

## 1 Samuel 13:23-14:23 – Forget the pomegranates, do something! (11.10.09am)

A child is born. The parents are proud of their beautiful new child. When they are happy they know how to handle it properly, they take it out and show it off to family and friends. A wide smile on their face as they wheel their new addition around the streets, and everyone admires the new baby.

“Aah! Isn’t she so cute! Look at her little nose, her cheeky little grin! Look at those dinky little fingers and toes. She looks so lovely. She does take after her mother, you know.”

“Oh - hasn’t he got big ears? He cries a lot, doesn’t he? He’s a stubborn little thing, isn’t he? Does he need changing?” “He does take after his father!”

A child is a miraculous creation; it’s amazing that there’s some of the mother’s traits, and some of the father’s, and some that neither knows where they come from!

I want us to look this morning at Saul and his son Jonathan. I hope I’m not going to confuse you – this **isn’t** the same Saul as we’ve been hearing about recently in the book of Acts; this is Saul, the first human king of God’s chosen people, the people of Israel, and his son, Jonathan.

In some ways father and son were alike: King David mourns for them after they’ve been killed in battle in 2 Samuel chapter 1, he says *‘Saul and Jonathan – in life they were loved and gracious, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.’* 2 Samuel 1:23, he talks about characteristics they had in common. But we’re going to look at the **differences** between them in an event recorded in 1 Samuel 14.

Let’s read from 1 Samuel 13:23, the last verse in the chapter. [Blue Bible P. 283]

So what is the situation at the start of our story? Well, we find ourselves at a place in the rugged hill country about seven miles north east of Jerusalem. King Saul has taken the Israelite army there to confront the Philistines in chapter 13.

At first it went well, but things went downhill very quickly. We read in chapter 13:2,3 that Saul had 3000 men with him – fine at the start. But the Philistines mustered together an army of 6000 charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore (13:5) – that’s a lot of soldiers!

For various reasons, Saul finds himself in chapter 14 with an army of only 600 men, and we read the following in 13:22, *‘So on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them.’* The clever Philistines had got rid of all the blacksmiths in Israel, or moved them into their own land, so that the Israelites couldn’t make any weapons to fight them with. **Very** clever.

So we find Saul here in verse 2 of our passage, *‘staying on the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree in Migron. With him were about 600 men, ...’* I don’t know if you’ve seen a pomegranate tree – I hadn’t, so I looked on the Internet to find some pictures. It’s a very nice little tree with large, bright red flowers. Lovely to look at and I’m sure a very pleasant place to sit, surrounded by these colourful flowers.

I don’t know if you’ve eaten pomegranate – I remember when I was in my early teens – about 10 years ago now – sitting and eating a pomegranate, getting a little tooth pick, and eating these miniscule bits of fruit – it took **ages!** Rather have a banana! So now I’m imagining Saul sitting under this pomegranate tree, relaxing in the shade, admiring the lovely flowers, and if he’s eating the fruit, he’s obviously in no rush to do anything in particular. Why is that?

Well, look back to chapter 13:6, *‘When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear.’*

**This** is the army of Israel. **This** is God’s army! How humiliating! Hiding in caves; running away; quaking with fear. The army of God a quivering **jelly** of a collection of men. No wonder Saul is just sitting there – look at the men he’s got to work with!

**Moses** tells his people how God wants them to go into battle in Deuteronomy chapter 20 – let’s look quickly. [Read Deut. 20:1-4] They’ve forgotten God’s promise.

So many times we read in the book of Joshua *‘and the Lord gave them into the hand of Israel.’* In chapter 21:44 it says, *‘Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the Lord’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.’* They’ve forgotten.

Hiding in caves; running away; quaking with fear! **God** hasn't changed. The **promise** hasn't changed. The situation is critical, it says; the army was hard pressed, it says. But in whose eyes?

The **soldiers** saw the situation was critical. They've taken their eyes off their God. They've forgotten that he's all powerful. They've forgotten what he's done for them in the past in delivering all their enemies into their hands. They've lost sight of their God, his character and his promise. They can only think about what is physically in front of them – all those Philistine soldiers, their superior numbers, their superior weaponry, their swift chariots. They can no longer see that God is fighting for them. So they run away, they hide. What a tragedy.

Before we condemn them, let's look at ourselves – would we do any different? **Do** we face trials in any different way? When we come against opposition, when the difficulties seem insurmountable, when everything seems to be against us, don't **we** run away? Don't **we** hide? Don't **we** curl up in a corner and hope it'll go away? Well, at least we probably **feel** like doing these things – we're only human – but **God** hasn't changed, **his promises** haven't changed.

God made a promise to those who are his and who serve him, '*And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.*' Matthew 28:20. And in Hebrews 13 we read, '*...because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*' These are two quotes the writers take from the Old Testament – from Deuteronomy and the Psalms – showing that God hasn't changed between then and now, his promises haven't changed between then and now.

