

Jonathan's success

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] There's an interesting series on BBC Four at the moment by Lucy Worsley. It's called something like the biggest fibs of British history or something.

! Actually, it's quite interesting, but actually it's not quite what it says on the box, because actually it's not really fibs that she's talking about, but what she does show is the way in which nobody writes history as just a bald recitation of facts.

People want you to learn from history, and so when historians write history, they have something in mind that they want you to learn from it. And that's certainly the case in 1 Samuel.

Well, in fact, all the historical books of the Old Testament, all of them are there, not just that we have a list of dates and can recite the kings and their dates, but rather that we might see how God is at work in history.

And, well, that's the message of it, and we're going to dive into it a bit and see if we can see how it works. So David had a nice map of the Holy Land in Saul's time this morning, and I did wonder whether to put it up.

[1:17] But then I thought, actually, there's not a great deal of point, because it all takes place in a very small area, actually. If you remember that map from this morning, it's right in the middle.

And the key places are Geber and Gibeah. Somewhat confusingly, these are both variations of the Hebrew word for a hill, but they are different places.

And Gibeah is thought to be a few miles north of Jerusalem. It was shown there on the map this morning, if you did see it. You won't remember that, but it was. Geber was Saul's birthplace, and also served as his military base.

Archaeologists have discovered an ancient fort there, which may well have been built by Saul himself. Geber, which I say is another hill, is only about three miles northeast.

And as we saw from chapter 13, verse 3, there was a Philistine garrison there. So they weren't very far apart. And even Beth Avon, which is mentioned in verse 23, is only a mile or two further north.

[2:45] But the key idea here, or a key thing, is that it is hill. This is hill country. And as I said last week, the Philistine army was designed, trained to fight in the coastal plain.

They were not equipped, really, to fight in the hill country. And so Jonathan had tempted the Philistines out into the hill country.

And as I said, the chronology of 1 Samuel isn't always clear. It is possible that the attack that Jonathan mentions, or is mentioned about Jonathan in chapter 13, verse 33, is being described in more detail again here in chapter 14.

But if you look at various passages from the previous chapter, various verses like 13, 23, for instance, it seems more likely that this is a follow-up attack on the part of Jonathan.

Having started the war with his first attack, Jonathan has tempted the Philistine army up into the hill country where they can't use their chariots and their horses. Which is something like that in chapter 13, verse 17.

[4:05] And the Philistine force has been split into three divisions. We also read that in chapter 13. And so now attention changes to Jonathan and his part in his role in the battle.

Saul is still at Gibeah and a bit of a funk, as we might say. And so Jonathan slips out in secret. Notice that in chapter 14, verse 1. He doesn't tell his father he's going.

And Jonathan is preparing to engage the enemy. So we'll look at the description of the battle. And then we will try and see what the historian...

We don't know, of course, who wrote 1 Samuel. It certainly wasn't Samuel himself because he's dead for quite a lot of the books of Samuel. Probably a state historian or scribe.

But he had something to tell us. And we'll try and see what it is. But before we do that, let's look at the narrative of the battle itself because it's quite long and complicated. The action takes place basically in three phases.

[5:19] So in chapter 14, verses 1 to 15, we read of Jonathan's first strike. In chapter 14, verses 16 to 23, we read what happened when Saul joins the battle.

And then, somewhat strangely in many ways, in verses 24 to 36, we have this long description of the aftermath of the battle. And particularly the effect that Saul's oath had on the course of the battle.

If you were just intending to recall the fact, she would probably give more information about the battle itself and rather less about the aftermath. But the fact that the writer spends so much time on this issue of Saul's oath suggests to us indeed that he's got something he wants us to learn from it. So let's come to the passage here.

And we'll look at it in these three sections first of all. So Jonathan has slipped out from Gibeah, presumably with his division of the army.

[6:39] Well, in fact, we know that because we're told, aren't we, in these verses that he's on one side of this valley and the Philistine garrison is on the other side of the valley.

So far, so good. This valley between these two crags is preventing the Philistines from getting at Jonathan's force and particularly preventing them using their horses and their chariots.

But of course, it does present a tactical problem to Jonathan as well. The Philistines were clearly watching the passes, having been caught once by Jonathan. They're perhaps not going to be caught again, or at least that's their hope, their plan.

How is Jonathan going to engage the Philistine force? Well, other than a suicidal assault up the crag, with the Philistines at the top throwing rocks down on them or something, pouring boiling oil on them or whatever they used to do in those days, I don't know the details.

