



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 25th September 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Samuel chapter 13:16 – 14:23

How to Win

The Story so far

I don't know if you have ever made a mistake in life from which you fear you will never fully recover? Perhaps a single, sudden act of folly, which has left its inward mark upon us for ever—or something longer term: a relationship entered into, a career move we should never have made, a choice we have regretted over and over again?

Well, at this point in their history, the Jews had asked for a king. Previously, God had sent them individual leaders, as and when the need arose: prophets and judges like Moses, Joshua, Gideon and Samuel. But the other nations had kings to lead them in battle, and so Israel wanted a king. It was not a good reason for asking for a king.

It showed a lack of trust in God. But they demanded a king and they got a king.

It was a choice they would regret. But it was not the end of the story—because God's purpose for them was not any particular type of government (whether monarchy or something else), but actually one particular king: not a plan, but a man.

God was not defeated by Israel's mistake, and God is not defeated by your and my wrong choices. He has provided a Man Who can put them right. When no-one's around, I've been known to get on one of the computers in the church office; and I soon make one (or more) wrong choices (I seem fated to do that). In no time at all, everything's locked up and the entire system is crashing. I always fear I have precipitated the ultimate disaster—perhaps triggered the destruction of the World Wide Web. But then someone steps in, and, with a few swift prods of their finger, it is all set right again; and I'm left feeling rather chastened, but very relieved. There was someone after all who could set things to rights. And so there is for you and for me. (More of that later).

But at this point in 1 Samuel 13:16, the outlook for Israel was grim: Not only have they made a bad mistake in asking for a king, but storm clouds are now gathering.

1) A Bleak Outlook

As King, Saul had already achieved a spectacular victory against the Ammonites, Israel's aggressive neighbours to the East. It was that triumph which established Saul's kingship back in Chapter 11. But now he faced a far more serious threat: *Saul and his son Jonathan and the men with them were staying in Gibeah in Benjamin, while the Philistines camped at Micmash. Raiding parties went out from the Philistine camp in three detachments. One turned toward Ophrah in the vicinity of Shual, another toward Beth Horon, and the third toward the borderland overlooking the Valley of Zeboim facing the desert. Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, "Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!" So all Israel went down to the Philistines to have their ploughshares, mattocks, axes and sickles sharpened. The price was two thirds of a shekel for sharpening ploughshares and mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening forks and axes and for repointing goads. So on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them. Now a detachment of Philistines had gone out to the pass at Micmash (13:16-23).* You

see, the Philistines had entered the Iron Age, while the Jews were still in the Bronze Age. That was quite a nifty thing to do in the 11th century BC, if you wanted to get one up on your neighbours. So, the Philistine army was huge (see 13:5), with all the best military equipment, while the Israelite army was disarmed and disheartened, and had already shrunk from 3,000 to 600 men.

Moreover, ringing in the people's ears were the Prophet Samuel's words to Saul in 13: 13-14: ***“You acted foolishly,” Samuel said. “You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command.”*** What could be more discouraging! The formal account of Saul's reign has barely begun, and already its end is being declared by God's spokesman.

So, everywhere there was another reason to give up the fight and submit, if you were an Israelite. The enemies of God were too strong and God's own people had betrayed Him by asking for a king, whom God had now rejected.

You and I look out on a world where the forces arrayed against God seem overwhelming, don't they? And we too are very conscious of having betrayed Him many times in our lives.

But notice that God's solution was not to set the clock in reverse to undo the damage. He does not say, “OK, then, you've learnt your lesson; let's forget about this king idea after all, and go back to where we were.” No, God's people cannot recall the past—what's past is past. But for us it is not to be an experience of karma (that awful law of cause and effect), but of grace, because God is never defeated by human sin. He never has to go backward to undo it. He always goes forward. We may have something awful on our conscience tonight—deceit, betrayal, envy, malice, fornication, violence, adultery, perhaps a failure to prevent something dreadful happening, even a death, or perhaps it's a constantly repeated pattern of moral failure in some area of our lives. God does not go back to undo those things for us. Because of what His son Jesus did on the cross, He goes forward and weaves them into the pattern of mercy and grace, which He wants to make of our lives. And so the key to that pattern is a Man, not a plan. So, let's go forward and consider the two key men in this episode, and what each of them teaches us about God's grace.