Jesus said, '*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*' John 16:33.

If we know God, we'll be able to think of times when he has given us **victory** in difficult situations; it's good to spend time thinking **back** to those times when God has been an ever present help in trouble. Not to **dwell** on the past, but to take strength and encouragement from it. That's why David reminds his readers for example in Psalm 115 of all God did in leading them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. We find it so easy to forget, don't we? That's why we celebrate communion, so that we don't forget the great things that we can know now, because Jesus died and rose again to bring forgiveness for our sins, and make it possible to know God.

But if we **don't** know God, we don't know anything of this assurance. We **can't** think back to what God has done for us. We **can't** gain strength and encouragement from what we know of God. If we are not **his**, his promise to fight for us doesn't apply. What a hopeless situation to be in. Where can we find help, if not from God? The help this world can offer is **never** going to be sufficient. **God alone** can give perfect freedom from fear – come to him, believe in him, trust in him, find strength in **him**.

So Saul sits under his pomegranate tree; head of the army, he **represents** his people Israel - disarmed and dispirited. It's no wonder he's feeling so glum and so powerless, his army have lost sight of their God.

But there may be another reason why Saul is 'content' just to sit here: In chapter 13:9 Saul had offered up a burnt offering to God, going **against** what Samuel had told him to do in chapter 10:8, to wait until Samuel got there. As a result of this he says in 13:13, *'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.'*

So perhaps Saul is not **sure** of his position before God – is he God's chosen king or not? Perhaps doubts have come into his mind. Perhaps he's thinking that if God doesn't intend Saul's kingdom to endure, perhaps he shouldn't be king **now**. You'll remember that Saul was reluctant to become king in the first place – when Samuel came to announce God's choice of king of his people in chapter 10, Saul couldn't be found – he was hiding among the baggage!

Perhaps he's lost heart. Perhaps he's feeling miserable and helpless, just like his men. So he sits there, waiting. Some people say, 'Patience is a virtue' and 'Good things come to those who wait.' But there's waiting, and there's waiting.

In his Psalms, David says, *'Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.'* Psalm 27:14. And *'Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him;'* Psalm 37:7. But when does waiting become 'putting off'? Sometimes 'waiting' becomes an excuse for not acting, putting it off. I don't get the impression here that Saul is waiting patiently for the Lord.

Things aren't going the way Saul expected and wanted them to. So he sits, admiring the pomegranate tree, gazing at its red flowers, waiting for something to happen. Saul had a sword in his hand, but did nothing with it.

Verse 22 of chapter 13 tells us that the only other person with a sword in the army of Israel was Saul's son Jonathan. But what he did with it was in stark contrast to his father.

Jonathan **springs** into action – no waiting around for him! Why does **he** act so differently from his father? – it's the same dire situation facing them both.

Jonathan sees that there is a situation here that needs resolving – the Philistines are occupying land belonging to Israel and seemingly making Israel powerless to do anything about it. Jonathan is committed to his people, but his first loyalty is to God. This situation isn't bringing glory to God, and so Jonathan feels that this isn't right, and that he should do something about it. The Philistines need driving off the land God has **promised** to Israel.

We see that Jonathan's loyalty to God demands that he takes action, and this is true of us too – our loyalty to God should always dictate our actions; we decide to take action informed by our understanding of God and our loyalty to **Him**. We don't allow our feelings for the world to go against what we know **God** wants us to do.

So he hatches a plan – he doesn't tell his father, perhaps indicating that Saul would have tried to stop him. It's a brave plan, a daring plan. The readers of this story would have known the area was very dangerous, to each side a crag where the enemy could easily have laid traps. It could have been disastrous.

But the important point is in the second half of verse 6; *'Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.'* Jonathan has tremendous faith in God. He knows that God has been **good** to his people in that the 600 men had **not** been destroyed – physically-speaking, the 6000 plus Philistines could easily have overwhelmed them, but God in his goodness had spared them so far. Jonathan saw this as God's hand at work. God has saved them up 'til now, they are God's people, and Jonathan trusts his God to continue to keep them.

The other part of his thinking is that God is all powerful, **nothing** can hinder his purposes, **nothing** can get in God's way – if God wants something to happen, it certainly **will** happen. God will save his people, whether by many or by few. Jonathan knows that God's powerful hand will save his people, not the strength of an army. God is powerful to save, but he's also powerful to save by his people, using his people. Jonathan saw this – God saves, but he can save using his children.



Do **we** have this faith? If we are Christians, we know that God saves – **we've** been saved from the punishment we deserve for our sins through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. We **know** God saves.

But do we also have the faith that believes that God can use **us** to save? Do we know that God can save his people **by us**? If we really believe this we will see that like Jonathan we can't just stand back and take no action. God's purpose is **clear** – he wants to save people, he wants men, women and children to be saved from eternity without him – he will save them by **various** means, but one way used very often is through **us**. Do we believe that? Are we **acting** upon it? When God's purpose is so clear, how can we **not** act in obedience?

