

1 Samuel 14

Contagious Courage

INTRODUCTION

When people are without hope they often are afraid to act. Paralyzed by fear of some impending doom, with no way to fend it off, they resort to hiding themselves. It is thought that any action might bring the threat to us quicker, so it is safest for the time being to do nothing.

This is where we find the Israelite army under Saul's leadership in 1 Samuel 14. Hopeless, hiding in a cave, paralyzed by fear, doing nothing as the massive Philistine army raids the land.

Let us remember how we got here. In 1 Samuel 13, Saul's son Jonathan attacked a Philistine garrison at Geba. The success of his mission, however, provoked a massive and terrifying response from the Philistines. The Philistines assembled 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and troops as numerous as the sand on the seashore. As they begin to close in on Saul's position at Gilgal, panic spreads through the Israelite ranks.

Samuel had commanded Saul to wait seven days for him to arrive and deliver the word of the Lord to him, to tell him what to do. But Saul sees his forces scattering from him, he sees the enemy advancing, and he sees no sign of Samuel's arrival. Rather than wait in faith, Saul takes matters into his own hands. He impatiently offers the burnt offering

himself, hoping to secure divine favor before going into battle. But in doing so, he directly violated God's command.

At that very moment, after he offered the burnt offering, Samuel arrived and confronted Saul for his foolishness. His impatience, which was born of fear and pride, led to disobedience, and reveals a deeper problem: **Saul's heart is not wholly dedicated to the LORD.** As a result, Saul is told that his kingdom will not endure. The Lord has sought out another—a man after His own heart.

Chapter 13 ends in crisis. Israel is outnumbered, ill-equipped, and without the Word of the Lord. The Philistines are raiding the land, and surrounding Saul's small army. Of the 3000 men Saul once had, only 600 remained. And of the 600, only Saul and Jonathan have proper weapons. It is into this bleak and desperate and hopeless situation that Jonathan steps forward in faith in chapter 14.

JONATHAN'S FAITH

Chapter 13 also begins to show the clear contrast between Jonathan and Saul. Saul had 2,000 men and was stationed closer to the Philistine garrison in Geba, yet did nothing.

Jonathan, with only 1,000 men and farther away, took the initiative, struck the enemy, and won a victory.

Chapter 14 repeats the pattern. Saul is idle again, this time in the cave at Migron with 600 men and Ahijah the priest. Surrounded by Philistines, he does nothing.

Once more, it's Jonathan who acts. With only his armor-bearer, he steps out in faith and brings another victory to Israel. But just as before, Saul's erratic, unbelieving leadership threatens to undermine what Jonathan's faith accomplishes.

Jonathan was a great warrior, not because of his strength, but because of his trust in God's promises. Deuteronomy 20:1,4 says:

"When you go out to battle and see horses and chariots and a people more numerous than you, do not be afraid... for the LORD your God is with you... to save you."

At the end of chapter 13 Samuel left Saul to go to Gibeah of Benjamin. Now apparently, Saul followed him there. But instead of being in the city with Samuel, he and his men are on the outside of the city at Migron, hiding in a cave. Like when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden, and prevented from entering the presence of the

Lord. Where Samuel is, God is, but Saul is not with Samuel, because Saul has been exiled from God.

Saul is a rejected king, by Ahijah the priest—the descendant of Eli's rejected line. Ahijah wears the ephod, with the Urim and Thummim, the means of discerning God's will. Yet Saul doesn't seek it. He simply “tarries”—inactive, faithless, and passive.

And what help can such a rejected king and priest offer Israel?

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Tired of waiting for orders, Jonathan takes initiative. He says to his armor-bearer, “*Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side.*” But he does not tell his father. Jonathan is a man of bold faith—it is better, in his mind, to act in faith and ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. He sees Saul sitting passively while the enemy stands near. Why not act? Because faithlessness breeds fear, fear breeds hopelessness, and hopelessness leads to paralysis. But Jonathan's faith leads to action.

