan, he will be the one who dies," notice what it says the soldiers did – they didn't say a word. In other words, if they had been loyal to Saul and trusted him and cared about him, as soon as he said, "Hey men, it's Jonathan." You would think that at least one person would have said, "Dude, it is Jonathan." They wouldn't have had to go through the whole charade and the lot casting and everything else. They would have just said, "It's him!" But they don't trust Saul. So they don't. Notice the difference between how Jonathan deals with his sin and Saul deals with his. Look farther on down. It comes out the lot says, "Jonathan is the one." In verse 43 it says,

⁴³ Then Saul said to Jonathan, “Tell me what you have done.” And Jonathan told him, “I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die.” ⁴⁴ And Saul said, “God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan.”

Now what if it was Saul who is in Jonathan’s shoes? Given what we know about Saul, how does Saul deal with it when people confront him about his sin? He either makes excuses or he blame-shifts. If Jonathan was like his father he would have said, “You know what, I tasted some honey, but it’s your fault. You laid a bogus oath on us that you should have never made. It was stupid militarily. It was stupid from a leadership perspective. It was stupid from a godly perspective. It was the dumbest thing in the world. How could you dare come to me and say I’m going to die because of your decision? You’re crazy.” Instead, what does Jonathan say? He says, “I tasted the honey, you said we shouldn’t, therefore I should die.” You don’t fess up much cleaner than that. “I sinned and I deserve the consequences.” Notice how the people respond now, which leads to the next principle. You see, bogus assumptions lead to foolish actions. The last principle is just this: Foolish action usually leads to either disgrace or at very least complete spiritual ineffectiveness. So Saul has gone through this whole show, and notice his response. Saul is more concerned with saving face before all of his troops than he is about the life of his son. Imagine if it were my son and I—I would have just started weeping even if I felt I had to go through with it. But Saul is so much more concerned with how people view him. We’re going to look at that next week. Saul is completely absorbed with how he is perceived by those outside of him. So Jonathan confesses and Saul says, “Well, that’s the way it is then. Jonathan shall die.” And the reason foolish actions normally lead to disgrace, you will see next. Because here is Saul, king of all Israel. He’s just made this grand proclamation that Jonathan will die, and notice what his soldiers say to him. Let me summarize it for you. “Uh-uh,” he’s not going to die.” Notice what it says in verse 45 after Saul says, “You shall die, Jonathan.”

⁴⁵ Then the people said to Saul, “Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.” So the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die. (ESV)

So now imagine you’re Saul. You’re the king and there has been a mutiny. You’ve said, “This person is to die.” And the whole nation has said, “Uh-uh,” you think the guy should die, through whom God worked his great salvation, the one who obviously knows what he’s doing is going to die? No way.” And it says the people rescued Jonathan. Now that leaves, according to Saul’s own logic, that leaves him in a bit of a jam. Because you remember the person left standing is the one who is really responsible for the whole mess. So the lot was cast, it comes down to the royal family, and the guy responsible is going to die, and Jonathan has just been rescued, so now there’s just one person left in the royal family holding the bag, who is really responsible for the trouble in Israel. It’s Saul. And not only that, Saul has now two ways he can respond to bring some kind of resolution to this situation. He can either say, “You know what, guys? Since I’m the only guy left, it must be me. I must be the sinner. I’m the one who has brought all this trouble in Israel. I’m the one who doesn’t have a clue what he’s doing. I’m the one who’s responsible for all this. I should die.” He could have said that. For everything we know about David, David would have said that. Or, Saul could have said, “You know what? You guys are the hoi polloi. You’re the sheep. I’m doing what I want. I’m the king.” And he could have enforced his rule upon them. And yet he didn’t. What did Saul do instead? He took his ball and went home. That’s it. You see in all the Hebrew narratives that I’ve pointed out to you guys since I’ve been preaching this. They always follow the same pattern. They follow the pattern of problem, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. And notice the resolution that you get when you have a king like Saul. Let me read the last verse to you.

⁴⁶ Then Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place. (ESV)

In other words, instead of owning his sin or instead of punishing the sin of others, Saul just decided to go home. And the Philistines went home. And so here they are. They’ve gone all this way in the battle with the Philistines, and because Saul has been caught and he has to either admit his sin or enforce what he believes, he just goes home. And the Philistines go home and there’s no resolution. What is the author trying to tell us? If you want resolution, if you want a king who can lead you, if you want a king who can deliver you, if you want a king who is faithful, it better not be a king like Saul. The only king that can give you any kind of resolution, the only king who can finish the job is a king like David. And the whole gospel, you hear me say over and over again, is really a two-part thing. One, do you believe God will deliver you and two, do you believe he’s going to finish the job. The promise of the gospel is just that. “I’m not only taking you from Egypt, but I promise I’m going to get you into the Promised Land. I promise I’m going to save you from your sins. I’m going to get you into heaven.” Which king is going to finish the job and which isn’t? The answer, of course, is that Jesus is the only king who offers any hope of resolution in your life. Think about that as we partake even today of His body given for us.