

Whose Will?

1 Samuel 13:1-14:52

I suspect most of us have tried to get ahead at some point in life – whether it be getting further up the pecking order at school or having the edge for that promotion at work or making that special deal to ease the financial pressure.

- What will give us an advantage over others?
- What secret will let us move upwards?
- How can we make sure we get the lucky break?
- Can we do something to guarantee success?

At that point, many people, both past and present, turn to God – or their version of God. What better way to guarantee success than by having God on board? If you can get God to act for you, then surely you've got it made. So how can you harness God's power?

- Some try magic – get the right incantation or the right spell and you can force God to act.
- Some try bribery – promise God all sorts of good things or good actions or good outcomes.
- Some try religion – light some candles, burn some incense, say some prayers, go on a pilgrimage.

Think back over your own life. Think of some time you wanted God to do something for you. What did you do?

- Go to church more regularly?
- Put more money in the offering plate?
- Go without food for a couple of days?
- Make promises of being nice to your sister?

The Story so Far

A couple of years ago, we left 1 Samuel at the end of chapter 12. This morning, we pick it up at chapter 13.

Let me remind you of the story so far.

- At the end of Judges, things were pretty bad in Israel. There was no king. People just did as they saw fit. Morale was low. More importantly, morality was low.
- Through an insignificant family, God acts to change things. He gives them a new leader – Samuel. Samuel brings God's word to Israel. Samuel leads Israel to renew her commitment to God. Samuel gives Israel relief from her enemies.
- But Samuel grows old. And his sons aren't a chip off the old block – they do wrong. At this point, chapter 8, Israel acts stupidly. They ask for a king like the nations. They reject God's rule over them. They reject God's call to trust His protection. They reject God's requirement to be different from the nations.
- God gives them Saul – a king like the nations. He's physically impressive – head and shoulders above everyone else. He wins a victory over the Ammonites. Things look OK.
- In chapter 12, Samuel gathers the people at Gilgal. It's an important occasion – a crucial point in their history.
 - He reminds them of their rebellious hearts in wanting a king like the nations. That was evil. That wasn't the best way for the kingship to start.
 - Yet, God hasn't abandoned them. Nor has God rejected the concept of kingship. He's given them Saul. This can still work – as long as they and the king pay attention to God. They must not rebel. They must obey God's commands.

And so we come to chapter 13. Is this kingship thing

going to work? What sort of king will Saul be? Will he obey God? Or will he rebel? They're the questions hanging in the air.

Another of the questions hanging in the air is the Philistines. This goes back to when Samuel first anointed Saul as king. 1 Samuel 10:5-8

After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.

Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do.

Saul's supposed to deal with the Philistine menace. To date, he hasn't done this.

Getting Ready for Battle

The action in chapter 13 opens with Jonathan attacking the Philistines. Now the astute reader notes two things at this point.

- First, he acts against the Philistines – what we've been waiting for; and
- Secondly, it's Jonathan who acts – not Saul.

We're not told exactly who Jonathan is at this point – I think it's deliberate. Unfortunately, some translations think they know better and supply the bit about Jonathan

being Saul's son. The narrator, however, wants to tell us something else before he gives us that information.

Anyway, Jonathan's actions bring two responses.

- Saul responds by mobilising the army at Gilgal. That's good. That's where Samuel told him to wait.
- The Philistines respond by mobilising their army as well. They're not particularly happy the Israelites may be organising some sort of resistance movement. They simply act to crush it in the bud – make sure the status quo doesn't change

Now, you can work out the maths. The Philistines have one chariot for each of Saul's special troops. Their army is vastly bigger. The Israelites could work out the maths too – and most of them disappeared. Some melted into the countryside; some fled east to the other side of the Jordan River.

How's Saul going at this point?

