

Rebuke and Rejection
I Samuel 13:1 – 14:52
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When I first accepted Jesus as my Savior, I related to Him as my friend. As I grew in my understanding of God, I learned to think of Him as much more. My concept of God has continued to grow through joys, challenges heartaches, discipline and blessings. Every journey into His Word causes me to grow and to understand a new aspect of who God is. In today's lesson, Saul learned that God is much greater than he had thought.

The story begins as Saul chose his standing army. As we read in last week's lesson, the call went out to fight the Ammonites and 330,000 men answered to join Saul in battle. Now, he conscripted 2,000 to stay with him in Micmash, and 1,000 to remain with Jonathan in Gibeah. These men would train to be Israel's full time army. The rest were sent to their homes where they could stand ready to answer future calls to battle.

In I Samuel 7:13 we read that "the Philistines did not invade Israelite territory again" throughout Samuel's lifetime. However, when they saw the presence of Israel's army in Micmash, and Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost in Gibeah, the call to arms apparently went out in Philistia also and an even bigger army gathered to oppose Israel: consisting of three thousand chariots and soldiers "as numerous as the sand on the seashore." [I Sam. 13:5] When the soldiers of Israel saw this Philistine army coming, they gave over Micmash to them and retreated to Geba and finally to Gilgal.

Now, there is no record of Israel obtaining any chariots until the reign of Solomon; therefore, the sight of this massive army cowered Israel's army. They knew God had defeated the Ammorites just ten years before. But facing such overwhelming odds seemed impossible now. Perhaps their concept of God depended on the size of their army. The soldiers began to slip away to hide in caves, thickets, behind rocks or in pits and cisterns. [1 Samuel 13:7] They shifted from trusting in God to relying on their own strength.

I know it's easy for me to fall into the same spiritual trap. There have been times when our enemy seems so big that we see only the size of our problem, instead of the size of our God. How deep our financial debt seems. How wide the chasm has opened between our spouse and us or between our child and us. How far we have fallen into fear over that looming layoff, that rift in relationships, that depressing disappointment? We become paralyzed with that fear and slink off to hide in the pit of our shade-drawn-room or in the cave of our busyness so that we will not have to face that which we simply cannot handle by ourselves. Have we forgotten how our God fought for us in our past? Is He now too small to help us?

Saul realized his army was losing heart in this stand-off. So, he eagerly awaited Samuel's arrival, knowing they would all find inspired bravery when Samuel prayed for them. He waited - for seven days, counting fewer men in camp each day. Now, we don't have a record of any promise from Samuel that he would arrive in seven days on this occasion: previously, Samuel told Saul to wait seven days and he would be anointed king. [1 Sam. 10:8] But perhaps Samuel had given Saul his plan to come when the word went out that the Philistines were gathering to oppose him. But Saul was increasingly more worried about the leaking numbers of his army as each day slowly passed by. This wait made God seem smaller each passing moment.

How big is our God? Sometimes it is frightful to see the enemy growing, with no end in sight! All of our past knowledge seems absolutely inadequate to win against such an enemy. Our dread increases as the enemy approaches. But that is when we must wait and turn to see God's power in a new way. The prophet Isaiah put it this way, "God doesn't come and go. God lasts. He's Creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath. And He knows everything, inside and out. He energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts. For even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. But those who wait upon

God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, They run and don't get tired, they walk and don't lag behind.” [Isaiah 40:29,31 Msg.] We can wait safely knowing everything is in God's hands.

Saul waited and wavered. Rather than being content to wait for God's way and how God wanted to handle this problem, Saul hit the seventh day and decided that he couldn't wait any longer. At this point Saul's concept of God was integrally tied up with offering a sacrifice and he desperately needed God's favor of blessing and guidance. So he began to perform the sacrifice himself.

Leviticus lists the regulations for presenting a sacrifice to the Lord God. The descendants of Aaron and Levi were to be priests and they must be consecrated and clean to offer them.

