

From Fear to Faith

1 Samuel 13:1—14:23

In 1 Samuel 13, the narrative shifts just a little—we move from the problem of kingship as a whole to the problem of Saul’s reign in particular. So far in Saul’s story, we’ve had one example of the Spirit descending on Saul, followed by a great a victory against the Ammonites. Surely, this is a good sign for better things to come. Israel’s hopes are high! Surely Saul will do a better job of leading them than the judges did. Israel has, after all, promised to obey and follow the Lord and they are fully aware of the consequences that will happen if they do not. Samuel warned the people at the end of chapter 12, “If you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish.”

So, on that jolly note, we shift gears to a specific moment in Saul’s reign: the Philistines have reared their heads again and are now brutally oppressing the people of Israel with their far superior army and weapons. The Philistines have pushed the Israelites almost to the Jordan River (map!) and many Israelites flee across the river or to the hills for safety. The Philistines also have a monopoly on weapons—only Saul and Jonathan have swords; the rest of Israel has meager farm tools, and even those must be taken to the Philistines to sharpen, as there are no blacksmiths in Israel. The Philistines’ army is described as “numerous as the sand on the seashore,” and they have *three thousand* chariots—the ancient equivalent of the war tank.

It does not look good. Now, we’ve had moments like this in Israel’s history before—in Joshua’s time, the Canaanite armies were as “numerous as the sand on the seashore,”¹ and in Gideon’s time, the Midianites were “impossible to count” and came upon Israel like locusts, devouring everything in their path, and “as numerous as the sand on the seashore.”² Each time, God intervened. To Joshua, God said, “Don’t be afraid of them, for I will hand all of them over to Israel.”³ To Gideon, God said, “I will be with you, and you will strike down the Midianites.”⁴

Gideon, Israel’s fourth judge, is an especially interesting parallel to King Saul—he, too, protests that his tribe is the smallest and weakest of all Israel, so why would God choose him?⁵ It might be worth remembering at this point that God always chooses the weakest, most underdog-like people to carry out his purposes. God asks for *obedience*, not military prowess. In Gideon’s case, God whittles down the army from 32,000 soldiers to just three hundred. Then, as Gideon’s army shatters jars on the ground, waves torches, and blows

¹ Josh 11:4

² Judg 6:7, 7:12

³ Josh 11:6

⁴ Judg 6:16

⁵ Judg 6:15, 1 Sam 9:21

trumpets, the Midianite army is thrown into confusion and they kill each other in their haste to get away from what they think is a vastly superior army. In Gideon's time, just as so many times before, God shows that *he* is the Divine Warrior who will fight Israel's battles.

And yet, when Saul is confronted with the reality of an army larger than he can count, he doesn't remember these stories. He is terrified, his confidence shaken as his soldiers desert him. Saul had been instructed by Samuel to wait for seven days before fighting the Philistines.⁶ When Samuel doesn't show, Saul takes matters into his own hands. Basically, he panics, and from that urgency, he offers his own sacrifices in preparation for battle.

Now, we might be confused as to why Saul's sacrifices were inappropriate. It's not that *only* priests were allowed to offer sacrifices; later on, David and Solomon will both offer sacrifices without any negative consequences.⁷ Saul's sin, it seems, is that *he did not obey God's command* to wait for Samuel. His urgency is genuine; you can hardly fault him for seeking God's favour prior to the battle, especially as his army shrinks smaller and smaller. But what he apparently fails to realize is that you do not need to offer sacrifices to gain God's favour; obedience is what God desires, not sacrifice. Not only that, but apparently, only *God* could give the go-ahead to begin a battle, and Saul's sacrifice bypasses God's divine instructions entirely. Essentially, Saul declares that *he* has the right to move Israel into battle whenever and wherever he wanted.

Old Testament scholar Bill Arnold says,

This episode illustrates the way Israelite kingship was intended to function. The king was not free to initiate warfare whenever and against whomever he wished. He had to answer to a higher authority. He could only receive marching orders from Yahweh and his prophet—in this case, Samuel. Thus, the text demonstrates the unique nature of the Israelite version of ancient Near Eastern monarchy as well as the unique nature of prophecy in Israel. Standing beside every Israelite king was to be a prophet speaking God's word for the situation. The degree to which the king obeyed or rejected that prophetic word was the determining factor in the Bible's evaluation of his reign. In a sense, Yahweh remained Israel's king, represented by his prophet, who ordered Yahweh's anointed one.⁸

So, Saul was not supposed to offer his own sacrifices or initiate war on his own. He was supposed to wait for Samuel. By offering his own sacrifices, Saul disregards God's presence and guidance to his kingship. He does as he sees fit, which, as we know from the previous stories of the judges, never goes well. This is the king that Israel chose, and

⁶ 1 Sam 10:8

⁷ 2 Sam 24:25, 1 Kgs 3:15

⁸ Arnold, [1 & 2 Samuel](#), 198.

