

1 Samuel 13:23-14:52

Introduction

We all have heroes.

I enjoy playing the guitar. And my guitar hero is a blues guitarist from Texas called Stevie Ray Vaughan. He died, tragically, in a helicopter crash before I was aware of him. But when I listen to recordings of him playing, he blows my mind. I would love to be able to play the guitar like him.

We all have heroes who we would love to be like, in one way or another. They inspire us.

And that should prompt us to ask who our heroes are in the Bible. Who would we love to be like?

This book of Samuel has lots of contenders.

In many ways, Hannah is the hero of the book. She is a model of faithful dependence on God. Her example in the opening two chapters sets the tone for the whole book.

But then again, there's Samuel himself. God's prophet, who grows from a young boy into a fearless servant of God before our eyes.

But this week, the story focuses on another strong contender. Saul's son Jonathan.

We met him last week when he attacked the Philistine outpost at Gibeah, doing what his father Saul should have done back in chapter 10, but didn't.

And now he takes centre stage.

He is certainly a man to emulate. And what stands out about him in our passage this morning is his courageous faith.

That's our first heading, as we look at the passage together: Courageous faith.

Courageous faith

Please look down with me at the beginning of chapter 14.

Now a detachment of Philistines had gone out to the pass at Michmash.

One day Jonathan son of Saul said to his young armour-bearer, 'Come, let's go over to the Philistine outpost on the other side.' But he did not tell his father.

The Philistines are making their presence felt. They're as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They're armed with chariots and charioteers. And they're coming close.

And what's Saul doing?

Verse 2.

Saul was staying, or more literally 'sitting', on the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree in Migron.

Saul's sitting under a pomegranate tree.

He's doing nothing.

He's on his own. A rejected king. Who has lost God's favour. Been abandoned by God's prophet. And whose army has largely deserted him.

With him are what remains of his forces. They have no weapons. Just 600 unarmed men. Among whom is a descendant of Eli. A member of a rejected line of priests.

It looks hopeless.

And Saul is sitting, doing nothing. It looks as though he's paralysed with fear.

Jonathan, on the other hand, is moving.

He sets out with his armour-bearer to go to the Philistine outpost. They come to a pass with a cliff on either side. One is called Bozez, which means 'Slippery'. The other is called Seneh, which means 'Thorny'.

It doesn't sound very promising.

Yet Jonathan displays the same character that we saw in Hannah, in the opening chapters of the book. He's confident in God's ability to act.

Look at verse 6.

Jonathan said to his young armour-bearer, 'Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the LORD will act on 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.'

This is great!

Humanly speaking, there are no grounds for optimism.

It looks as though the Israelites are about to be slaughtered.

But Jonathan sees things differently. He sees this as a battle between the covenant people of God and the uncircumcised enemies of God.

Like Hannah, he has faith.

Faith doesn't look to circumstances but to God.

Our own circumstances may look hopeless. We may not be able to see any way through the situation we're in. If we look at our circumstances, we might despair.

But faith knows that there is always hope even when our circumstances look hopeless. And that's because faith doesn't look to circumstances but to God.

But it does so with humility.

Jonathan isn't arrogant. Look again at what he says to his armour-bearer in verse 6. He says: **'Perhaps the LORD will act on our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.'**

He's saying, 'God *can* do great things with small resources. And God *might* be willing to do something now. And if we will place ourselves in his hands, who knows what he might do?'

Remember, there's just two of them. They're up against an overwhelming enemy force.

And his armour-bearer says to him, 'Jonathan, let's go for it!'

This is courageous faith.

Jonathan doesn't know for sure that God *will* act. He doesn't presume to tell God how he *should* act. He simply trusts that God *can* act if he so chooses.

And he gets going.

He's an example for *us*.

This is the kind of person we should imitate.

In what circumstances might God be calling you to have courageous faith like Jonathan's?

What brave thing might he be calling you to do?

To use an old term, how might he be calling you to 'step out in faith'?

Perhaps it might be having a difficult conversation with someone.

It might be inviting a friend to one of our Christmas services.

It might be doing something new and scary in the year ahead.

It might seem overwhelming. But if we will have courageous faith like Jonathan's, who knows what God might do?

Jonathan trusts God and acts.

And the second thing we find in the story is the God who saves.

That's our next heading: The God who saves.

The God who saves

Look at verses 8 and 9.

Jonathan said, 'Come on, then; we will cross over towards them 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.'

Jonathan doesn't have access to the lots which the priests use to discern God's will. Nor does he have a pocket Bible and the indwelling Holy Spirit, as we have today. So, he devices a test to determine God's will.

And he gets the sign he wanted.

He and his armour-bearer clamber up the cliff called 'Slippery'. Attack the Philistines. And they kill twenty men.

Then God acts.

He fights in partnership with Jonathan and sends a panic on the Philistine camp. It's such a severe panic that the ground even shakes.

Saul's men see the Philistines melting away in all directions and report it to Saul.

Saul musters his men and tells them to do a head count. They discover that it's Jonathan who's at the heart of the commotion. And after a half-hearted attempt to consult with the Lord, Saul too joins the battle.

And then we discover that when God's involved a lack of resources doesn't matter.

Remember that the Israelites don't have any swords. But that isn't a problem. Because, in their total confusion, the Philistines start striking each other with their own swords.