Between him and the Philistine garrison lie two rocky crags—one called Bozez (“the Gleaming One”) and the other Seneh (“the Thorny One”). Scripture doesn't say which is which, but typology gives us a clue. Jonathan must

descend into the gorge and ascend the far side. The descent down Seneh—the “Thorny One”—pictures a descent into Sheol, the cursed domain of death. Thorns recall the curse of Genesis 3, and the Hebrew term for crags is the same root as “teeth,” often used to describe the devouring mouth of the grave.

Jonathan descends into this cursed place—but he rises again, climbing up Bozez—the “Gleaming One.” This is a picture of resurrection. Like Christ, who bore the curse, entered the jaws of death, and rose again in glory, so Jonathan pictures redemptive descent and victorious ascent. His victory is a foreshadowing of Christ’s greater triumph over death.

And just as Christ’s resurrection drew saints from their graves, Jonathan’s act of faith stirs the Israelite soldiers who had been hiding in caves and tombs to rise up and join the fight.

TRUE FAITH

Before the battle, Jonathan says something crucial:

“Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the LORD will work for us. For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few.”

This is what Saul failed to understand. The outcome does not depend on numbers, but on the Lord. Jonathan's "perhaps" is faith. Faith does not presume on God's will, but faith does trust in God's power. Like when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace. They said, *"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will worship the gold image you set up."*

In saying 'perhaps' Jonathan is not expressing doubt. True faith confesses God's ability without demanding or expecting outcomes. Faith puts itself at God's disposal, but continues believing even if things don't go well. Some people think that faith is having confidence in outcomes. That faith is some kind of certainty about the future.

But that misunderstands the nature of faith. In saying 'perhaps the Lord will work for us,' Jonathan has faith in God's ability, while he understands that God is not required to act for them. God can do mighty works with very small resources – **"Nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few"** – so let us go over there, for God may be glad to do so in this case. And how else will we know unless we place ourselves at God's disposal?"

Faith confesses the power of God, but it also retains the freedom of God. Faith does not dictate to God, as if the Lord of hosts is faith's errand boy. But faith believes God is capable, and is willing to take action based on what God can do, not on any certainty of what God will do.

So what does that mean for you, Church? It means you must stop waiting for perfect conditions before obeying God. Some of you are waiting until you feel bold enough, sure enough, strong enough. Stop waiting. Act. Obey. Trust that *perhaps the Lord will act for you*. Start the ministry. Initiate the reconciliation. Speak the truth in love. Offer the gospel to your neighbor. Step out in faith—and let God determine the outcome.

Your small little efforts of faith, are not in vain. God can use just one person who believes God can use him, to do great things. But the person who hems and haws and debates strategy and outcome all day, and looks at probabilities and statistics – let not that man suppose God will do anything for him, for he is not trusting in the Lord, but rather, like Saul, in how he can manipulate the circumstances for a favorable outcome.

Faithfulness does not depend on certainty of success. It depends on the certainty of God's power and character. Stop thinking that all risk taking is foolish. It is not. In fact, risk taking is the very environment in which biblical faith is proven. So trust God, and act. Perhaps he will work for you.

COVENANTAL FAITH

Jonathan also calls the Philistines “uncircumcised”—a deliberate reminder of covenant identity. Circumcision marked God's promise to give the land to Abraham's descendants. Jonathan fights not as a lone hero but as one standing on God's covenant. “We have the promises,” he is saying, “they do not.”

This is like the Church saying, “We are baptized. We bear the sign of the New Covenant. Christ has promised to be with us until the end. He has given us the inheritance of the world and pledged that the gates of hell will not prevail.” These are promises given to the covenant community. Faith doesn't demand God fulfill them on our individual terms—but it does act, believing God can.

I WILL FOLLOW

7 So his armorbearer said to him, “Do all that is in your heart. Go then; here I am with you, according to your heart.”

This is a pledge of total support for whatever actions Jonathan might take. His armor-bearer is so loyal to Jonathan, he is willing to give himself to whatever is in Jonathan's heart.

This is a beautiful image of how you should respond to your Lord. Wherever Christ leads, you should follow "heart and soul."