How is he going to get up there? So he resorts to subterfuge. And he and his armour bearer decide to approach the Philistine sentries alone.

[8:03] Now obviously this is a rather high-risk solution, but as Jonathan says, with the Lord's help, it might succeed, because the Lord can save by many or by few.

So what's his aim? It's to distract or take out the sentries, so that perhaps the Israelite force can get up onto the crag, unscathed and engage the enemy. So we have in some detail how this worked out.

Jonathan shows himself to the sentries, and this would amount, of course, to a challenge to individual combat. Remember later with the story of Goliath, the Philistines seem to be quite into the idea of individual combat, which is why the ploy might perhaps work.

But it does rather depend on the overconfidence of the Philistines, doesn't it? Remember we were told that only Saul and Jonathan had iron weapons, a sword or a spear.

Now presumably, since Jonathan was going to climb up the crag, he'd left his heavy armour behind, but he must have been carrying his weapons. That alone would have marked him out as someone important.

[9:25] We were told, as I say, that only Saul and Jonathan had iron swords. So if the sentries were really on the ball, they should have been suspicious, shouldn't they? But they're not. They're overconfident, aren't they?

They just say, oh look, the Hebrews are crawling out of their holes. And so they allow Jonathan and his armour bearer up onto the top of the crag. Big mistake on their part.

Because Jonathan and his companion are able to clear the ridge. It says they cleared about, what's it, about half an acre, I think it says, isn't it, in verse 14. Yes, in an area of about half an acre.

Quite a large area. Managed to kill about 20 of the Philistine guards. The point being, presumably, that this was enough space and enough time for the rest of his army to climb up the crag safely and engage the enemy.

Oh, I didn't go on to the next slide, sorry. So how does the author describe, the writer describe this event?

[10:39] Well, the Philistines are shaken, he says. And they're shaken both metaphorically and literally because there appears to be an earth tremor as well. I think the authorised version, the King James version here, perhaps catches the repetition of the Hebrew better than any of the modern translations because essentially the same verb is used three times.

The verb to tremble. And the other one where it says the earth quaked is a different verb but one that has much the same meaning. I think it's just worth reading this out. There was trembling in the host, in the field, and among all the people, the garrison and the spoilers.

I think it means the raiders, the skirmishers. The garrison and the spoilers, they also trembled and the earth quaked so it was a very great trembling.

That's literally what the Hebrew says, that the Philistines were shaken. The modern translations say they were in a panic, which is probably true, but literally it says they were shaken.

So, that's phase one of the battle. What happens next? At last, Saul begins to get some decent intelligence.

[12:10] You notice this on verse 16. His scouts eventually catch on to what's going on, where the Philistines are and what's happening.

He wonders, Saul wonders how this has happened and looks around and discovers that in fact his son, Jonathan, has left the camp and started the battle without him. So, Saul prepares now to engage.

But even now he seems to prevaricate. In chapter 13, he failed to wait for Samuel. But now he does wait. Now he waits for the ark to be brought and for the priest to draw the lot in verse 18 and 19.

That's presumably what he's meant by withdraw your hand. And they were waiting to draw a lot to see if it was time to engage the enemy. But at last, Saul does give the go-ahead and the main force engages.

The Philistines are in a panic. All those Israelites who are in the caves reappear and join the battle again. And we're told that even some Hebrews who had been in the Philistine army actually defect to Saul's side.

[13:30] And so there's a rout and it sounds like a complete and absolute victory. But it isn't.

The surviving Philistines flee northward past Beth-Avon and into the woodland, the forest land. So here's the opportunity for a decisive victory.

But once again, Saul blows it. And the writer explains why at some length. So we only get quite a brief description of the main battle, obviously.

Oddly enough, we get a longish description of Jonathan's attack. A very brief description of the main battle. And a lot about why the victory was not the decisive one that it should have been. And it all comes down to this Saul's vow and the aftermath of it. The writer's obviously keen that we derive the maximum benefit from this description of Saul's rashness.

[14:46] So what happened? In his anger, Saul makes an oath that the Israelites should not stop to eat during the day of the battle. That sounds all very spiritual, doesn't it?

It'll be a fast and they won't eat. But of course, it's tactically absurd. If a long pursuit is in order, the troops need food to keep up their energy levels.

