

1 Samuel 14

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. Thank you all for coming out on a cold night, and on Oscar night, no less.

I just remembered. I'm sorry you'll be missing the joyful tears of the winners and the pained smiles of the losers as they pretend to be happy for the winners but really aren't inside.

Or the red carpet interviews. In case you're wondering, I'm wearing Old Navy tonight. At least I think. I'm not sure. It's actually really fitting because our text tonight has all the ingredients for a great Hollywood blockbuster.

Hopeless circumstances, individual acts of great courage, the loyalty of a faithful friend, stirring action, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, this is a thrilling story of combat.

1 Samuel 14. If you haven't already, turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 14. If you're using one of the pew Bibles that's provided for you, that's on page 235. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers on the page are the chapter numbers.

[1 : 15] The little ones are the verse numbers. We'll be looking at the first part of the chapter tonight, 1 Samuel 14, 1 through 23. Listen as I read. 1 Samuel 14, 1 through 23.

One day, Jonathan, the son of Saul, said to the young man who carried his armor, Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side.

But he did not tell his father. Saul was staying on the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Megron. The people who were with him were about 600 men, including Ahijah, the son of Ahatab, Ichabod's brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of the Lord in Shiloh, wearing an ephod.

And the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. Within the passes by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistine garrison, there was a rocky crag on the one side and a rocky crag on the other side.

The name of the one was Bozes, and the name of the other was Senna. The one crag grows on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Gibeah. Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised.

[2 : 25] It may be that the Lord will work for us, for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few. And his armor-bearer said to him, Do all that is in your heart.

Do as you wish. Behold, I am with you, heart and soul. Then Jonathan said, Behold, we will cross over to the men, and we will show ourselves to them. If they say to us, Wait until we come to you, then we will stand still in our place, and we will not go up to them.

But if they say, Come up to us, then we will go up, for the Lord has given them into our hand, and this shall be the sign for us. So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines, and the Philistines said, Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves.

And the men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armor-bearer and said, Come up to us, and we will show you a thing. And Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, Come up after me, for the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel.

Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet and his armor-bearer after him. And they fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer killed them after him. And that first strike, which Jonathan and his armor-bearer made, killed about twenty men within, as it were, a half furrow's length in an acre of land.

[3 : 36] And there was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and even the raiders trembled. The earth quaked, and it became a very great panic. And the watchmen of Saul and Gibeah of Benjamin looked, and behold, the multitude was dispersing here

and there.

Then Saul said to the people who were with him, Count and see who has gone from us. And when they had counted, behold, Jonathan and his armor-bearer were not there. So Saul said to Ahijah, Bring the ark of God here, for the ark of God went at that time with the people of Israel.

Now while Saul was talking to the priests, the tumult in the camp of the Philistines increased more and more. So Saul said to the priests, Withdraw your hand. Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and went into the battle.

And behold, every Philistine's sword was against his fellow, and there was very great confusion. Now the Hebrews, who had been with the Philistines before that time, and who had gone up with them into the camp, even they also turned to be with the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan.

Likewise, when all the men of Israel who had hidden themselves in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too followed hard after them in the battle. So the Lord saved Israel that day, and the battle passed beyond Beth-Avon.

[4 : 47] Well, it's an exciting story. If you've been following along in 1 Samuel, back in 1 Samuel 13, we've learned that the nation of Israel is once again in very bad shape.

They have a new king, Saul, but he's picked a fight with Philistine soldiers, and Israel has been invaded. And the Philistines have the Israelites outnumbered. Look back at 13.5.

The Philistines invade with soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. Saul begins with just a few thousand soldiers, but by the time we get to 1 Samuel 14, he only has 600 still with him.

People are fleeing. They're abandoning him. To make matters worse, the Israelites are also outmatched technologically. The Philistine army had chariots.

These are the tanks of the ancient world. The Israelites don't even have swords and spears because the Philistines have not allowed them to have blacksmiths. So the Israelites are going to war against the sophisticated Philistines with nothing but bows and arrows and farm tools for weapons.