2 Saul—the king who could have been

He's a real enigma is Saul, because so much of him seems to have wanted the best. He had already shown great courage (in dealing with the Ammonites), and a concern to have God's blessing on his rule (in the first half of chapter 13). But why does he now appear so inactive, and ineffective? Look at 14:2-3: ***Saul was staying on the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree in Migron. With him were about six hundred men, among whom was Ahijah, who was wearing an ephod. He was a son of Ichabod's brother Ahitub son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, the LORD's priest in Shiloh. No-one was aware that Jonathan had left.*** [Incidentally we have already been told that all Eli's descendants were under God's judgement (3:11-14), so Ahijah's presence with Saul was not very auspicious] And, then: ***Saul's lookouts at Gibeah in Benjamin saw the army melting away in all directions. Then Saul said to the men who were with him, “Muster the forces and see who has left us.” When they did, it was Jonathan and his armour-bearer who were not there. Saul said to Ahijah, “Bring the ark of God.” (At that time it was with the Israelites.) 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”*** (vv 16-19). There's a frustrating indecisiveness about king Saul, isn't there? Is he going to consult God, or isn't he? Is he going to commit his men to battle, or isn't he? As it is, the battle is won by God despite Saul's indecisive incompetence: ***Then Saul and all his men assembled and went to the battle. They found the Philistines in total confusion, striking each other with their swords*** (v 20). Saul's initial paralysis, followed by this stop-start flusteredness, may be explained by the fact that his own confidence in his rule as king was based on the military success he had achieved against the Ammonites, and not on God's choice of him as king. He thought that his authority depended on his success in battle, not on God's grace. So now that he was facing what appeared to be certain defeat, all his confidence had evaporated. It did not prevent him keeping

up a semblance of godliness (Saul was always religious), but it made him entirely ineffective in God's service, because he did not really trust God's grace.

And there is a lesson for us: if my confidence is self-confidence—confidence in what I can do and who I am, in my own ability and personality and achievements—it will all vanish when I face failure, when circumstances turn against me, in the time of trial and testing. But if we put our faith in a gracious God, Who has loved us, although we do not deserve to be loved, and Who has dealt with our sins on the cross, then our lives will tell for something in this world whatever the circumstances we face. Let's look at someone who did just that—