Leviticus 22:3 states, “For generations to come, if any of your descendants is ceremonially unclean and yet comes near the sacred offerings that the Israelites consecrate to the Lord, that person must be cut off from my presence. I am the Lord.” Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, not of Levi. He was not consecrated to be a priest. But he performed this sacrifice anyway.

However, there was a deeper problem for Saul. In verse 12, Saul's excuse to Samuel reveals it: “I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord's favor. So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.’” Matthew Poole puts it this way in his commentary: “I did it against my own mind and inclination. My conscience told me I should forbear it, and punctually obey God's command delivered to me by Samuel, but my necessity urged me to make haste.”

Saul saw his army dwindling as the Philistine army was growing hour by hour. Rather than seeking the solution from the same God who helped him in the past, Saul wanted God to function on his time-table. Did you notice how many times he used the word, “I”? He forgot that the omnipresent God knew exactly where the Philistines were, and where Samuel was. God also knew exactly what was in Saul's heart. God saw beneath that tall handsome kingly appearance to the man who doubted his God. Saul felt he needed to go through the steps of a sacrifice to have God's “favor,” just like a person might knock on wood, or rub a lucky penny. But his heart did not believe God would answer this problem even without an army as huge as that of his enemy.

Why did God have Samuel delay his arrival? Matthew Poole suggests, “This first king that Israel demanded must trust God's authority without question or hesitancy or human logic. God wanted even his earthly sovereign representative to model for His people that God alone rules Israel.”

When we see the enemy gathering troops and our resources shrinking, can we trust God's authority without question or hesitancy? Human logic may tell us to DO something - now! But if we do not hear God answering our prayers for relief, perhaps He is building our faith as we live in the tension between that earthly logic and that heavenly miracle He wants to show us.

This may be a shock, but God does not desire our happiness so much as he desires our peaceful trust. Jesus warned his disciples in John 16:33, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Can we wait for God's peace in the terrible circumstances we face, and refrain from doubting God with our actions?

Saul had just completed giving the sacrifice when Samuel approached him, asking “What have you done? ...You have acted foolishly....You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you;” [1 Sam. 13:11, 13] Last week we studied that command in 1 Samuel 12:14,15. The Lord required that even though He would grant a king to rule over them, both the people and that king must know and keep the commands of the Lord God. “If you follow the Lord your God – good! But if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against His commands, His hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers.” Now, Saul must face these consequences personally. He would not pass on the kingdom to his sons. Instead, “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.”

Next week we will see the man God would choose. But it seems that these dour words had such

an impact on Saul, that they changed his mind about pursuing his planned attack. Saul pulled back his men from Gilgal to Gibeah, following Samuel. But his fears went with him, and grew as he counted the soldiers who were still with him and found that there were only 600 men now. We do not hear Saul repent of his doubts or fears.

Seeing that Saul was not going to attack, the Philistines pulled their camp up to Micmash and set up sentries. They began to feel even more secure as the days and weeks and perhaps months passed without a battle. So, they began to send out raiding parties in every direction except where Saul's army lay. No sense poking a sleeping bear!

Now the Scriptures give us a clearer picture of the completely unbalanced situation facing Israel's army. As the Philistines had dominated the area for so long, they had killed or captured every blacksmith in the land of Israel. They required the people of Israel to come into their territory to even sharpen their farm implements. The last verse of chapter 13 described the state of Saul's army: "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 Jonathan had them." This lack seems to indicate that this "stand-off" lasted perhaps for months.

Ephesians 6 talks about the battles we face. Verse 12 reminds us, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." How can we fight against such overwhelming forces as we see them devastating our nation, community and family? Are we trusting a god who is too small to fight these forces? Absolutely not! Read on in Ephesians.

"Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." [Ephesians 6:12,13] Just as Saul and Jonathan had to stand and watch devastation being spread in their nation, we too see such depravity spreading past us. But we are to stand. We are not completely defenseless, nor was Israel. God is on our side and as we read in John 16:33, Jesus said, "But take heart! I have overcome the world." We must put on our armor, and take up "the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God," [Ephesians 6:17] and we must stand in prayer against this enemy and watch what the Almighty God will do.