- Remember the perspective of 1 Samuel 12? Israel's human king is to pay attention to Israel's real King – namely God. Saul's doing OK here. He's at Gilgal and he's waiting the seven days for Samuel. In other words, he pays attention to God's word. That's how it's supposed to work.
- But, from the human perspective, it looks very much like this doesn't work. The soldiers desert. The longer he waits, the smaller his army gets. The longer he waits, the greater the odds against him.

And so, he gives up waiting. He makes the critical leadership decision. He goes for political expediency. He offers the sacrifices himself. He knows he has to have

God onside – with the odds stacked up against him the way they are, he doesn't have any chance without God. And so he goes ahead with the sure-fire religious formula for guaranteeing God's help. Notice the logic here.

- I've got God's word on what I'm supposed to do – but that's a bit hard. I'm having trouble doing what God tells me to do.
- So, instead of obeying God's word, I'll come up with something a bit easier – something that's sure to work. I'll offer some sacrifices.

We'd never use that sort of logic, would we? Have you ever tried to bargain with God? Ever been in the situation where you knew what God wanted – you knew what God's word says – but you didn't like that or you thought it too hard and so you offered God something by way of substitution?

- Maybe more prayer.
- Maybe more regular attendance at church.
- Maybe giving up chocolate for a week.
- Maybe obedience in some other area.

Maybe you're doing that now. You know there's something God wants you to do:

- Perhaps some sin He wants you to battle;
- Perhaps an area of godliness He wants to develop;
- Perhaps a relationship He wants you to fix up;
- Perhaps a greater commitment to evangelism

And you're trying to offer Him something instead. The "something instead" may be a very good thing. It may even be something He's pleased with – something you should be doing anyway. But you can never use it as a substitute for obedience.

Saul should've known better.

- He had the example of Gideon. God whittled down Gideon's army from 30000 to 300 just so everyone would know it was God's victory – not Gideon's.
- He had the example from chapter 4. Israel tried to force God to act for them by bringing His Ark into the battle. God demonstrated He's not there to be manipulated by them – to be their servant.

Anyway, Saul does the deed and then Samuel turns up. Saul makes his excuses – tries to justify his actions. He had seven days of watching his army disappear to justify this in his own head – to deceive himself that he was doing the right thing. Samuel cuts across it.

You acted foolishly ... You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, He would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after His own heart and appointed him leader of His people, because you have not kept the LORD'S command.

The consequences are that Saul loses the kingship – no ongoing dynasty. It's at that point the narrator tells us Jonathan is Saul's son – at the point where we know God says he won't be king after his father.

The rest of the chapter continues to set the scene for the upcoming battle.

- Samuel leaves (15). God's prophet – the source of God's word – isn't with Saul and the army.
- Saul's army dwindles to 600 (15).
- The Philistines send out raiding parties at will (17) – probably getting their army into positions of tactical advantage.
- Saul's army has no real weapons (18-22). All the

military firepower is with the Philistines.

So, as you turn to chapter 14, what do you expect? At the human level, Israel has absolutely no hope. The odds against them are overwhelming. And, at the theological level, God's rejected Israel's leader – the kingship will be taken from him. And so, we expect Saul to die in this battle and Israel to be scattered.

Engaging the Enemy

Chapter 14 also opens with Jonathan acting – you get the impression this guy would make a good king. He decides to have a go at a Philistine outpost – with the help of the young guy who carries his armour. Note verse 6:

Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few."

Note two things:

- He knows God can win – and God can do it with a big army or just a few. In fact, He could do it without any help at all – like He did in chapters 5 and 6 when He got His Ark back to Israel.
- He doesn't try to manipulate God. While Jonathan knows what God's capable of, he doesn't have inside knowledge of God's plans. There's no trying to force God into doing something. This isn't a "name it and claim it" theology. He's willing to go out on a limb, but he's not sure of the outcome.

In verses 8 to 10, Jonathan proposes a sign by which they may know God's purposes. They'll break cover and expose themselves to the Philistine lookouts.