Samuel declares that Saul's kingship will not survive because of Saul's disobedience. Instead, God will choose a king of his own, a king who is more interested in obedience than power. Saul's disobedience—his *impatience* and *urgency* to act *now*—has cost him everything. This is the king that Israel asked for.

Bill Arnold says again, “As is often the case in biblical history, the ultimate failure of our hero is not his inability to defeat the enemy. Rather, all is not right in his relationship with Yahweh.”⁹ “He fails to accept the structure of authority established for him by Yahweh and his prophet Samuel.”¹⁰

God desires obedience and trust in all of your life's circumstances, not anxious actions that look faithful but really take control of the matter for yourself. Being in relationship with God means that we must look to him *first*. We *trust* him. We *obey* him. If we do not, then we have decided that we will be better off without him. We have taken matters into our own hands; we put ourselves in God's place and shove him to the back corner of our hearts. When we charge ahead into our lives without first consulting God and listening to him—for that's what obedience means, to *listen* and then to *do*—then we, like Saul, have persisted in doing evil. We have decided what is good for ourselves, and there are a host of stories in the Bible that warn against what happens when humans decide for themselves what is good and evil instead of listening to God's definition.

At the bottom line, Saul doubted whether God is good—whether God will do as he said he would. He doubted that God is trustworthy, which is all the more heart-wrenching because he'd *just experienced the presence of the Spirit upon him in chapter 10 and 11*. He *knew* what God's presence was like; he *knew* that God had called him to the kingship and that God could and would defeat the enemy as he'd done so many times before, but in the heat of the moment, he forgot. His fears became larger than God's character, and he gave in to the temptation to no longer wait for God's timing. *You took too long*, he says to Samuel. *It's your fault that I was tempted to disobey*.

It's not that we can't question God's goodness; we've all had circumstances in our lives where we are confronted with something that makes us ask, “Is God really good?” Like Saul, we have a choice—to let the circumstances of our crises decide our actions, or to remember the character of God as he has shown us so many times before—in Scripture, and in our personal lives.

⁹ Arnold, [1 & 2 Samuel](#), 197.

¹⁰ Arnold, [1 & 2 Samuel](#), 200–201.

Saul is a warning—and an invitation—to us: Stand firm in temptation and trust in the character of God; obey *God* more than your anxious desires to fix the situation; wait on *God* instead of taking rash action.

First Samuel 14 continues the standoff against the Philistines, but now from the perspective of Jonathan, Saul's son. It's rather tragic, for this narrative shows just how good a king Jonathan would have been, but for his father's impatient disobedience. Jonathan and his armourbearer confront the Philistines. The odds are hugely against them—two men against an army as numerous as the sand on the seashore? They're asking to be crushed!

But Jonathan's words indicate a heart of trust in YHWH: "Perhaps the Lord will help us for nothing can hinder the Lord. He can win a battle whether he has many or few."¹¹ Saul was afraid of defeat when he was left with six hundred men; Jonathan has faith that God will intervene through only the two of them.

So, Jonathan offers a test, not unlike Gideon asking for a sign: If the Philistines goad them into confronting them, then Jonathan and his servant will scale the cliffs and fight the Philistines, knowing that God will give them victory. And that's exactly what happens. The odds are impossible; two men climbing down one cliff and then up another on the other side of a ravine should be easy targets for the Philistine army. But they arrive on the other side unharmed and proceed to kill twenty men.

Jonathan's brave attack results in panic among the Philistines—a panic sent by God. There is also an earthquake, a sign of God's involvement in this battle. God, the Divine Warrior, fights on behalf of his people. He does not need armies; he only needs a few faithful people who are willing to obey him despite the odds. These are the ones through whom he can take action. And so God does, inspiring the rest of the Israelites to join the fight as the Philistines "melt away in all directions."¹²

Saul, awkwardly, asks his priest to bring the ark of God, as if Israel had not learned that bringing the ark into battle was a *bad idea*. But then, as the battle grows louder, Saul abandons this idea and joins the battle—but it is already almost over. The battle has been won, despite Saul's desperate attempts to control the circumstances. Apparently, all that was needed is faith and obedience, both of which Jonathan demonstrates in abundance, and Saul lacks. The contrast between father and son is stark: both take action, but one was

¹¹ 1 Sam 14:6, NLT

¹² 1 Sam 14:16

spurred on by fear, while the other was inspired by faith. “Jonathan is a leader who takes action, while Saul simply responds.”¹³

I don’t know about you, but I am left with a sort of conflicted feeling after spending time in this passage. Israel asked for a king and Samuel chastised them for it, but God still sent his Spirit on Saul with the hopes that he might be a king who obeys God instead of trying to control the narrative himself. But our brief hopes for this king are dashed. He does not trust God, does not have a relationship with God, and does not obey God because he does not truly fear God.