Those who had defected re-join the Israelite army.

Those who had deserted come out of hiding.

The Philistines are routed.

And the result is stated in verse 23: **So on that day the LORD saved Israel, and the battle moved on beyond Beth Aven.**

Once again, God has shown himself to be the God of reversals. In chapter 13, Beth Aven was a place of fear and desertion. Now it's a place of victory and salvation.

Jonathan's confidence in the Lord is vindicated.

When we put ourselves in God's hands our own *lack* of resources is irrelevant.

If it is God's will to do so, he can accomplish great things through us whether we're well-resourced or not.

I love the bit in John's Gospel when Jesus says to his disciples: **'I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.'** (John 15:15)

When you and I became Christians, God made us partners with him in the family business: the business of salvation. As with Jonathan, God partners with us when we act in faith for him. And the resources that we contribute are not the critical factor. It's the resources that he contributes that are the critical factor.

As parents, we may feel ill-equipped to raise our children to know and love the Lord.

In the workplace, we may feel ill-prepared to answer the questions of our colleagues and to meet their objections to our beliefs.

In our families, we may feel that our personal witness is inadequate.

As a church, we might think that we lack sufficient clout to witness to the local community and impact the lives of those around us.

But the resources that *we* contribute are not the critical factor, whether as parents, work colleagues, friends or as a church. When we act in faith, it's the resources that God contributes that are the critical factor.

Remember Jonathan's words. If it is his will, then: **'Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.'**

That's the confidence we need. And Jonathan's faith in the Lord was vindicated. On that day the Lord saved Israel.

Well, we might expect this day to be a day of rejoicing and celebration for the Israelites. But the reality is very different. There's still more drama to come.

And I've called our next heading: Saul's folly.

Saul's folly

Please look with me at verse 24.

Now the Israelites were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, 'Cursed by anyone who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!' So none of the troops tasted food.

The Lord saved Israel that day, yet the Israelites are in distress.

Previously, they had been in distress because of the Philistines. But now they're in distress because of their own king and this rather bizarre oath that he's bound them under.

Notice his motive.

Jonathan saw this as a battle to save the Lord's people. Saul, on the other hand, sees it as his own personal revenge on his enemies. And fuelled by his desire for revenge, he's exercised poor judgement.

And the consequences are dire.

As the day goes on, the men become more and more weary.

Jonathan doesn't know about his father's oath. So, when he enters a wood and sees honey, he eats some and is immediately strengthened.

One of the soldiers tells him about the oath. And Jonathan points out his father's mistake.

Verse 29.

Jonathan said, 'My father has made trouble for the country. See how my eyes brightened when I tasted a little of this honey. How much better it would have been if the men had eaten today some of the plunder they took from their enemies. Would not the slaughter of the Philistines have been even greater?'

Saul's poor leadership has lessened the victory.

And what's more, it leads to the sin that follows.

By the end of the day the Israelites are so famished that they start slaughtering livestock where they stand and eating the meat with the blood still in it. Something that God had told them not to do.

Saul quickly builds an improvised altar so that the animals can be slaughtered properly. And then he decides that he wants to keep pursuing the Philistines through the night and not leave one of them alive.

When a priest suggests that he should consult God first, he does. But gets no answer. He assumes that it's due to the presence of sin and wants to know who the sinner is. The guilty person must die.

Lots are cast and Jonathan is identified.

Verse 43.

Then Saul said to Jonathan, 'Tell me what you have done.'

So Jonathan told him, 'I tasted a little honey with the end of my staff. And now I must die!'

Despite Jonathan's objection, Saul stands his ground. He insists that Jonathan must indeed be put to death. His son must die.

At that point Saul's men jump to Jonathan's defence.

He is the one who has brought about this great deliverance for Israel.

He had acted with God's help.

There was no way they would allow Saul to kill him.

And so, Saul backs down. He calls off the plan to pursue the Philistines. And the victory is left incomplete.

Saul is left even more isolated, and his reputation further weakened, while Jonathan is exalted.

The contrast between the two of them is stark.

What a great king Jonathan could have been.

The irony is that he will never *be* king because of his father. Samuel has already stated that the kingdom will be taken away from Saul and his descendants, because of Saul's faithlessness.

The chapter ends with a summary of Saul's victories. His reign isn't a complete disaster. God does use him to deliver Israel. But he is a flawed and faithless king. And ultimately, a rejected king.

As we read about Jonathan's courageous faith and the great salvation that God worked through him, it leaves us longing for what could have been, if only *he* were king.

It leaves us longing for a king *like* him.

Well, Israel would get that king. King David.

But ultimately, Jonathan is preparing the way for the coming of another son, who *would* have to die to save his people.

He's pointing us forward to a coming king, whose courageous faith in God would lead to the greatest salvation the world has ever known.

Once again, as we read this book of Samuel, God is preparing the way for the coming of Jesus.

Conclusion

Though just one man, he has rescued us from our greatest enemy. From sin and death.

His life of faithful dependence on God is the supreme example for us to follow.

And as we read this story now, we should be filled with thankfulness that we can live under *his* good and loving rule as *our* King, today and for eternity.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we thank you for Jesus and for the great salvation he has won. Thank you for the example he has set before us of faithful dependence on you. Please help us to follow him as our King today. To trust him. To rejoice in him. And to live for his glory. In his name we pray. Amen.