John 10:27 – "My sheep hear My voice... and they follow Me."

Luke 9:23 – "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me."

The Church, like the armorbearer, doesn't initiate salvation, but we join our Lord in His mission. We follow Him into the valley of the shadow of death, into conflict, into the presence of our enemies, bearing the weapons of the Spirit, trusting entirely in His leadership. Like Thomas, when Jesus said he was going to Jerusalem, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." – John 11:16

Faith and hope, is being willing, heart and soul, to follow Jesus wherever he sends you, to do whatever he tells you to do, and to not be afraid of the outcome, but rather, to be confident in what the Lord can do with you.

⁸ Then Jonathan said, “Very well, let us cross over to these men, and we will show ourselves to them. ⁹ If they say thus to us, ‘Wait until we come to you,’ then we will stand still in our place and not go up to them. ¹⁰ But if they say thus, ‘Come up to us,’ then we will go up. For the Lord has delivered them into our hand, and this will be a sign to us.”

Jonathan then devises a plan to discern whether the Lord has given the Philistines into his hand, and the entire strategy defies all military logic.

First, he says: “Let them see us.” In doing this, he forfeits the element of surprise—any general would tell you that’s tactical suicide. He doesn’t set out on a covert night operation with night vision goggles. He says, let us walk out in broad daylight and show ourselves to them.

Then he says, “If they say, ‘Wait there,’ we will stand still.” If the Philistines say stay there, that indicates that they are still hungry for war, and want to fight. They are still very much the aggressor. But Jonathan and his armor bearer are going to descend down into the pass between these two cliffs, and show themselves to them at the bottom of the pass. Now think about that. The Philistines have the high ground. Every military instinct would say: Get out of there. But Jonathan says, No—we’ll stay and fight if that’s what they say.

He doesn't say, "If they say, 'Wait there,' then we'll retreat." That would make sense. No—he says, We will wait here. We will hold our ground. We will trust that even in this exposed, impossible position, the Lord can save.

Then comes the final part: "*If they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go, for the Lord has given them into our hand.*" That's the sign. The Philistines are cocky and self assured, and the hunger for battle is not in them. They are willing to talk smack to the Hebrews, but not pursue them.

Now while that is a good sign, Jonathan is not exactly putting him and his armorbearer into the best situation.

From a strategic standpoint, this is the height of lunacy. It puts him at an even greater disadvantage than if the Philistines had come down to him. They have to crawl up the side of this cliff on his hands and feet. By the time he gets to the top he is going to be exhausted. I don't think the Philistines are going to wait for them to catch their breath, like Inigo Montoya did for Wesley in the Princess Bride when he climbed rope up the mountain.

But for Jonathan, that's the point. If God leads us into the worst possible position, then that's how we'll know. This victory will be His alone.

Now, is that how you think, people of God? Probably not. We tend to assume that if God is with us, life will be easy and gentle—pillows and flowers, affirming friends, ease and comfort. No pain. No hard things. Just smooth sailing. Winning for us is no problems ever, a life of ease and luxury and softness. In fact, any sense of hardship and burdens we turn against the Lord and say, God doesn't love me. Why are you against me, Lord?

But that's not biblical faith. That's self-centered delusion. That's the thinking of someone who is the hero of their own boring story, where God exists only to decorate the background.

But if the LORD is the center of the story—if His glory is the purpose of your life—then you will begin to see, by faith, that God often does His greatest work when you are brought to the edge. When you are overwhelmed. When you have no strength left. When you are crawling on your hands and knees up to an enemy who overpowers you and outnumbers you. That's when God shows up. For God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

God placed **Saul** in a moment of testing just like that, to see if he would believe. Would he trust the Lord's power to save? He didn't. So Jonathan, chooses to be a man of faith

and action *places himself* into a similar situation, just so he can trust in the Lord's power to save.

Jonathan is not exactly the kind of guy who is playing it safe. If we met Jonathan today, some of us might think he was presumptuous for putting himself in a such dangerous situation. But Jonathan is a man of faith who is not afraid of the outcomes. Just so long as the Lord gets the glory.