- If the lookouts say: Stay where you are – then we'll take that as a sign God doesn't want us to proceed.
- But if the lookouts say: Come up and fight – then we'll take that as a sign God will give us victory – and we'll go up and engage the enemy.

So that's what they do. They break cover. The lookouts see them. The lookouts invite them up for a bit of fun. They scale the cliff and the two of them slaughter the outpost.

How does that work? We're not given many details.

- One possibility is that God intervened. He caused a deep sleep to come on these Philistines so they didn't shoot arrows and throw spears as Jonathan and his mate scaled the cliff and they weren't waiting with swords to capture them at the point of their vulnerability when they reached the top.
- Another possibility is to think through some of the details. We're told these were steep cliffs separating the two armies – big enough to have their own names. Sure, the Philistines invited Jonathan and his mate up for a bit of sport – but they didn't really expect them to take up the offer. Who'd be that stupid? They probably couldn't see the face of the cliff they stood on. They probably assumed these two Israelites went back to their rabbit holes and they themselves went back to playing cards.

Whichever method it was – and it may have been something altogether different – God was in it. Verse 15 makes that clear:

Then panic struck the whole army – those in the camp and field, and those in the outposts and raiding parties – and the ground shook. It was a panic sent by God.

The narrator then leaves Jonathan on top of the cliff with his armour bearer and takes us back to Saul. He left him camped under a pomegranate tree back in verse 2 – in the company of a priest named Ahijah – a priest from the doomed line of Eli.

Saul has some lookouts as well. They report a disturbance in the Philistine camp. They assume an Israelite's caused it and make a search to find out who. That's when they discover Jonathan's absence. Saul decides it may be time to act – maybe because he's worried about his son or maybe because he thinks the disturbance something to take advantage of. He asks the priest to organise finding out what God wants. However, before the priest can finish getting God's opinion, it becomes fairly obvious the Philistines are in all-out retreat and so Saul gives chase – rather successfully as it turns out.

We get a conclusion in verse 23:

So the LORD rescued Israel that day, and the battle moved on beyond Beth Aven.

Everything seems good. Sure, there are several surprises.

- The very fact that Israel won is a bit of a surprise – not because we thought God couldn't do it, but because we thought God was about to act against Saul. So, on this occasion, Israel's not punished for Saul's failure.
- It's a bit of a surprise that Saul and Jonathan are still alive – after all, chapter 13 strongly suggested this was a story about Saul losing the kingship.
- And it's a bit of a surprise that God uses Jonathan rather than the king to get things going. But then, if we've paid attention to the story so far, we're probably getting used to God acting through unexpected

people. And Hannah's song back in chapter 2 told us that was how God often acted.

Yet, all in all, the Philistines are beaten. They're back home where they belong. God, like He did in the Judges Period, saves Israel once again. It's got that "this is the happy end of the story" feel about it.

Mopping up Operations

And yet, that's not the conclusion to this story. There's another twist to be explored – and the narrator takes us back a few hours in time to explore it. Verse 24:

Now the men of Israel were in distress that day ...

Note the contrast being drawn here – a contrast that's easy to miss because someone stuck a heading in between.

- Verse 23: God rescued Israel that day.
- Verse 24: the men of Israel were in distress that day.

The same word was used back in 13:6 to say the men of Israel were *hard pressed* by the Philistine army. That army's not a problem anymore. God's dealt with them – but they're still in distress. Why? What's going on here?

The rest of verse 24:

because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, "Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!" So none of the troops tasted food.

Israel's king like the nations brings trouble on them. Saul replaces the Philistines as the cause of their problems. Saul turns deliverance into distress.

- Immediate trouble because the men are faint and lack the strength to press their advantage.
- Immediate trouble because when evening comes and the men can eat, they're in such a hurry they

break the law about eating meat with blood in it.

- Long-term trouble because the Philistines aren't fully defeated and so come back to haunt Israel on another day.