The disappointment of Saul is exacerbated by the faithful bravery of Jonathan. Jonathan does what his father could not—he takes courageous action and trusts God for the victory. He inquires of God before starting the fight, and when God gives him a sign of approval, the victory is assured. It is *God*, not Jonathan, who wins the battle for them, who throws the Philistines into confusion. But God acts *through* Jonathan’s faithfulness. On one hand, we are assured that God has not abandoned Israel despite Saul’s failure; on the other, we are disappointed that Jonathan will not be the next king. Saul’s disobedience has ruined his son’s life.

As with so many examples in Scripture, we are left at a crossroads: to obey God or not to obey God. To trust him or to trust ourselves. To move from fear to faith.

Which will we choose? Will we be like Saul, who can’t wait for God to act so he does it himself? Or like Jonathan, who asks, waits, trusts, and acts? God will do as God does; he will continue fighting evil and oppression whether we join him or not. . . but how much more amazing would it be if we joined him in it, if we saw firsthand God’s intervention in the world!

As I was considering this contrast between fear and faith, I thought of two examples in my life—one where I gave in to the fear, and then was confronted by it and changed my mind at great risk, and another where the voice of reason disguised my fear for a very long time before I recognized it for what it was, and even then it took years for me to leave my fear behind.

The first was early in my relationship with Fritz. We were getting to know one another, and apparently he’d already decided how he felt about me. I was a little slower to that sentiment, so when he asked me to make the relationship “official,” I did what every well-meaning girl does—I panicked and told him that we could not be anything more than “just friends.” I was afraid. I’d been hurt in a relationship before, and the last thing I wanted was

¹³ Arnold, [1 & 2 Samuel](#), 209.

to experience that hurt again. So, out of fear for getting hurt again, I said no. I wanted the safety of “just being friends.” In this way, I was like Saul, letting fear make my decision for me.

Thankfully, a mutual friend talked me around, and I decided that well, maybe this man was worth the effort, worth the risk. I remember a clear moment when God said to me, “It’s a risk to love *you*, and I still did it.” Well then. I realized that I couldn’t just talk *about* faith; I had to actually *step out in faith* and *live it*. Making a decision in panic is a surefire way to protect myself. But it also makes sure that I don’t experience love, grace, and joy to the fullest. Fear keeps us trapped. Paralyzed. Unable to live fully in the goodness that God has for us. As it turns out, my decision to give Fritz another chance (really, he gave me another chance) was a good one. My fear didn’t go away; I was still terrified of getting hurt, but I was just as certain that God would take care of me within my fear. And he has.

The second example has been more recent and has involved circumstances entirely outside my control, like COVID and job loss. The past six years have steadily moved me from my previous career as a physiotherapist to serving as a pastor here with you. Lucky you, you’ve had a front row seat to one of the biggest decisions of my life. As I began seminary, completed seminary, and began working here with you, I felt more and more sure of the calling God had for me. Physiotherapy did not fill me with life; I dreaded going to work every day. But preaching and talking to others about life with God? Oh yeah, I could do this all day, every day.

But despite this deep certainty that I was meant to work in ministry, I was afraid—afraid of leaving the security of a job that pays far better than ministry does, afraid of the scrutiny and the questions about why I would leave a career that I’d worked so hard for, afraid of the judgment from those who thought I was stepping “down” in life, and afraid of ostracization from family members who don’t believe that God gives women the authority or ability to preach.

I felt the pressure of the crossroads. I was conflicted. There is tension in a decision like this—between calling and duty. In the best case, calling and duty collide and are one and the same. But often, the duties that pull at us don’t align with the calling that tugs at the deepest part of our heart. I could continue in my “safe” job as a physiotherapist, or I could step out in faith and trust that God was calling me to something different. Well, you know which one I chose, and you can bet that I had many conversations with God about it. He always showed me the next step to take in his timing when I waited for it.

But the question I have for you is: What crossroads are you at? Which decisions lie before you? I’ve talked to enough of you to know that there are things in our lives that we are

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unhappy with, things that we do day after day just for the paycheck or for the safety that it offers. Now, I ask you: What would happen if you stepped out in faith?

If your response is, “I can’t do that!”, I might gently point out that that is a response of fear. You’re right, you can’t do it *on your own*. But guess what? God was bigger and more powerful than the Philistine army, and he is bigger and more powerful than your fear. He is still faithful. There is nothing that he can’t do, and he will continue doing his work in the world, but *he wants you to join him in it*.

It doesn’t mean that you should leave your job and begin working in elsewhere in something that brings you joy. . . though it might. I’m only speaking from my experiences. And I get it, there are practical considerations like being able to buy basic needs like food and shelter and caring for any dependents that you might have. But even so, God can provide for you in ways that you might never imagine, if you step out in faith; he certainly has for me. It might be something else altogether—a relationship that needs to have better boundaries or starting a new relationship altogether, a hobby that you’ve been wanting to pursue but are afraid of failing at, learning a new skill, or volunteering in something you’ve never tried before.

Don’t let fear make your decisions for you. Be like Jonathan, not like Saul. Listen to God and obey him; that’s all he wants from you.

Let’s pray.