They can't fight a long, drawn-out battle without eating. But once again, Saul acts rashly and without thinking. Now the point is, of course, that Jonathan wasn't at Gibeah and therefore has not heard of this oath.

As the pursuit moves from mountaintop to the forest, he looks for an opportunity to replenish his strength. And what does he find? He finds some honey. Doubtless he feels provided by God himself.

And so Jonathan grabs some to eat and his energy is restored. The literal Hebrew meaning of the phrase, I believe, is that his eyes were enlightened. Obviously, the literal reference here is to the sugar hit.

[16:03] His energy was restored, as it says. But is there perhaps a little irony, perhaps a little metaphorical enlightening going on here as well as he becomes aware again of his father's sometimes lack of tactical naus?

He certainly makes this point in verses 29 to 31, doesn't he? He says, you know, the Philistines are escaping. How can we catch up with them and destroy them if we're not allowed to eat?

But of course, presumably, Jonathan has joined up with the main force now because some of the people with him do know of this vow and tell him about it. But of course, Jonathan didn't know before this.

And as the battle moves on again, or it should do, Saul delays yet again. Again, he should be pursuing the Philistines.

But this time, the Lord doesn't give him the answer through the Urim and Thummim, the lot. And so he delays and this causes further problems, gives further opportunity for the Philistines to escape.

[17:29] So the writer here actually spells out for us, doesn't he, three consequences of this rash oath.

And what are the three consequences? First of all, as we've already said, it enables the bulk of the Philistine army to escape because the Israelites are too tired to maintain the pursuit.

And so if you notice, this point is actually made twice. The writer doesn't want us to miss it. It's made first of all by Jonathan in verse 30. And then at the conclusion of the narrative in verse 46, we are told that the Israelites, Saul stopped pursuing the Philistines and they withdrew to their own land.

That was the first effect of this rash oath. What would have been a decisive victory actually allowed the Philistine forces to escape back to their own cities.

And the second point that the writer wants to make is that far from this being a spiritual oath, an oath as it were, that would make the people holy.

[18:48] It actually had exactly the opposite effect because he tells us that the people are so starving and exhausted by the evening that they ignore the Jewish food laws in verses 32 and 33.

Moses had commanded that the animals should be killed in a proper way. In particular, that the blood should be drained before they eat it. that was the sign because the life is in the blood pointing forward of course to the blood of Christ that was shed.

But the people were so exhausted and hungry that they ignored that and just killed the animals and ate them as they stood.

So instead of making the people holy as I say it had this oath had exactly the opposite effect. And there are other subtleties to this aren't there?

You notice do you once again that Saul shifts the blame onto the messages in verse 33? You have broken faith he said roll a large stone over here at once it's not my fault Saul says you've you know you've broken faith although it was his own fault that they were doing it.

[20:18] Well what is Saul's response? Well he does do something he builds an altar and at least orders that the remaining animals be killed properly according to the proper food rules.

It's interesting even the way the writer refers to this he carefully avoids pronouncing this act as either good or bad this building of an altar all he tells us is it's the first altar Saul had built make of it what you like probably because it's a bit difficult it did at least have the effect that the animals were killed properly and sacrifice given to the Lord but it was all a bit late and should it have been Saul really he was building the altar anyway so we're not told really whether that was a good thing or a bad thing and of course the third effect of this rash oath is that Jonathan who was the hero of the battle nearly lost his life and the writer actually devotes most space to this issue doesn't he Saul is short on real obedience but he's spooked by his almost superstitious use of the lot the urim and famim as it says actually literally in the Hebrew these things that were held in the priest ephod the priest robe and to take them out nobody quite knows how it works but it was a lot of some sort no answer it's been suggested that it was like heads and tails and two heads meant a head two tails

meant a tail but a head and a tail meant no answer it's possible but nobody really knows for sure but anyway whatever it was God declined to answer in verse 37 and even though he was going to allow the

Philistines to escape Saul is spooked by this and delays and in a panic he reminds people of the oath in 39 and I think again there's quite heavy irony here Saul is very keen to make sure his oath has been obeyed and that the army hasn't sinned against his oath but whose sin has actually caused the problem in the first place and you notice that Saul is prepared to implicate even his own son but not himself he says my son may die if it's him he never suggests that he's going to die so what happens well some of the people of course knew that Jonathan had eaten the honey some of them were told had seen him and told Jonathan what the oath had been about but you notice they rather wisely remain silent they keep quiet and so it's back to the lottery again verse 41 but this time God does answer and so the truth comes out there is some doubt about the exact meaning of Jonathan's comment in verse 45 whether he's saying pleading his innocence and saying I shouldn't die or perhaps he's saying well you know