So Jonathan, whose name means "The LORD has given", steps into an impossible situation and declares, "*Come up after me, for the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel.*"

Maybe you are in an impossible situation right now. Maybe your marriage is strained. Maybe you've lost your job. Maybe your mind is weary with anxiety or depression. Maybe you are overwhelmed by the crushing demands of life and see no way out. You feel weak. Forgotten.

Maybe you're in the ravine right now—overwhelmed, worn out, stuck between a rock and a hard place, crawling on your hands and knees. But maybe that's exactly where God wants you. Not to destroy you, but to glorify Himself through you. He leads His people through the valley—not to abandon them, but to reveal His power. Will you have faith to trust in God and hope to see His salvation come to you?

Follow Jonathan's lead. Trust the Lord. Climb with faith.
And when the victory comes, say it with confidence:

"The LORD has given."

1,2 PUNCH

The two proceed with Jonathan's plan. ¹¹ So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines. And the Philistines, mildly surprised by the foolhardy act, make fun of them saying, said, "Look, the Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden." ¹² Then the men of the garrison called to Jonathan and his armorbearer, and said, "Come up to us, and we will teach you a thing."

Jonathan said to his armorbearer, "Come up after me, for the Lord has delivered them into the hand of Israel." ¹³ And Jonathan climbed up on his hands and knees with his armorbearer after him; and they fell before Jonathan. And as he came after him, his armorbearer killed them. ¹⁴ That first slaughter which Jonathan and his armorbearer made was about twenty men within about half an acre of land.

Here Jonathan and his armor bearer perform a one-two punch on the Philistines. Jonathan has the initiative, and he strikes the Philistines on their turf, where they feel comfortable and relaxed. Jonathan strikes the first blow, knocking the guys down, and his armorbearer finishes

them off. One by one they roll through 20 men like it was nothing.

As a result of their initial strike, there was trembling in the camp of the Philistines. News has come to the camp out in the field, and all the men start to **tremble**. The garrison and the raiders **tremble**. And then God sent an earthquake so that the earth itself began to **tremble**. God sent a panic on the Philistines, like when he thundered from Heaven during the battle of Ebenezer in chapter 7. God is acting. God is responding to the faith of a one man. The whole camp of the Philistines is thrown into utter confusion and fear and panic. They are melting away, going here and there. All there military discipline and order was brought to nothing.

Saul hears about this from his watchmen, and he calls the roll to see who was gone, and surprisingly it was Jonathan and his armorbearer.

A DOUBLE-MINDED MAN

¹⁸And Saul said to Ahijah, “Bring the ark of God here” (for at that time the ark of God was with the children of Israel). ¹⁹Now it happened, while Saul talked to the priest, that the noise which was in the camp of the Philistines continued to increase; so Saul said to the priest, “Withdraw your hand.”

With the Philistines in retreat, the time was right for Israel to strike. God was clearly at work. But Saul, ever double-minded, didn't know what to do. He called for the ark of God—apparently present with Israel that day—and summoned the priest Ahijah, who wore the ephod, the means for discerning God's will. Saul wanted to cover all his bases before entering the fray.

He instructed the priest to seek the Lord's guidance, but as the noise from the Philistine camp grew louder, Saul abruptly said, **“Withdraw your hand”**—in other words, stop inquiring.

His two commands—“Bring the ark” and “Withdraw your hand”—reveal his careless attitude toward holy things. He treats divine guidance as a tool to manage, not a will to submit to. He commands the priest instead of listening to him. He initiates the inquiry only to interrupt it the moment it becomes inconvenient.

Saul's behavior here exposes the core of his instability. He flips flops between piety and impulse, prayer and action, never rooted in either. When he should pray, he acts. When he should act, he prays. Leaders must know the difference.

Some time ago, I spoke with a city council member ahead of an important vote. I urged her to speak up and do what was right. But instead of going to the meeting, she stayed home to pray. That's not godly faithful leadership. There is a time to pray. But when it's time to act, inaction cloaked in prayer is disobedience.