[5 : 49] And so it's not surprising that they're demoralized. They're running away, or they're hiding in the hills, outnumbered, fighting with inferior weapons, low morale. This is the recipe for a military disaster.

And so this is what we come to at the beginning of 1 Samuel 14, a hopeless situation. And then Jonathan, the king's son, comes up with what seems like a crazy plan.

He and his armor bearer, the young man who helps him carry his things, decide that they're going to attack the Philistines by themselves. And only one of them has a sword.

Jonathan has a sword, but his armor bearer doesn't. Now Jonathan isn't entirely crazy. He has the sense not to tell his father about this plan. He's operating under the opinion that it's better to ask forgiveness than permission.

No father would have allowed any plan like this to go ahead, but Jonathan does it. Now we're going to delve a little bit deeper into the story and try to see what it tells us today, but I want to first pause and ask all of us a question.

[6 : 55] If you think about it, thousands of battles and wars have been fought over the centuries. Now many of them had much more significant political consequences than this one.

They involved a lot more combatants. This is just dozens or hundreds. But the story of this battle was written down in the Bible. It's passed along to us and we find ourselves on a Sunday evening in New Haven, Connecticut talking about it.

Why? Why this story? Is this just an accident? Some historical coincidence? Well, I'll tell you why I think it is.

Because unlike many other battles and wars, bigger ones that have been fought, even around the same time, the chief actors in this drama are not people.

It's God who's really on display in 1 Samuel 14. He's the chief actor, even though he never speaks a word or draws a sword. That's what this story is about.

[8 : 02] Tonight we're going to be looking at Jonathan's faith and then in his action, but we're not really interested in Jonathan. We want to know about God. And once we learn who God is from this text, then we can learn what we're supposed to do in response to it.

So we'll start with Jonathan's faith, we'll look at his action, and then we'll try to see what we're to do in response to the God we encounter in the pages of 1 Samuel. Well, what is Jonathan's faith?

What does he believe? We'll look back at what he says in verse 6. Jonathan said to his young armor bearer, Come, let's go over to the outpost of these uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few. Now these Philistines were uncircumcised, meaning they're not among God's people. They're not partakers in God's covenant. In fact, they're defying God and they're oppressing His people. This cannot be tolerated. And Jonathan knew that nothing could stop the Lord from saving His people.

[9 : 10] Nothing could prevent him from rescuing the ones he loved. He knew that the power of God was greater than any military force that could be arrayed then or now.

And God doesn't need chariots or large armies. He doesn't need many. He can do it by few or none. He doesn't even need swords. When God decides to save, He saves.

And that's the confidence, the faith, that propels Jonathan forward. That's the conviction that gives him this outstanding, extraordinary, almost foolhardy courage.

Well, how did Jonathan know this? It certainly wasn't obvious from the circumstances. You couldn't read the signs of the times and think that there was a great victory in the offing.

No, the opposite. I think he knew his history. He knew the history recorded in our Bible, which is the record of God's saving work. And it drives home this same message again and again and again.

[10 : 12] God is powerful to save. I think Jonathan knew what God had done in bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt. A slave people, enslaved in the nation, in the superpower of its age.

Far more powerful than even the Philistines. But God had saved them. And even if they had managed to escape Egypt, the road to the promised land was long and dangerous, but God preserved them.

Then they didn't have a plan for fighting the Canaanites once they got there, but God gave them victory. These were not obstacles to God. Jonathan realized that God can save by many or by few. God didn't need thousands or hundreds of thousands of soldiers. He didn't really need much at all. During the first part of the Civil War, the commander of the Union Army was a general named George McClellan.

Now, George McClellan was really popular with his soldiers, but he was tentative and he was always afraid to engage with the Confederate troops. He never thought he had quite enough men. And that's how he felt.

[11 : 22] And so he was always sending messages back to Washington, asking for more. Finally, President Lincoln said, if General McClellan does not want to use the army, I would like to borrow it for a time. And so he relieved General McClellan of his command and found someone who would do the work that he wanted done.