While Saul saw overwhelming odds, his son Jonathan saw that Almighty God was on their side, tipping the balance in Israel's favor. So, seeing Jonathan's heart of faith, God gave the word to him. It was time to go up against this vile enemy.

Jonathan said to his 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." [1 Sam. 14:6] His armor bearer replied, "Do all that you have in mind; . . . Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul." While thoughts of God's commands and presence shot doubt in Saul's heart, these same considerations fired up these believing men to storm the enemy's stronghold, with God on their side.

The terrain described indicated that Israel's army had switched from where their positions were at the beginning of chapter 13. Saul had established Micmash as his base where 3,000 men formed his standing army. Now, the Philistines were in Micmash and Saul had joined Jonathan's training base in Geba and Gibeah where Saul held court under a pomegranate tree. A deep ravine or wadi ran between these locations. Archeologists have located the area and noted how steep the walls of the huge stone cliffs were. On one side the cliff was named Bozez and the other was named Seneh. Bozez means shining. This rocky precipice was made of the same reddish rock as Seneh; whereas, Bozez was capped with a chalky white stone, which explains its name. Travel was possible down around the two steep sides, but to climb both hands and feet must be used, making them great look-out posts, but poor paths of attack, being easily defended.

So this, Jonathan decided, would play to their favor. They may have started down their side of the ravine before dawn. Then, the guards on the Philistine side would think they were defecting and probably no match for their garrison of armed men above them. But the two men were spotted beginning their climb up Seneh's cliff. That's why Jonathan decided on the sign he would use to know

if this was a good idea or not. He said, "If they say to us, 'Wait there until we come to you', we will stay where we are and not go up to them. But 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." If the Philistines felt threatened, they would not want Jonathan and his armor bearer to come any closer and would keep them in the more vulnerable position of the lower ground of the ravine.

However, Jonathan heard the answer to his sign when the guard arrogantly said, "Come up to us and we'll teach you a lesson." The guards ridiculed the Israelite army because so many had defected into the caves and holes in the hills. They figured these two "ex-soldiers" could become a little something to work off the boredom, caused by this stalemate.

Jonathan finished his climb not in subjugation, but in power. He immediately began fighting and killed about twenty men with his armor bearer in the first half acre this outpost filled. Then Jehovah God fought for them, sending a panic in the main camp through an earthquake. Not only did the main camp begin to flee, but the panic routed the raiding parties as well! "The Philistines perceived that some Divine power was fighting against them, and all the stories of the unseen Helper of the Hebrews would flash across their minds." [Elliott]

Meanwhile, Saul's lookouts saw the panic of the Philistine camp and how they were "melting away in all directions" like butter sliding off of hot pancakes. What a great victory! God was using just two men who trusted in Him to rout a huge army of invaders! But Saul couldn't understand that what was happening was actually God fighting for Israel. So, rather than growing in his understanding of God, he decided to take roll-call again.

We see how God's ways are greater than man's ways. There is no need to explain how or why God works among us. We just need to trust and thank Him when he answers our prayers. We read that we need to be ready with our Spiritual Armor and to stand while we pray against our enemy. But Saul got so content in the waiting that he forgot to be alert for God's timing.

Ephesians 6:18 gives us our spiritual battle orders right after revealing our Spiritual armor: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." Saul didn't keep alert, even though the army was just a ravine away, and even though he had look-outs watching them. How do we know this? Because in the next few verses he was running in circles trying to decide what he should do instead of giving marching orders.

First, his roll call found that Jonathan and his armor bearer were the ones missing from his army. Secondly, he thought of the lesson he had learned with his premature sacrifice. He feared acting rashly again as he had before. So he called the priest Ahijah to go and get the Ark of the Covenant wanting the sign of God's presence to go with them. But the ark was in Kirjath-Jearim and it would take days to get it back to Geba through the mountains. Ahijah must have reached into the ephod containing the Urim and Thummim to help Saul decide what to do about seeking God's favor because verse 19 tells us: "While Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the Philistine camp increased more and more. So Saul said to the priest, 'Withdraw your hand.'" Saul had finally decided, because the sound of battle distracted him, it was time to assemble his men and enter the battle, now.