Peter's second letter tells us that God is being patient with man, delaying the day when this world will end and judgement will come to those that are not trusting in Jesus for salvation, God is delaying this final judgement because he is '*not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*' 2 Peter 3:9. So God wants people to be saved and he wants to use us in their salvation. What a great privilege, to be used by God to save others. But are we **doing** it?

You see, Jonathan could have said, 'Well, the **king's** not taking any action, the army are powerless against the enemy, it's not **my** place to do anything to change the situation. **I** don't give the orders. I'll just do what I'm told to do. Pass a pomegranate, dad.'

No, he's convinced that God could and **would** save his people '*by many or by few*', he **could** use Jonathan to save them. At this stage, he doesn't know if God **will** use him or not – verse 6, '*Perhaps the Lord will act on our behalf.*' But he takes action to find out. He won't **know** unless he does something.

So Jonathan's faith is put into action. He decides **now** is the time to act. He takes God's promises to heart - God can save, God can save by **him**. He acts in faith.

In verse 8 onwards, we read the conversation that Jonathan has with the Philistine guards – remember in the physical location where they were, the Philistines could have picked them off at any time. Verse 10, '*If they say "come up to us", we will climb up because that will be our sign that the Lord has given them into our hands.*'

So when this **does** happen, Jonathan knows God is in this – verse 6 said '*Perhaps the Lord will act,*' but now Jonathan says '*the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel.*'

The Philistines' arrogance has played into Jonathan's hands, who now knows the fight is on. He has confidence in his own **ability**, but even **more so** in the power of God. God repays his faith, and he quickly does away with the boasting guards, and because of the surprise attack, he and his armour-bearer are empowered to kill some twenty others too.

When Jonathan was faced with the enemy, he knew that **no number** of Philistine soldiers was a problem for God. He **trusted** God, and the size of the army wouldn't restrict God's ability to help him. God honoured their faith and brave action and gave them victory.

Likewise with us, you know: if we feel surrounded or overwhelmed by circumstances or situations, by enemies, we need to remember that God is **never** intimidated by the size of the enemy. God **always** has the resources to win the battle – if **he** calls us to action, we commit our resources to him, and **trust** him to lead us to victory.

Verse 15: panic struck the whole Philistine army, there was what seemed to be an earthquake. But this wasn't a **normal** set of circumstances. This was a panic sent by **God**. This was **God's** battle, **he** fought for his people. They would gain the victory because God fought through them and for them. Fighting God's battle **always** brings victory because he will fight on your side. **God** can't lose, **you** can't lose if you are fighting for God. Remember the promise in Deuteronomy 20:4, *'For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.'*

Meanwhile what's happening back in the valley with Saul and the army? Saul is **still** slow to act; rather than joining the battle, he gathers his troops to see who has left the camp. He seeks more guidance, he sends for the priest. Seeking clear guidance? Or still putting off? Where does waiting become putting things off? We must be careful not to postpone the purposes of God by **waiting** rather than making decisions.

Eventually he makes the right decision and takes his army to battle. What a **frightening** picture he finds – if it wasn't so serious a situation it would be comical – the Philistines are there, turning their swords on each other – it made **no difference whatsoever** that the Israelite army had no swords or spears, the Philistines used their own against **each other!** **Nothing** is too hard for God! This is God's battle. God has the victory.

Isn't it amazing how everyone wants to be involved in success and victory? All of a sudden all those soldiers crept out of their hidey-holes; all those ran back from where they'd fled to. They all joined the battle in hot pursuit, we read in verse 22. If only they'd stood on God's promise in the **first** place, his promise to fight for them and give them victory over their enemies. They could have known victory without having to go through a period of defeat.

Do we want to be involved in victory? Then we have to be on the Lord's side. The way to avoid **defeat**, is to stand on God's promises, and he will give us victory. There are **so many** wonderful promises in God's Word – search them out, stand on them, experience victory. Look at the Philistines, the poor Philistines. Poor because they were **always** destined for defeat – **no-one** can withstand the power of God.

Of course our battle at the moment is not a physical battle – we're not called in this country to take up arms and fight **physically** for our faith. But we **do** face opposition, and this looks certain to increase in days to come. The battle of faith is God's battle – he will provide the resources.

We're reminded of the spiritual armour that God provides in Ephesians 6, verse 10 onwards. Let's just finish by looking at those verses together. [Read Eph. 6:10-17] God will grant his people victory if we stand firm for him, standing on his promises, trusting him to provide the resources we need.

We're **all** facing battles of one kind or another; don't sit under the pomegranate tree admiring your surroundings, waiting, resting, contemplating, however relaxing and pleasant it may be; **now** is the time for action – the sword of God is in our hands [hold up Bible] – the power of God unto salvation - what does God want **you** to do?