I really am innocent but if necessary I will die it's not entirely clear what is meant there but it does seem that Jonathan is prepared to give his life for his people and of course he is the firstborn son but no it seems that Jonathan is not the perfect sacrifice that God requires and so at last the people themselves get their act together and intervene and they say no this isn't going to happen God has been with Jonathan we're not going to have him killed and again the literal meaning here is actually that the people ransomed Jonathan it says rescued but it is actually ransomed or redeemed is the word that's used we don't know quite how that happened perhaps they made some sacrifice for the unwitting breaking of the oath perhaps they made some payment it's not clear but somehow he was rescued seems they did something that rescued him perhaps as I say made a sacrifice people knew that Jonathan was the real hero of the battle and perhaps more importantly that he was the one really doing the work of

[26:00] God they make that point in verse 45 but still the act is not without consequence the Philistine army escapes Jonathan is beginning to understand his father's shortcomings and again we know that Jonathan is never going to get the chance to be king as I said last year it seemed last week it seemed that Jonathan might have made a much better king than his father but that's not to be and this understanding that Jonathan has will play a key role later in his later dealings with David of course but we're not going to go on to follow that up so that's the action and I say the way it's described clearly the writer wants us to learn something from it so let's see if we can see what it is that the writer is trying to teach us now normally what happens of course when a historian writes of a new king or a change of kingdom or something like that the point of the history is to legitimize the new line of the new king certainly the two examples that

Lucy Worsley has talked about so far in this BBC 4 series one of them is how the Tudors spun the death of Richard III in order to present themselves as the saviour of the country and again how William and Mary spun themselves as the guardians of the Protestant succession and again of liberating the country you may well agree with them in that particular case but it was certainly in a sense it was true it was propaganda they issued declarations to make that point and of course that's certainly the way history was written in those days we know for instance of some of the history of Egypt how whole pharaohs were left out of the record entirely there were lists of kings and those kings who weren't sort of politically correct regarded as politically correct at the time the history was written were left off they were just left out entirely and that's usually what happened either the kings were just excised from history altogether or they were vilified by the next king along and they were like say like

Richard III was the propaganda was how bad they were so is this what our historian is about is he trying to legitimise the line of David it does seem it was probably written by eyewitnesses who lived through into the time of David and so that might have been his intention and of course actually there is a touch of this certainly he does want to explain why the Lord rejected Samuel but actually you'd have to say that if that was his main intention he does a pretty poor job of it doesn't he I was going to stop reading at 46 but actually Martin read through to the paragraph heading which was actually

up to 48 and we noticed didn't we that actually the historian says that Saul did do a lot of good stuff as well as we said last time he wasn't all bad by any means so if his aim was to legitimise the line of David and to condemn the line of Saul why tell us that it wasn't necessary to do so and certainly I mean if you're going to want to explain why Jonathan never became king it seems very strange to hype him up in the way that it's done in this passage doesn't it it hardly seems like a very suitable way to do it no if that's the writer's main purpose you have to say he makes a pretty poor fist of it because he actually says a lot of good things about Saul and even and certainly about Jonathan I think the writer's objective in fact is more religious than political here the issue really is not who is the legitimate king but the issue is who is it that God blesses and how is that blessing obtained and that I think is what the writer wants to tell us well in fact he says that doesn't he in verse 45 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 shall fall to the ground for he did this today with God's help that's the key verse isn't it so the men rescued Jonathan and he was not put to death so what's being compared here I think is the faith of Jonathan being compared to the religious and the religiousness of Saul Saul you'll notice is the one who has all the right religious paraphernalia and uses all the religious sounding language he has the ark of the covenant which is supposed to show the presence of the Lord he has the legitimate priests who have the official ephod who have the urim and thummim the lot in fact in

