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1 Samuel 13:16–14:15

Twenty-first Message

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# BREAKING THE IMPASSE: ALL IT TAKES IS ONE

*SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES*

Our theme this morning is “Breaking the Impasse.” At certain times in our spiritual lives we get bogged down at an impasse. We may be growing in many areas, but at one particular place we repeatedly become stuck. Whether it is a habitual sin, a strong individual who shuts us down, our health, or accumulated debt, if we are unable to break through the impasse it can take on a life of its own, affecting all we do. Eventually it can lead to spiritual paralysis. If that describes your situation, I have great news for you. There is a way out...if you have faith.

You may say, “That’s great, but how is faith born?” The answer is, faith is more “caught” than “taught.” Perhaps, then, it is no accident that 1 Samuel 13-14 is one of the longest narrative units in the Old Testament. It takes a good action film of significant length to captivate us and infuse us with the character traits of a hero whose faith we see “in action,” not in theory. Jonathan’s courage, faith, and self-sacrifice are as mysterious as they are amazing. His godly character is further elevated in our eyes when we view it against the dark backdrop of what is deceptively false. Throughout these scenes, Saul serves as the foil to Jonathan’s faith. In each scene, Jonathan initiates the action, doing what the king should be doing, while Saul merely reacts. Jonathan’s faith and success shame the king and drive him to plot his son’s murder. As the narrator’s lens pans back and forth between father and son, we are forced to examine our faith before these two opposing mirrors. Before we enter into this action-packed adventure, I would like you to reflect on these questions:

Are you paralyzed by fear (like Saul),  
or are you developing a fearless faith (like Jonathan)?

1. What are the impasses in your life (people, circumstances, health) that paralyze you and prevent you from moving forward in your spiritual life?
2. How do you view your upbringing and social environment? Do you feel handicapped by those whose personality, character or choices make living by faith difficult for you?
3. Do you feel obligated to wait for those who are supposedly responsible to initiate change, or are you free to act to take new ground for Christ, independent of what others think?
4. Have you abdicated your leadership for fear of facing negative emotions from others? Are you driven to please people by keeping the peace?
5. Which is more difficult for you, confronting the women or the men in your life?
6. When was the last time you ventured by faith into uncharted territory to confront evil or to reach out with unexpected love and forgiveness?

## I. The Setting: Gloom and Doom (1 Sam 13:16-22)

### A. The Philistines’ Military Advantage (13:16-18)

And Saul and Jonathan his son and the people who were present with them stayed in Geba of Benjamin, but the Philistines encamped in Michmash. And raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies. One company turned toward Ophrah, to

the land of Shual; another company turned toward Beth-horon; and another company turned toward the border that looks down on the Valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness. (1 Sam 13:16-18 ESV)

After Saul had been censured by Samuel, he numbered his few remaining troops and repositioned them in Gibeah to brace for the Philistine onslaught. Once the troops vacated their outpost in Michmash, the Philistines quickly took possession of it as their base of operations to launch an all-out offensive. At Michmash they now command an excellent view to the south, and the steep cliffs adjacent to the town make a potential attack almost impossible. From their new outpost they seek to isolate Saul, deploying raiders in three companies, wreaking havoc and destruction over three points of the compass. Their strategy is painfully reminiscent of Saul’s methods when he divided the troops into “three companies” and won a decisive victory against the Ammonites (11:11). Now Saul is on the receiving end of the Philistine initiative; from Gibeah he is powerless to stop the scorched earth policy of the raiding parties.

Morale must have been extremely low among Saul’s troops as they sat idly by while the enemy trampled through their land at will. For those who had faith, it would have been difficult to follow a king who had none, especially after witnessing the angry exchange between the king and the prophet. There probably was a lot of anger and resentment among the ranks of the troops, who had little interest in religion. They felt this grim situation could have been avoided if their commander-in-chief had not ordered them to withdraw from their superior position in Michmash. What good is religion when it jeopardizes the battle? There were not many happy faces in Geba.

Besides their strategic advantage, the Philistines also had an iron grip on Israel’s economy, extinguishing any spark of hope that the nation might survive.