Once again, Saul was too impatient to leap into action, to stop and finish his inquiry as to God's purpose. Matthew Henry stated, "He that believeth will not make such haste, nor reckon any business so urgent as not to allow time to take God with him." The Pulpit Commentary concludes, "Saul, impatient of delay, cannot wait 'till the will of God is made known to him....But this precipitancy very well shows the state of Saul's mind." Several commentaries stated that if Saul had taken the time to consult with God now, perhaps he would not err in demanding a fast that Jonathan didn't know about, seriously handicapping his army in this battle.

How many times have we asked friends and counselors what we should do, but have neglected asking God because we felt so pressed into action? How many times has God given us things we should do and we have neglected action, fearing defeat as Saul did concerning this battle. Proverbs

3:5,6 instructs us to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and he will make your paths straight.” The principles that the Lord has given us in the Word will lead us straighter than our logic or good sense ever will. Trust Him and be so immersed in His light that the right path will be easy to see, even in the midst of battle.

And this battle was fierce. Jonathan and his armor bearer were joined by the other Hebrews who had been in the Philistine camp. Some of these may have been pressed into servitude during the Philistine raids; some may have come willingly to do commerce such as sharpening their farming tools. Then, Saul and his army joined the fight. Finally, the soldiers who had hidden in the caves and pits joined the fight too. Even those who had fled into the surrounding country side, seeing the panic in those raiding parties, joined the fight and began to rout the Philistine army. As the battle grew, the soldiers Saul was so concerned about having abandoned the fight, joined the battle on converging fronts to chase the Philistine army back toward their own country.

This was a miraculous victory! However, the final thing Saul had done before joining the battle was to bind his men in a vow not to eat anything until evening. Now, if Jonathan and his armor bearer began their assault at dawn, most of the men did not even have breakfast, so they began to be distressed and were losing their strength to continue the pursuit of the fleeing Philistines.

Why would Saul deny his men food during battle? Was he afraid that they would take too long and lose sight of the enemy? Was he so bent on revenge for the disgrace of his indecision that he didn't want them to stop long enough to doubt his leadership? Whatever the reason was, he added the penalty of death for anyone who disobeyed.

Unknowingly, Jonathan took advantage of the wild honey he found as they pursued the Philistines through the woods. Scarcely missing a step, he merely dipped his staff end into the comb and pulled out a taste of honey that greatly relieved his fading energy. It was only after this act that he heard from a fellow soldier about his father's vow and curse. Jonathan knew this order had caused trouble for Israel, because the army was lagging behind in pursuit, due to their fatigue. As the battle continued, the Philistines were dropping their supplies and spoil to lighten their load and aid their escape.

Finally, as evening fell and the Israelite army stopped chasing their enemy, they began to eat some food they had retrieved. With all of the exertion of the fight and flight, the men were so starved they decided to kill and cook some of the animals they plundered as quickly as they could. They were starting fires and slaughtering the animals but not taking the time to drain the blood from them before they started a meal of steak, cooked extra rare. God had established at the time of Noah, “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.” [Genesis 9:4,5] Again in Leviticus 17:10-12 “Therefore I say to the Israelites, 'None of you may eat blood, nor may an alien living among you eat blood.’” The men had obeyed their king's order but not the command of God.

One of the men brought this lapse to Saul who called out, “You have broken faith,” to stop the men. Saul showed that he did understand the Lord's ordinances. He rolled over a big stone and began helping the men to drain the blood out of the slaughtered animals. After this 1 Samuel 14:35 says, “Then Saul built an altar to the Lord; it was the first time he had done this.” Saul showed a step forward in his value of God's commands.