Saul had ample time to seek the Lord. He had the ark, the priest, and the ephod. He could have prayed beforehand—but he tarried. Then, when God began to move, he rushed in, pretending to seek God's will, only to abandon it when the battle noise swelled. His concern was not obedience, but his own glory. Jonathan acted in faith and God moved. Saul hesitated, postured, then impulsively reacted. He saw the opportunity for his own glory was getting away, and he didn't have time to wait on God.

This moment captures Saul's flawed leadership: outwardly religious when it suits him, inwardly impulsive. He gestures toward God but refuses to wait on Him. He wants the credit for a victory he did not begin, and he wants God's name attached to it—so long as it doesn't slow him down.

VERSES 20–23: COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS

When Saul and his 600 men finally arrived at the battle, they found the Philistine camp in complete disarray—

soldiers turning their swords on one another in total confusion. Some Hebrews who had defected earlier and joined the Philistines now turned against them. They were opportunists quick to shift allegiances once the tide turned.

Then, all across the hill country of Ephraim, men who had been hiding in caves and tombs came out and joined the fight. The momentum of the battle swung to Israel's favor, and the chase pushed the Philistines as far as Beth Aven. The text says plainly:

“So the Lord saved Israel that day.”

That's what happens when courage breaks through. When people are beaten down and paralyzed by fear—when they believe resistance is pointless—they won't lift a finger. But once someone stands up in faith, just one man, it sparks something inside of them. Courage awakens courage.

Jonathan's bold action lit a fire in the people. Saul does not act, he reacts. He does not lead, he follows. He is just like the deserters who turned back, and those in the caves who rose up. But Jonathan's faith is infectious. His courage is contagious. But so is Saul's fear. Saul's fear paralyzed Israel. But Jonathan's faith brought victory from the Lord for Israel.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS.

I saw this vividly during the COVID years. Churches whose pastors were overly cautious—paralyzed by daily briefings about new cases of Covid, the number of hospital beds, the number of ventilators. Those pastors and churches that cared more about those numbers than doing what honored God lost more than just momentum. They lost credibility. They lost their people. Some never recovered. One example: Christ the King Church in Springfield, Missouri, a CREC Church in our Presbytery, closed its doors this year. The leadership faltered when courage was most needed.

But other churches stood firm. They led boldly, and that courage spread. New churches were also planted. People looking for faithful, fearless leadership found it—and many of you are here at Christ the Redeemer because of it.

People want leaders with courage. It was one of the defining issues of the past five years. And when leaders act in faith and courage they free others to do the same. Fear loosens its grip. Hope returns.

Its like what Deborah said in her song in Judges 5 –
“When leaders lead in Israel, When the people willingly offer themselves, Bless the LORD.” When leaders lead,

people will offer themselves. But when leaders fail, the people become paralyzed, and they are defeated.

This is what happened in Israel that day. Saul did not lead. And the people were paralyzed by fear. But Jonathan's faithful action stirred the people to action. And the people, once passive and hidden, rose up and joined the victory God had already begun.

Jonathan didn't wait for a large army. He didn't wait for the polls to come in. He didn't say, "Let's see what everyone else is doing first." He acted in obedience, trusting in God's promises, even if he had to do it alone.

That's real leadership. And it is not reserved only for leaders. We've got far too many believers who are content to huddle in the cave with Saul, watching the enemy gain ground, or, who are afraid of the consequences of obedience. They are just waiting for the circumstances to become favorable before doing anything.

People of God, stop waiting for someone to give you permission to obey God—just do it. You don't need a crowd to do what is right. You just need conviction, and faith that God may perhaps act on your behalf. Jonathan had one armor-bearer. But even just one person with God

is in the majority. You don't need permission to obey. You just need to believe and obey.

Therefore People of God, believe that nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many, or by a few. Whatever inadequacies and short comings you may feel, God is not hindered by any of them. Use your meager efforts in faith, and who knows, God may perhaps work for you. And when things get difficult, do not be afraid, for that might just be the sign that the Lord has given it into your hands.