### B. An Iron Grip on the Economy (13:19-22)

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, “Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears.” But every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, or his sickle, and the charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the plowshares and for the mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and for setting the goads. So on the day of the battle there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan, but Saul and Jonathan his son had them.

The Philistines had driven all the blacksmiths out of Israel, creating a monopoly on the smelting of iron, forcing Israel to use the metal for peaceful purposes only (this has a modern ring to it). This resulted in a total lack of military hardware on the one hand, and a significant drain on the economy on the other. The Israelites were dependent on the Philistine blacksmiths to keep their farm implements viable, and therefore had to make continual trips across the border to sharpen their tools at exorbitant cost. So as the Philistine war machine advances unabated to the east, the Israelite manpower and wealth is going in the exact opposite direction, to the west.<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of the battle, Israel has just two swords, one for the king and one for the crown prince, to combat the Philistine war machine. Outmanned, outgunned and outflanked, where can a savior be found?

To capture the contrast between faith and fear, the camera switches back and forth from Jonathan to Saul. The effect is palpable.

## II. Faith's Initiative and Fear's Seclusion (1 Sam 13:23-14:3)

### A. Jonathan's Faith to "Cross Over" (13:23–14:1)

**And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash. One day [lit. "It was the 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.**

Timing is everything in the life of faith. Just as a detachment of Philistines leaves the main camp at Michmash to defend the pass leading to it, Jonathan and his armor bearer decide to "cross over" to the enemy camp. For the first time in the story we hear Jonathan's voice. The first words of Biblical characters are often a window into their character. While most of the nation is plagued by pessimism and gloom, Jonathan's words, "Come, let us cross over," are filled with buoyant faith and initiative, inviting his young armor bearer to explore what God might be up to. Such confidence is in stark contrast to his father's first words, "come let us return" (1 Sam 9:5), when he was ready to give up in his search for his lost donkeys. Perhaps this is why Jonathan does not inform Saul about his covert initiative. The king has no faith, therefore he has no ability to assess the situation, especially now that he had lost favor with the prophet.

Jonathan's faith burns so brightly that the narrator highlights the time factor ("It was the day") as if a new day had just dawned in Israel's history, one that will reverse Israel's fortunes. Keith Bodner develops the thought: "Not only does this reinforce the idea of Jonathan as a risk taker, but the verb he uses, 'pass over' (*abar*) evokes memories of the defections of the previous chapter, as a large number of 'Hebrews' (*abarim*) go AWOL and 'pass over' (*abar*) the Jordan (13:7). The wordplay is important because it anticipates a reversal in this chapter: through Jonathan's endeavors in 1 Samuel 14, those 'Hebrews' who previously 'passed over' will return to the camp of Israel (14:21)."<sup>2</sup>

Immediately after we are captivated by Jonathan's invitation to his armor bearer, the camera pans back to the outskirts of Gibeah, where Saul is hiding.

### B. Saul Sits in Fearful Seclusion (14:2-3)

**Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men, including Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of the Lord in Shiloh, wearing [lit. "carrying"] an ephod. And the people did not know that Jonathan had gone.**

The narrator turns our attention back to Saul, where he and his modest army have withdrawn from the city into the seclusion of a cave. Patrick Arnold suggests that the mention of the "pomegranate" is not a tree, but "probably identical with the 'Pomegranate Rock' of Judg 20:45–47, to which 600 Gibeahite soldiers fled for refuge after an ambush by Ephraimite warriors."<sup>3</sup> If this is correct, Saul is taking shelter in the cave that saved his tribal ancestors from annihilation. In contrast to his son's faith, which thrusts him fearlessly into the enemy camp, Saul and his troops have abandoned the city and are hiding out in the historic Benjaminite "bomb shelter." Inside the royal cave we hear no words of faith or courageous initiative, just pitiful resignation and fearful seclusion.

