

Introduction

Have you ever been over your head in a venture? You know the desperate feeling. Perhaps you were a student in a class that was beyond your ability, at least at the beginning. That happened to me several times in college. Perhaps it was in a job for which you were not adequately prepared. Whatever the situation, you felt desperate. You were expected to perform, but you didn't know what to do; or maybe you knew what to do, but you lacked the ability to accomplish it. You were in over your head. King Saul knew the feeling.

Scripture

We left Saul in chapter 13 in a desperate situation. The Philistines had amassed a large army and were raiding his land. Samuel had left him. His soldiers were slipping away or hiding in caves. The victory of rescuing a city from the Ammonites had seemed to establish him as a true savior-king who knew how to protect his people. But the emotional outburst of that victory has given way to indecision. Like a young athlete who bursts on the professional scene of his sport with gusto, who discovers after a time that he is among great athletes who have stood the test of time, and then loses his swagger, even his self-confidence, and he asks himself, "What am I doing here?" so Saul is in the same boat.

It takes a young soldier to generate action. Just as he had done before, Saul's son, Jonathan, makes a bold move against the Philistines and starts a battle. He scales a cliff with his armor bearer and kills twenty men. Add to that surprise attack a small quake, and the Philistines are thrown into a panic. Saul joins in the fray, the AWOL soldiers rejoin their comrades and a great victory is achieved...to a degree. It is one of the cases where victory feels like defeat. What happened?

The first sign of trouble was that Saul once again needed his son to start the fighting. The king was at a standstill. He could not rally his troops. He was holed up himself in a cave. He had lost the wise counsel of Samuel because of losing his nerve waiting for Samuel's arrival. He just didn't know what to do.

The second sense of trouble is seen in Saul's counselor, named in verse 3: "*Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of the LORD in Shiloh, wearing an ephod.*" The great-grandson of Eli is carrying on the family work as high priest. Isn't that the same family on which God pronounced judgment? Yes, it is. This is not the man you want beside you acting as your mediator with the Lord.

Indeed, it is here that Saul seems the most to be grasping at straws. He needs, or thinks he needs, to use the ark of God to ascertain guidance from the Lord. Remember the last time the ark was brought into a military camp? It spelled total disaster. None of this bodes well for Saul.

But again, Jonathan has forced his father's hand, so that Saul cut off the consultation and joined in the battle, leading him to his rash vow. Full-scale battle is taxing enough on fighters; to do it with food is all the more exhausting, but that is what Saul forced his own people to do. Verse 24 notes: "*Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies.'*" This is a case where emotion in the heat of battle leads to foolish action. What is going through Saul's mind to utter such a ridiculous oath? Anger at the Philistines who have made his life miserable? Perhaps anger and embarrassment over his son yet again leading the battle? Whatever the reason, it shows poor leadership and a mind caught up in self rather than what is best for his men.

Such a binding on his fighters lessened their ability to hunt down their enemies. It led to sin by many of them. Once nightfall arrived, they were so famished that they killed the beasts of their enemies and ate them on the spot, so quickly that they ate without allowing the blood to be drained out—a clear violation of God's law. Saul responds by quickly providing a means to drain the blood of the animals. Even so, it is too late to rectify the sin committed.

Saul then builds an altar. Meanwhile, now that his fighters are fed, he wants to continue the battle through the night and score a decisive victory. The men are ready. That's when Eli's great-grandson steps in and advises that Saul seek the Lord's will: "Let us draw near to God here." That seems like a good religious thing to do. How can one argue with seeking counsel from the Lord? But then, whatever might be the means used to get an answer, none is forthcoming. Saul is stymied.

What follows next is a bizarre scene. Saul concludes that the reason for no answer is a sin being committed. Although the eating of meat with its blood is blatant transgression of the law of God, Saul's method, which would have been accepted as being the means of determining God's will, leads him to Jonathan, his son and clear champion of the battle that day.

Jonathan's sin? Not knowing of his father's oath, he ate a bit of honey. He broke, not God's law, but his father's foolish law. He broke the oath not knowingly but in complete innocence. All the more puzzling it is that God leads Saul, not to the men who transgressed God's law, but to Jonathan. And by the way, one could argue that it was Saul, by his foolish oath, led those men into their sin. Even so, Saul gives the Lord opportunity to expose even him. And yet, Jonathan becomes the scapegoat.

How then does Saul react? Is he torn with remorse over his own folly? Is he filled with grief for his son? When Jonathan nobly accepts his fate, does Saul weep over him? This is his response: "*And Saul said, 'God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan'*" (v. 44).

What is going through Saul's mind? Anger at his son for tasting the honey? Anger at his son for making a fool out of his father, as his oath is made so foolish and odious to all around him? How could Saul act so self-righteously and call upon the name of God as he kills his own son?

Only the righteous indignation of Saul's own men saved Jonathan, as they intervened with their own oath: "*As the LORD lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day*" (v. 45).

Meanwhile, the battle has ended and the remains of the Philistine army escape. There is still more to be said about Saul as a warrior-king that covers the rest of his reign, and it is not what we would expect.

When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. Wherever he turned he routed them. ⁴⁸ And he did valiantly and struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them.

Go figure. This foolish, indecisive, rash king turns into a valiant, tough warrior who fulfills the expectations of his office, laid out by the people: “that our king may...go out before us and fight our battles” (8:21).

Lessons

I have sympathy for Saul. He never asked to be king. He even claimed that he was not the guy. His one battle victory was the direct result of the Spirit of God rushing upon him. Now, he is surrounded by enemies. It is easy to lose nerve, easy to not think clearly. Saul is in over his head in a desperate situation. Even so, he would have done well to follow two principles for us all.