3 Jonathan

(i) the king who never was

He would have made a great king of Israel, don't you think? God had not rejected Saul's line because of the failings of Saul's oldest son. Jonathan's worthiness was not the issue. He seems to have been frustrated by his father's inertia: *One day Jonathan son of Saul said to the young man bearing his armour, "Come, let's go over to the Philistine outpost on the other side." But he did not tell his father* (14:1). This is the second time he has taken the initiative in attacking the Philistines (see 13:3), but this is a far more daring escapade, let's read it again: *On each side of the pass that Jonathan intended to cross to reach the Philistine outpost was a cliff; one was called Bozez, and the other Seneh. One cliff stood to the north toward Micmash, the other to the south toward Geba. Jonathan said to his young armour-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." "Do all that you have in mind," his armour-bearer said. "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul." Jonathan said, "Come, then; we will cross over toward the men and let them see us. 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." So both of them showed themselves to the Philistine outpost. "Look!" said the Philistines. "The Hebrews are crawling out of the holes they were hiding in." The men of the outpost shouted to Jonathan and his armour-bearer, "Come up to us and we'll teach you a lesson" (14:4-12a)—perhaps the Philistines thought they were deserters. Perhaps the climb (clearly a serious rock face) seemed impassable to the Philistines; and as Jonathan and his armour-bearer actually climbed, perhaps they were out of sight under an overhang. Certainly they seem to have taken the Philistine outpost by surprise when they appeared at the top: *So Jonathan said to his armour-bearer, "Climb up after me; the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel." Jonathan climbed up, using his hands and feet, with his armour-bearer right behind him. The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armour-bearer followed and killed behind him. In that first attack Jonathan and his armour-bearer killed some twenty men in an area of about half an acre* (vv 12b-14). The NEB translation of the end of verse 14 is *like men cutting a furrow across a half-acre field*, which may capture the sense because they do seem to have worked as a tag-team. And that feat of arms by the two young men was enough to precipitate a rout among the Philistines: *Then panic struck the whole army—those in the camp and field, and those in the outposts and raiding parties—and the ground shook. It was a panic sent by God* (v 15). It was certainly God's doing. The numbers were no problem to God. He needed only the two. Nor was the lack of weapons a problem: see verse 20: *Then Saul and all his men assembled and went to the battle. They found the Philistines in total confusion, striking each other with their swords.* The Philistines were defeated by their own swords. It was definitely not a victory for which the Israelite army could claim much credit: *Those Hebrews who had previously been with the Philistines and had gone up with them to their camp went over to the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. When all the Israelites who had hidden in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were on the run, they joined the battle in hot pursuit. So the LORD rescued Israel that day, and the battle moved on beyond Beth Aven* (vv 21-23).*

But it is worth looking a little more closely at the man God used to bring it about, and the attitude that man took to God, as expressed in 14:6. Let's call this—

(ii) The faith that never loses (How to Win)

Jonathan said to his young armour-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” (14:6). We need to work backwards through what Jonathan said to his armour-bearer, if we are going to understand its logic. Jonathan started from (a) doctrine, a truth about God: ***Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.*** Jonathan had a clear conviction that there was a God, and that He is sovereign. He can do whatever He chooses. Do you and I share that conviction about God, that ***Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few?*** (b) And that doctrine produced a cautious expectation in Jonathan: Perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. Notice the humility of faith. Faith does not dictate to God. Faith knows its own ignorance and the omniscience of God. John Whitecross tells this story—

“A minister, praying for a child apparently dying, prayed, ‘If it be Thy will, spare this child.’ The wretched and distracted mother interrupted him with the words, ‘It *must* be God’s will; I will have no *ifs*.’ The child, to the surprise of many, recovered, but lived to break his mother’s heart, and to be publicly executed at the age of twenty-two.”

Jonathan knew better than that poor mother: perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. He put no pistol to God’s head. (c) And then, thirdly, Jonathan used his imagination to suggest a plan—“Come, let’s go over to the outpost...” Doctrine, humility, and imagination—do they characterise our faith? Do we think like Jonathan did? Follow the logic again: “God can work with very small resources [even as small as you or me. Do you believe that?] He may choose to do so in our case [always humble]. He just might. How can we know whether He will or not, unless we try it?” Is not that the logic? Let’s try. Let’s just push the door. Let’s just see if God will work. One step of faith at a time.

We’ve just commissioned our leaders. I don’t know if you were one of them. But is tonight a night to face a challenge from Jonathan here? ***Jonathan said to his young armour-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”*** (14:6). Is it time you pushed on a door, put God to the test—perhaps offering for leadership (not letting all those other voices which tell you you are too busy, too tired, too committed, too nervous, drown your trust in God), or joining a group, or inviting a friend to church, to breakfast, a sports dinner, a jazz evening, Arena? Start from Doctrine: truth about God (“Nothing can hinder”); coupled with humility (“Perhaps the LORD”); then Imagination (let’s try!).

Our equivalent of Israel’s war with the Philistines is evangelism: the battle to make God known. We’ve got some great events coming up. God wants to save; He just might; How can we know until we try?

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)