But I think McClellan's not special here. I think every general probably has wanted more men, more weapons. In any battle, it's always better to be the many rather than the few.

But the military history in the Bible, and there's a lot of it, doesn't really fit this mold, does it? God never complains about the lack of soldiers. On the contrary, sometimes he seems to intentionally limit the human resources at his disposal.

That's what we see here in 1 Samuel 14. We see it maybe even more clearly in Judges chapter 7. Then there, in Judges 7, it's not the Philistines who are oppressing Israel. It's another neighboring nation, the Midianites.

And so God raises up Gideon, an unimportant man from an unimportant family in Israel, not someone who's an obvious choice to lead at all, but God chooses him. And then Gideon calls the warriors of Israel together.

[12 : 30] And listen to what God tells Gideon in Judges 7. It's on page 206 if you want to turn there, but I'll just read it. Verses 2 through 7. The Lord said to Gideon, You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands, in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her.

Announce now to the people, anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead. So 22,000 men left, while 10,000 men remained. But the Lord said to Gideon, There are still too many men.

Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, This one shall go with you, he shall go. But if I say, This one shall not go with you, he shall not go. So Gideon took the men down to the water.

Then the Lord told him, Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink. 300 men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

The Lord said to Gideon, With the 300 men that lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place. So God is progressively whittling down the number of soldiers available to Gideon.

[13:39] Now why did the Lord give these specific instructions? Was there something particularly spiritual about the men who lapped at the water rather than the ones who knelt down on their knees to drink?

Some people have tried to explain how that might be true. Maybe something that would make them better soldiers or better at following instructions. But if there's something about lapping at water that makes you a better soldier, I don't know what it is.

In fact, I think the whole point of what God's doing here is saying, Look, I'm doing this in order that Israel may not boast that it's their own strength that saved them. I'm choosing an arbitrary criteria to separate these soldiers just so you remember that I won this victory and it wasn't won by soldiers or strength of arms.

That's how God does things. And isn't that exactly what God is doing in 1 Samuel 14 here in the passage we're looking at this evening? There's a great Philistine army that stands arrayed against Israel and God's going to win the victory with two men and one sword.

God wants to be glorified and worshipped as the true deliverer of his people. In fact, every detail of Jonathan's assault on the Philistine outpost emphasizes this fact that the victory belongs to God.

[14:58] So Jonathan's attack begins over the most impossible, unpromising terrain imaginable. Remember, we saw how it was described. There's a deep ravine with cliffs on either side and in order to get to the Philistines, Jonathan and his armor bearer are going to have to climb down one and then climb up the other while the Philistines laugh at them and probably throw rocks.

Well, maybe the Philistines won't expect them. Maybe they'll have the advantage of surprise coming from that direction, but we see that that doesn't happen either. In fact, Jonathan said to his armor bearer, climb up after me.

The Lord has given them into the hand of Israel. Actually, I'm sorry, before that, in verse 8, Jonathan said, come then, we will cross over toward the men and let them see us. So Jonathan reveals himself.

Here I am. Let's the enemy know he's coming. And then Jonathan responds with great confidence. The Lord has given them into the hand of Israel. So it's two against dozens with inferior weaponry, climbing up a cliff with soldiers standing above you.

It's perfect. It's the perfect setup for an attack. Not from a worldly perspective, but from God's. This might seem like insane arrogance or delusion until you remember that it's God's presence in the battle that makes the majority.

[16:18] Well, the remainder of the passage just gives us details of the victory. They climb the cliff. They kill a bunch of soldiers. The rest run off in terror. The news of the defeat spreads, and pretty soon the Philistine army is in a panic.

It's a panic sent by God. By the time the Israelites even arrive on the scene to finish the job, the Philistines are fighting one another. They're doing the Israelites' jobs for them. The victory is complete.

It's a catastrophic setback for the Philistines. God's great power to save is demonstrated again to a doubtful world. So where are you right now?