In addition to this bleak "band of brothers," the narrator names a recent recruit, Ahijah ("brother of the Lord"), a priest with ominous credentials. He is the grandson of Phinehas and the great-grandson of Eli, who was the priest in Shiloh. One might think that having an Aaronic priest carrying an ephod to ascertain the divine will would be an asset for Saul, especially in view of his earlier cultic transgression. But every detail of Ahijah's lengthy genealogy hints of disaster for the king, as Bodner outlines: "Ichabod's widowed mother dies in childbirth with the lament 'glory is exiled from Israel'; Phinehas is killed and the prophetic word spoken against him finds fulfillment; heavy Eli falls backwards from his throne and plunges to his death; and Shiloh is displaced as a sanctuary and eschewed as a spatial setting. Ahijah's attendance on Saul thus assumes a heightened significance here, as two rejected lines are now together in one place: two generations lost in space, with no time left to start again (as Don McLean would sing)."<sup>4</sup>

The impotence of the priest is confirmed by the fact that he brings no knowledge to the king regarding his son's absence. Everyone in Saul's circle remains (literally) in the dark. Without the presence of God's spirit and the prophet's voice, a king's assets become liabilities.

From that depressing scene the narrator shifts our attention back to our two warriors as they consider their approach to the Philistine camp. The scene illustrates how a person with faith assesses obstacles and develops strategies to advance in God's will.

## III. The Voice of Faith (1 Sam 14:4-13)

### A. Assessing the Obstacles (14:4-5)

**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 Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh. The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba.**

The hill country in this region is replete with deep canyons (wadis) running east to west, making passage from north to south difficult except on the central watershed ridge. One exception to this is the "pass" in the Wadi Suwenit, a broad place in the canyon where passage is easy.<sup>5</sup> Traversing along the riverbed, the canyon walls rise higher and higher. At Michmash, the walls almost converge, as "two steep outcroppings (lit. 'tooth of bedrock'),"<sup>6</sup> approximately 200 meters high, stare at each other like defiant sentinels. Their bold features and sharp, tooth-like crags gave them the names *Seneh* ("thorn") and *Bozez* ("shining"—perhaps facing south, it caught the rays of the sun). The lengthy description of the fierce landscape makes us appreciate not only the virtual impossibility of the crossing, but also provides an apt symbol of the spiritual paralysis in Israel under Saul's leadership—a paralysis that seems as extensive and permanent as these two imposing columns of rock.

### B. The Bedrock of Faith (14:6)

**Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. Perhaps the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few."**

Jonathan's invitation to his armor bearer gives expression to the bedrock of his faith. Fokkelman points out that of the 129 words in vv. 6-13, only 16 are action words; the rest are speech, suggesting that prayer and praise before the battle do more to determine the outcome than our prowess and skill in the fight.

In Jonathan's short speech we find three qualities of authentic faith. The first is the perspective of faith. For Jonathan, this battle is not about the Philistine war machine versus the ill-equipped Israeli army. No, the conflict is about a group of proud, "uncircumcised" human beings, parading as warriors, challenging the Almighty God. The people of Israel

are not the victims in this scenario but privileged covenant partners with the LORD of Hosts. That gives Jonathan quite a different outlook than the royal press, CNN or ESPN.

Secondly, because of God's absolute omnipotence, Jonathan believes there is absolutely no obstacle that "restrains" the Almighty from granting a victory. Yet, as Fokkelman observes, consider all the obstacles: "the superiority of the Philistines, the undermining of Saul's self-confidence, the annihilation of troops and the grave shortage of arms,"<sup>7</sup> not to mention, the impenetrable, rocky landscape. But to the one who has faith, no obstacle poses a threat to God.

Like Jonathan, Jesus believed that no obstacle, no matter how imposing, posed a threat to God's almighty power. Standing on the Mount of Olives, Jesus encouraged the disciples that if they would exercise their faith through prayer and praise, they could remove any roadblock to the gospel:

**"Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him."**  
(Mark 11:23)

Jesus evokes the disciples' memory of God's power displayed in the Exodus, when he cast Pharaoh's chariots into the sea. The Jews were hoping that God would perform a "second exodus" and cast their enemies, the Romans, into the sea. But, standing on the temple mount in Jerusalem, Jesus turns the tables on the Jews, explaining that the greatest obstacle to their believing in the gospel is not the Romans but Israel's temple! He had supreme confidence that by faith and prayer, God would remove it and, in effect, cast it into the sea. In A.D. 70, that is exactly what happened.