What's behind this oath? It looks like an attempt to manipulate God, doesn't it? It's not something God asked for. There's no word from God commanding this as a condition of victory. Rather, it's more like religious bribery. It reminds us a bit of Jephthah's vow in Judges 11 – the vow to sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house if God gave him victory. It was all so unnecessary, because God had already promised victory. That turned out to be his only daughter.

Israel's king also brings trouble on Israel because he wants to enforce his curse. Jonathan wasn't there when the curse was uttered. He was busy attacking the Philistines instead. He came across some wild honey in the woods. He ate it and was strengthened. It helped him continue the fight. When he's told of the curse, he says:

My father has made trouble for the country. See how my eyes brightened when I tasted a little of this honey. How much better it would have been if the men had eaten today some of the plunder they took from their enemies. Would not the slaughter of the Philistines have been even greater?

Eating the honey got him in trouble with his father. Saul wants to chase the Philistines and drive home the advantage. He checks with God first – at least, he tries to check, but God doesn't answer. So, he assumes someone's done the wrong thing. They cast lots to find out who – and it comes out that Jonathan's eaten the honey. Like Jeph-

thah, Saul's serious about the curse he uttered. Like Jephthah, he's so serious he wants to execute his son. He wants to execute the human responsible for initiating Israel's deliverance. Fortunately for Jonathan, the army intervenes and stops that happening. Unfortunately for Israel, it means the rest of the Philistines get away.

Evaluating Saul

Chapter 14 concludes with two brief lists.

- The first (47-48) lists Saul's military accomplishments.
- The second (49-51) details Saul's family.

And then there's a final verse telling us that Saul kept fighting the Philistines throughout his life.

Saul had military success. He inflicted punishment on these other nations (47). He fought valiantly (48). As far as being a king like the nations, he made his mark. He kept Israel from obliteration. But the narrator doesn't tell us much about that. He acknowledges it happened, but it's not the most important thing. More important is what he tells us in these chapters. Saul may be impressive – he may be the sort of guy that looks like he'd make a good king – but he wasn't the king required by chapter 12. He disobeyed God. It's more important we be told about that than his military successes.

These two chapters keep putting Saul and Jonathan side by side. We're intended to see the contrast.

- Saul sits around with his dwindling army in fear and trembling. Jonathan initiates the conflict.
- Saul thinks God's got to be forced to act for them and does the appropriate religious things to ensure that. Jonathan assumes God's already for them.

- Saul thinks it all depends on him – on what he does to get God to act. Jonathan assumes it all depends on God – God can save by many or few.

One assumption leads to a lot of unnecessary religious activity. The other assumption leads to trust.

So, how do you relate to God? How do you get God to act for you to guarantee your success?

- Read the Bible more?
- Pray more?
- Offer some impressive acts of self-denial?

It's the wrong approach.

God's already for us. Romans 8:31-32 tells us:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all — how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?

Ephesians 1:3 says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Do we believe that? Are we willing to trust God's word?

That's what it boils down to. When we want to try doing all these things to manipulate God, it's because we think we know better than Him what's best for us. We're sure we know what's really good for us and we want God to come through and give it to us. Saul, in his own wisdom, knew it was good for him to keep his army around and so he disobeyed God's instructions to achieve that "good" end. He brought distress to Israel. Unfortunately, too often we do exactly the same thing. We think we know

better than God. We think it'd be good if we found a way to force God to do our will.

Don't get me wrong here.

- Reading your Bible's a good thing to do.
- You should pray.
- Self-denial is a Biblical concept – Jesus tells you to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him.

It's right that you do those things, and many more – but not if your motivation is to make God your errand-boy. God won't put up with that – because that's not treating Him as God. Trust Him. Pay attention to His word. Obey it – because that shows you trust Him.

- Even in the hard times.
- Even when you don't understand what He's doing.
- Even when you don't like His instructions.

But never think you'll somehow obligate God by doing this – that He'll owe you. That can never happen. And, if you truly understand God and how God's fully for you, you wouldn't want it to happen.