Not in ancient Israel, being oppressed by Philistines, I think. Some of you, I think, probably feel harassed and helpless, anxious about the future.

Maybe your family life isn't working out the way that you'd always hoped it would, or maybe you have medical or financial setbacks facing you. Maybe you have deep concern or anxiety about your spiritual state, where you stand before God.

[17:26] How does God really feel about you? Well, I don't have medical or financial advice to give you. If I did, you wouldn't want to take it. What I have is what 1 Samuel 14 says.

Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving. I don't know your circumstances. I don't know why God has brought the trials to you that He has brought.

I don't even know what God's deliverance would look like when it came to you, specifically. But it may just be that He has put you where you are so that when He saves you, you won't boast in your own strength, but you'll say, the God of Jonathan, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, He did this, and no other.

Your situation is not outside of God's control. Just before the start of the service, I was talking to Nick, and he asked if I wanted to do any question and answers after the services we sometimes do. And I said, I don't think we'll need to. I think it's a pretty straightforward passage with this really powerful but clear message. The one question that someone might ask if they were to would be, can something hinder the Lord?

[18 : 45] Well, no. It says in the text, nothing can hinder the Lord. And then Nick followed up. He said, well, what about me? Can I hinder the Lord? And he was joking. But it's a good question.

Not Nick specifically. I mean us. When we think about what we want God to do for us, we think about what we want our lives to look like. The chief obstacle is generally not outside of us. It's within us. Can I hinder the Lord? It's a question we all ask ourselves at some point, or at least we should, if we're serious about our life.

Well, the answer is no. The testimony of Scripture is not just that opposing armies cannot overcome the Lord. It's that even our own sin and rebellion can't overcome the Lord.

So what should we do while we wait on the Lord to bring us deliverance? Well, we trust him. And do what Jonathan did.

[19 : 49] Remember the ways that God has saved in the past. So remember Jonathan and take heart. Think about Gideon and see God's power. Most of all, remember Jesus Christ.

It's not just that God might deliver you or even that he's promised to deliver you at some future date. If you've trusted in Christ, he already has delivered you.

And the momentary sufferings of this life are simply preparing us for future glory. Those of us who have trusted in Christ have already experienced a future salvation far more dramatic and complete than any victory over Philistines.

Now if you're here and you haven't trusted in Christ, if you've never known that kind of deliverance or rescue, you might be wondering what Jesus has to do with Jonathan.

Well, Christians believe that all of the examples of God's deliverance and salvation in the Old Testament point forward to the greatest salvation available to us in Christ in the New Testament.

[20 : 55] The salvation that is now at work in our lives. These are like appetizers that prepare us to look forward to the great feast to come. And the salvation that we have in Christ is even more improbable and mind-bending than Jonathan's.

Jesus was confronted by a world of people in active rebellion against his Father. The challenge wasn't a hostile military force, but the fact that humanity stood under God's just judgment for sin. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. God requires all of us to obey him. But at the same time, we rebel.

And the law puts us under a sentence of death. Paul is saying that death is like a venomous spider which uses our own sin to bring us to eternal death.

And so Jesus dies on the cross taking the punishment for our sins that God's law required. And so Paul can say the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God.

[22 : 00] He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And what a victory it is. Jonathan's victory was accomplished with one sword, but Jesus' victory was won without any.

Jonathan killed God's enemies. Jesus died for them. Jonathan's victory won temporary deliverance for the nation of Israel. Jesus brought eternal salvation for anyone who would believe.

Even you. Even me. Forgiveness of sin and an eternal life of fellowship with God, they are ours if we'll only turn away from our sin and trust in Christ.

God can save us. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving. Not even our own sinful hearts. So we see Jonathan's conviction.

Nothing can stop God from saving. We ourselves know an even greater salvation, the true salvation that comes to us through Christ. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving. Well, we've talked about Jonathan's actions as well as his faith.

[23 : 07] But notice that Jonathan must have realized something else key. That God uses people to bring about salvation. It isn't just that God has to work through people, it's just that he chooses to.