The third aspect that governs Jonathan's faith is humility. Though he has supreme confidence in God's saving might, he does not presume on God, or violate God's freedom to act when and with whom he chooses. Notice his use of the word "perhaps." Fokkelman comments: "Perhaps" is not vacillation and does not have the tone of cool calculation of risks... but the tone of respect. Jonathan's hope has no intention to a prejudicial effect on God, but respects his liberty to act or not.<sup>8</sup>

Some of you may have had the unpleasant experience of an over-zealous and ill-formed believer exhorting you that if you just had enough faith, God would answer all your requests and even heal all your diseases. I applaud their confidence, but without that all-important "perhaps," they lack the humility that fosters healthy relationships. Authentic faith assesses obstacles in the light of God's omnipotence, coupled with a humility that grants God the freedom to act when and how he desires.

#### C. Authentic Faith is Contagious (14:7)

**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."**

One of the greatest qualities about authentic faith is that it is utterly contagious. Jonathan's words radiate such genuine, life-giving power that they light a flame of total trust in the soul of his young armor bearer. The man is so confident in his master's relationship with the Lord, he finds his heart beating as one with his. Thus he is at Jonathan's complete disposal to do whatever he thinks the situation demands. Later in the story, Jonathan will reciprocate, giving the same kind of loving-trust to David after witnessing his courageous faith in his confrontation with Goliath (1 Sam 18:1-5). When an individual has authentic faith to serve God and his kingdom, it is of little concern whether he leads the charge, carries the weapons, or must decrease that others may increase (John 3:30).

If you are an introvert like me, pray that God will send you a Jonathan to inspire you to "cross over" to places you never dreamed possible. When I began working as a youth pastor, I was concerned that our youth needed adventures to challenge them and get them out of their

comfort zones. Not being very knowledgeable or adept in the wilds of the outdoors, I prayed that God would send someone to lead and mentor me. In response, God sent Paul Winslow into my life. At 6' 7" tall, Paul was our church's equivalent to Paul Bunyan. For years I enjoyed being his "armor bearer," tagging behind him in hair-raising adventures, backpacking, skiing, rock climbing, river rafting, not to mention several missions trips around the world. Years later, I "crossed over" behind the Iron Curtain to Romania as Gary Marchetti's "armor bearer." I never would have had the faith necessary to make such a crossing on my own, but our team gave Gary and his wife our complete trust. Years later we switched roles, and he joined us on one of my mission trips.

Jim Ross is our church's newest Jonathan. This month he is headed to Liberia to explore the key people whom God has been preparing to work with their organization to help feed, educate and love a community of orphans. Because of his faith, many of you may be moved to sponsor a child; others may even travel to Liberia to serve on a medical or educational team. It doesn't take many Jonathans to energize a community with faith; it takes just one.

#### D. Faith's Strategy: Signs of Pride (14:8-10)

**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 to us."**

Now that he has the complete trust of his armor bearer, Jonathan maps out their strategy to determine if this is the Lord's timing. This is true humility, coupled with confidence in the Lord's ability to lead. The "sign" Jonathan chooses seems odd, as it appears to be giving the advantage to their enemy. He and his armor bearer will "cross over" and reveal themselves to Philistine troops positioned high above the canyon walls on top of the ridge. If the Philistines decide to pursue them down into the riverbed, Jonathan will take this as a sign not to attack. But if they say, "Come up to us," then they will go up and attack.

Jonathan's brilliant strategy is designed to uncover the attitude among the Philistine troops. If they considered these two Israelites a serious threat, they would pursue them down the steep cliff into the riverbed to the pass. But if, in the relative ease of their high position they were proud and over confident, the invitation to "come up to us" (i.e. by climbing the cliffs, which was well nigh impossible) would be a sign that they considered these two of no consequence and they had absolutely no intention of pursuing them. This then will be the sign that the *Lord has given* them into their hand.