[32:22] Samuel he even has the services of a genuine prophet Saul has all the right religious stuff he even builds an altar doesn't he and everything is dressed up in religious languages look at verses 39 and 44 for instance everything sounds very spiritual doesn't it as surely as the Lord who rescues Israel lives even if it lies with my son Jonathan he must die verse 44 does much the same thing may God deal with me be it ever so severely if you do not die Jonathan he's using all the right language here he uses the Urim and Thummim twice as if he really wants to know what it is that God requires but when you look more closely at these verses you find out that what he actually wants is for God to endorse what he has already decided verses 36 and 37 his rash oath has had the opposite effect of what was intended instead of leading to the destruction of the Philistine army which presumably was the point of it he said you'll not eat until I've had my revenge against the Philistines it had in fact exactly the opposite effect it allowed them to escape and there is certainly an important lesson here just because something is dressed up in spiritual language that doesn't make it wise or right remember the words of the Apostle John dear friends do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world you can have all as I say all the right religious stuff and yet you can not really be doing what God requires by contrast here we have

Jonathan yes by contrast here we have Jonathan his acts are guided by wisdom and strategic good sense he sees what needs to be done and he gets on with it and does it faced with a tactical conundrum he spots the ploy that might work daring as it is there is perhaps a bit of who dares wins here but this isn't a reckless gamble Jonathan calls to mind perhaps the victories of Joshua and Gideon he is putting his life on the line but not recklessly because he is confident that the Lord can save by many or by few as I said in this chapter

Saul does all the religious stuff Jonathan calls on the Lord only once here in verse 6 but where Saul has religion Jonathan has faith and through the people it is Jonathan who receives God's endorsement in verse 45 as we've already read it's not religion religious paraphernalia religious language that is what God requires it is faith and obedience in chapter 15 the historian records actually yet another example of Saul actually disobeying the Lord's command while dressing up all his actions with religious flannel we haven't got time to read it but you can read it at home if you like quite similar example where Paul again so I keep calling him Paul sorry

Saul again is told what to do by Samuel and doesn't do it and in fact this turns out to be the last straw as far as Samuel is concerned the time when he finally abandons Saul and the writer records

Samuel's words as the definitive judgment on Saul's reign in these two remarkable verses let me read them to you first of all he pinpoints the falseness of Saul's religion Samuel replied does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord to obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams well that's strong enough isn't it but just look at the next two verses he's saying that in fact all Saul's religion is just like superstition Saul's arrogance is idolatry because he has rejected the word of the Lord for rebellion is like the sin of divination not very different is it divination from the Urim and Thummim that was commanded by Moses but you can see the point he's getting at there it's divination is not something that is allowed under the Jewish law in fact it's a sin because it means you're not trusting to the Lord's words really and Samuel is saying that Saul's what Saul is doing is rebellion like divination not listening to the word of the Lord but listening to the word perhaps ultimately of the serpent instead and he says that although Saul built no idol and yet in his arrogance he was guilty of idolatry and as I say [39:20] I think I said last week in a sense he was setting himself up as God but his God wasn't up to the job because he's rejected the word of the Lord and so the Lord has rejected him as king Saul thought that he knew better than God ultimately and so effectively he rejected the word of the Lord by rewriting it to suit himself well this all happened 3000 years ago and people may not rewrite the word of the Lord in quite the same way today but as the French say the more it changes the more it's the same thing there are many religious leaders today aren't there who use all the right religious language and yet are actually rewriting the word of the Lord to suit themselves to fit in with their own view of the world well

I don't think I could quite manage the venom I think is the word fair word that Samuel manages here so let me just read it to you again for rebellion is like the sin of divination and arrogance like the evil of idolatry because you have rejected the word of the Lord he has rejected you as king those who reject the word of the Lord they may have the title of bishop or king or presbyter or pastor even but if they reject the word of the Lord then the Lord rejects them what about Jonathan what can we say about Jonathan who is the good example that we're presented with here the model as we were David was reminding us this morning Jonathan is the model the good model what was Jonathan's motto was it who dares wins well

I guess there is a touch of that actually in Jonathan but it's not trusting in his own strength is it that's the point what was it to Carey said expect great things from God and attempt great things for God yes who dares wins but only if you dare in the faith in the Lord who saves by many or by few and that was I think Jonathan's real motto that's the thing that he wants us to remember that was his battle cry the Lord saves by many or by few and as we go into spiritual battle sometimes there may be a lot of people involved there may be large churches large numbers of people but I think Jonathan is really saying well actually of course the Lord is more glorified when he saves by few as he did with

Gideon so let's not be worried by our lack of numbers Jesus said called his people a little flock didn't he so it only needs two or three of you to engage the enemy because then I'm there with you so let's finish this part of our worship by singing that call to arms ending