And we can march through the Bible and find all the examples of times and places where God uses often ordinary people to bring salvation or deliverance to his people. Noah, Moses, Gideon, Samson, Jonathan, David, Paul, Peter.

When God brings salvation, he normally does it through human agents, through people like you and me. This is why Paul in the book of Corinthians says, We are God's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us.

We implore you on Christ's behalf be reconciled to God. We are Christ's ambassadors. God is making his appeal through us. This is true today.

God chooses to bring salvation to the world by empowering ordinary human beings like you and me, people who are ourselves sinners, and he brings the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ through us.

[24 : 18] How can they call on the one they have not believed in and how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard and how can they hear without someone preaching to them, Paul asks. And the questions are rhetorical because the answer is they can't.

Well, almost never. There are some very rare exceptions. Almost 300 years ago, the great preacher George Whitefield toured the United States preaching to huge crowds, tens of thousands at times. In fact, he visited Connecticut and preached in Hartford and Weatherfield and places not very far from here. But a lot of people in both England and in America disliked Whitefield.

There was one man named Mr. Thorpe who was part of a group called the Hellfire Club. And the Hellfire Club existed solely to mock George Whitefield and to disrupt his sermons whenever they could.

One day, Mr. Thorpe and his friends were in a pub and Mr. Thorpe decided he would do some impressions of George Whitefield and his friends found them hilarious. He did an excellent imitation, including facial expressions and mannerisms and even the very scripture quotes and words that George Whitefield had used.

[25 : 29] But in the middle of his mockery, he listened to what he was saying and was converted on the spot. And he lived a totally different life after that. I think he's the only person I've ever heard of who was converted through his own preaching.

And he didn't even mean it. That's not typical. And even in that example, it's because he'd heard George Whitefield that he even knew what to say. The fact is, when God wants to bring salvation, whether it's from a Philistine army or forgiveness of sins, he does it through human beings.

Of course, the great example of this is Jesus Christ himself. Eternal sin of God, yes, but also a man. Whenever we read of God bringing deliverance through a man, we're meant to think of Jesus.

So we read of Moses who leads the people out of Egypt and we're reminded in Deuteronomy 18 that there's another prophet coming, like Moses. Or we think about Joshua who leads the people into the promised land after Moses leads them out of Egypt and then we remember that Joshua, Yeshua, Jesus, that these are the same name.

Or David, Jesus is the son of David, is he another warrior king? Another Moses, another Joshua, another David? Yes, but greater than all of these, he's the man through whom we have salvation.

[26 : 46] The one man through whom we have, the one man who can mediate between God and man. One God, one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for all men.

says 1 Timothy. God brought ultimate salvation through Jesus Christ. So we now know that God saves and we know that he saves through people. Well, what should we do? Well, we can't just take this as an example to follow.

We don't want a kind of bad Sunday school theology that says Jonathan was brave so you should be brave. Jesus obeyed God so you should obey God too. Well, you should. The problem is that we're not like Jesus.

The greatest salvation is one that we cannot work for ourselves no matter how courageous we are. We have to keep reminding ourselves of the central truth of this text and of the whole Bible that it's God who saves.

At the same time, this story reminds us of both God's power and his kindness to his people. And it's that power and mercy that allows us to live boldly and courageously for him.

[27 : 56] The God who saved in the past is the same as the God who saves today. He does not change even if human circumstances do. He is powerful to save and powerful to save even miserable sinners.

And he's chosen to use the weakest of human instruments to do it. People like you and me. So if you've trusted in Christ, you have the privilege of participating in this work. So why not?

Why not prayerfully trust the Lord for your own salvation and also for the salvation of the people around you? Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving.

Let's pray. O God, when you decide to save, nothing can stop you.

There is no one like you. Lord, we confess to our own weakness in faith and we ask that you would strengthen us. We pray that you would give us a renewed joy in our own salvation if we've trusted in Christ.

[29 : 03] Remind us about what you have done for us already. And we pray that you would bring salvation to the lost world through us. And we pray these things in the name of our mediator, the man Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.