Fokkelman comments: "It is striking that Jonathan makes no mention whatever of battle or defeating the Philistines. He confines himself to his intention to cross over, showing himself and 'climbing up.'" Thinking through the actual fight was not necessary for Jonathan, for he knew "pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov 16:18). All he needed to do was show up.

## IV. The Fight of Faith (1 Sam 14:11-15)

### A. Working the Signs (14:11-12)

**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."**

When Jonathan and his armor bearer reveal themselves, the Philistines take the bait and show even more than Jonathan had hoped for. Their self-conceit is amplified in their derision for the Hebrews, whom they compare to lowlife desert animals or underground vermin. As the Philistine pride echoed across the canyon walls, Jonathan's confidence is ignited: he knew that "the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel." Faith is the first and last word of Jonathan's dialogue. The words "the Lord has given" (*Yahweh natan*) are identical to his name (*Yonatan*). As Jonathan's "re-enacts his name,"<sup>10</sup> his God-given identity now becomes his destiny.

#### B. The Fight... What Fight? (14:13-14)

**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 half a furrow's length in an acre of land.**

After all the buildup and suspense, we would expect hard-hitting details of the ensuing fight. But all we get is that the two of them *show themselves, climb up*, and then the camera zooms in on the Philistines, who *fall before Jonathan*, and his armor bearer finishes them off. This is not the stuff of a Hollywood blockbuster. But to the eye of faith, there is much more beneath the surface. As Fokkelman observes: "There is no explosion of force or heroism, but an implosion... The appearance (*gala*) of Jonathan was an appearing, a revealing (*gala*) of the God of Israel. Then in a panic of numinous character, 'The Philistines fell before Jonathan,' who hardly had to use his sword."<sup>11</sup>

The fate of the Philistine troops is identical to that of their god, Dagon, who *fell down* before the ark of the Lord (1 Sam 5:3-4). It seems as if the Philistine *gods* have lost their power once again. In case we miss its significance, the scene is replicated in the gospel of John. When Judas betrayed our Lord, the betrayer escorted a band of heavily armed soldiers and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees to the garden to arrest the unarmed Jesus. Seeing them at a distance, Jesus went out to meet them and innocently asked, "Whom do you seek?" They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "*ego eimi*" ("I am he"), which was the Greek equivalent of God's personal name (*Yahweh*) in the Old Testament. At the mere mention of that holy name, those mighty warriors drew back and fell to the ground (John 18:3-6).

The narrator concludes the battle with a summary line of the day's death toll: "Although outnumbered about ten to one, Jonathan and his armor-bearer dispatched 'some twenty men' in a 'furrowed area' of a field small enough to be plowed by a yoke of oxen in half a day—that is, the Philistines were killed in a brief time and a short distance."<sup>12</sup> Apparently, this was only the beginning of what was to occur that day.

#### C. The Ensuing Panic (14:15)

**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.**

The dreadful news that Jonathan had decimated the Philistine outpost shot through the Philistine troops at breakneck speed, and was intensified by seismic shock waves that struck them with panic and confusion. No one was exempt. It arrived with such force that they scattered in every direction. The panic was sent by God to fight for his people as the complement to their faith (Deut 7:23). On this day the earth quaked and the pride of the Philistine war machine melted like butter on a hot stove. All it took was one to break the impasse, one who had the faith to "cross over."

Where is God speaking to you to take the initiative by faith? And what is preventing you from taking the initiative today?

[May you come to know] **what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.** (Eph 1:19-21)

1. I have depended heavily on Fokkelman's insightful and detailed narrative analysis on this text. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 46.

2. Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 131.

3. P. Arnold, "Migron," *ABD*, 4:822.

4. Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 132.

5. *Pictorial Library of Bible Lands, Vol. 2, Samaria* (CD-ROM; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

6. Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 156.

7. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 54.

8. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 54.

9. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 53.

10. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 53.

11. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 52-53.

12. Ronald F. Youngblood, "1 & 2 Samuel," *EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 3:662.

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