1. When responsibility is given, we are to accept and to trust in the Lord.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, as Gandalf explains to Frodo the history of the ring that has come into his possession, Frodo responds, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.” No doubt Saul had similar thoughts. Gandalf responds with an answer that applied to Saul and to us all, especially we who acknowledge our Lord and his sovereignty. “So do I and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

The times in which we live, the places where we live, the personalities and gifts we possess—these have been given us, and with them responsibility to serve our Lord honorably. Much of our circumstances are outside our control. What we possess is our determination to accept whatever the Lord brings our way and serve him to the best of our ability.

And understand as well that every circumstance is a test for us, not so much for how we will perform, but how well we will trust our Lord. Do you trust now that whatever your circumstance it is not outside the control of your Lord? Do you trust that he will not give you more than you can bear? Do you trust that he will bring you through your particular battle in such a way that it will be for your good? Do you trust him well enough that your focus is only to do what is honorable before him, leaving to him the outcome? With such trust you will not lose your nerve, you will not feel overwhelmed? You will not act out of desperation.

2. We are to embrace the achievement of others and acknowledge our mistakes.

Any list of principles of leadership in any field will include the principle of empowering and recognizing the abilities of others. Coupled with that is knowing one's limits. It is that very ability—to show humility—that wins respect. If Saul had lauded his son; if he had admitted that his rash oath was just that—rash, he would have won the respect of his people and of his son. He would have given due honor to the Lord much more effectively than building an altar of stone.

So we need to do the same. Are you quick to give credit to others for the good work that they do? Are you generous in praising others? Are you forthcoming with your own limitations and mistakes? Are you accepting of others receiving more credit than you, of being give more responsibility? Are you able to take pleasure in the work and responsibility that the Lord has seen fit for you to have, even if it does not seem equitable? Do you rest in the Lord for your reputation and reward? If so, you will not feel the stress of having to win the praise of others. You will do your work out of the pleasure of that work and not out of any sense of competition or vain praise. If so, you will be at peace.

3. The bizarre foreshadowing of the cross.

What has had me scratching my head is why God would have allowed the scene of Jonathan's being singled out. Saul did not seek Jonathan out. He did not know of his son's oath-breaking. It is God that leads Saul to Jonathan through the ancient version of coin-tossing. It seems to me that either the people who had eaten meat with blood should have been singled out or Saul himself for his foolish oath. It's poor Jonathan, innocent of sin and who risked his life to win victory, all because he was trusting in the Lord when he made the initial battle encounter.

I have yet to be successful trying to get into the mind of God that he does not reveal. Here is what I do know. A masterful novelist will set up in the beginning of his book the climactic scene that will come later. Some scene that seems uneventful will come back to play. Maybe it was to show a particular trait of the protagonist that comes to the fore later. Maybe it is an incident, which, though it seems to be of no import then, proves to be the critical cause of what takes place later. Oftentimes it is a scene that foreshadows what will come. Sometimes the foreshadowing will set up a contrast of what will take place.

The writer of 1 Samuel is not thinking way into the future when he writes the scene of Saul and Jonathan in verses 43–45, where the father attempts to kill his son for breaking the father's oath. But then there is another writer, the Holy Spirit. I cannot help but think that God the Holy Spirit is thinking ahead to the moment of God the Father sending God the Son to die for God's people. Compare the stories.

Saul, the Father, makes an oath that Jonathan, his son, breaks (unknowingly, notwithstanding). In his wrath Saul is prepared to slay Jonathan for oath-breaking. And so, the people have to ransom Jonathan to save him from his supposed sin. Did you get that? The people save their savior Jonathan. As they stated of him, “who has worked this great salvation in Israel?” (v. 45).

Now hear the gospel. God made a covenant with our father, Adam. Our father broke the covenant in the Garden of Eden, and his sin was passed down to us, all of whom have proven time and again our sinfulness. We are all oath-breakers, transgressing the law of God. It is our

sin that has prevented this world from being the paradise it was meant to be. But then, God the Father, though he had cause for just wrath, made a covenant with God the Son for the Son to make a ransom for us oath-breakers. The wrath that should have fallen on us fell upon the Son.

This is the plan of a God who was far from being made desperate by circumstances getting out of hand. However terrible may have seemed his enemy Satan, our God was never in over his head, but always working all things out to his glory. The champion that he sent—his beloved Son—never had to act precipitously, as did Jonathan in order to spur his indecisive father to action. Our Lord acted always in the will of his Father; indeed, was carrying out his work of redemption according to the precise plan and desire of his Father.

Our Lord routed his enemies upon the cross, and on the cross he made ransom for our sins by the shedding of his precious blood. We have knowingly committed our sins. We were not driven to sin through rash oaths of someone else, as were the men who ate the meat with blood. We were not ignorant of oaths as was Jonathan. We loved our sin. Even so, God so loved us that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us as our ransom.

And though, yes, it was God's just wrath that fell upon the Son, the Son nevertheless was fulfilling the will of his Father who was well-pleased with his act of obedience. Indeed, the Son was fulfilling the Father's oath to send a Savior to ransom his people. The Son was fulfilling his own oath to do the will of his Father. The scene of the cross was a scene of oath fulfillment, not oath breaking. The oath that brought about the cross was one of deep wisdom and deep mercy, made not in rash anger but in profound love. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

And you. If you have yet to receive this love, to place your faith in the ransom made for you, now is the time for you to do so. Carry out the will of God the Father, which is to place your faith in the work of God the Son. If you have already turned to God the Son, then all the more commit yourself to follow his example: to do the will of his Father, to accept whatever role is given to you to play, to live your life trusting in the Lord.