We no longer have to offer sacrifices of animals for our forgiveness of sin. Christ offered himself as our perfect sacrifice. When He shed his blood on the cross, He was paying the penalty we owed, once for all. Have you ever built an altar of thanks to God? It will probably not be made out of stone. But perhaps it is a verse, a souvenir to remind you of a retreat or sermon where you recognized God in a new way. An altar is where you lay down your own will and give it to God. He encourages us, “...to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” Saul recognized God's amazing intervention to provide this victory for his people. We need

to purposefully thank God just as sincerely for all He has done to save us from our enemies.

Saul's act of worship reenergized him. He desired to continue the attack that night. "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them till dawn, and let us not leave one of them alive." [1 Samuel 14:36] His men are ready to follow Saul their king. But this time Ahijah wanted to ask God's will first. Saul must have wondered, since everything had been going so well, why should they stop and ask God's will now? They were on a winning streak, the men were on his side, surely God would confirm Saul's will. But instead, "God did not answer him on that day."

My prayers at times have also been more a request for God to bless my plans than to ask His will. However, God often showed me through a mess that followed, that my plans were not His plans.

Saul, knowing that God demanded His people must keep His commandments, deduced that God's lack of an answer must mean that someone had broken God's commandments. Probably the act of eating the meat without draining the blood had removed God's blessings on this battle. He had to settle this before charging forward. Saul was learning to wait for God's Word. However, he had no idea that it wasn't the army's eating of meat that was the problem. And time was "a-wasting".

Therefore, his impatience broke through again, ushering forth another thoughtless curse: "As surely as the Lord who rescues Israel lives, even if it lies with my son Jonathan, he must die." [1 Samuel 14:39] It's interesting that the army didn't say anything about this dire curse. Perhaps they knew Jonathan hadn't had opportunity to hear of his father's curse about eating, or perhaps they were too concerned that their sin was truly the cause of God's silence. But the lot finally revealed that the problem lay with Jonathan.

King Saul could not believe it! His own son had sinned? Jonathan explained his innocence in eating the honey, and then he bravely asks, "And now must I die?" [1 Samuel 14:43] Saul's plans came to a screeching halt. His own plans were rash. His own plans were not based on the all-knowing future of the omniscient God. His god was based on circumstances. If things were going according to Saul's plans, then God must be blessing him. But if bad circumstances were throwing a wrench in his plans, God must not be on his side. How limited Saul's god was.

How easy it is for us to worship a prosperity god too. As long as things go well in this life, God must be on our side. But when adversity hits; when problems in our family, career goals, social life, or personal health halt our progress toward what we call success, do we turn to an almighty powerful God or our own god of "doing it my way." Saul had an opportunity to learn more about the Sovereign God who uses even adversity to work out growth in our character as He accomplishes His will, but instead he took a vow that could cause his first born son's death.

Saul lost this opportunity for growth. He doubled-down on his vow and would have killed his own son! But finally, his men spoke up to challenge Saul. 1 Samuel 14:45, "But the men said to Saul, 'Should Jonathan die - he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never! As surely as the Lord lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he did this today with God's help.' So the men rescued Jonathan, and he was not put to death."

"Saul stopped pursuing the Philistines, and they withdrew to their own land. After Saul had assumed rule over Israel, he fought against their enemies on every side...He fought valiantly..." [1 Samuel 14:46,47a; 48b] When Saul turned his abilities over to the Lord as Israel's first king, he accomplished God's will to protect God's people.

That's the key message in this story. Worship of the Almighty Lord God must include a lying down of our selves. When we do this, God does not smash our identity into a hollow shell, but rather he turns His will into our passion. He uses the abilities and talents He created in us to accomplish part of His sovereign plan for the world. Saul did not let go of his own will completely, as future lessons will show us. But, let's pray that our concept of God has grown enough today that we may let go of our lives completely and let God use us to win His battle.

In Jonathan's words: "Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many, or by few." Or as stated in this simple math equation: God plus you equals a majority.