



Catalog No. 1640
 1 Samuel 14:24-36
 Twenty-third Message
 Brian Morgan
 June 27th, 2010

A LIVING FAITH OR DEADLY RELIGION?

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Introduction: A Day for the History Books

Last week we saw how Jonathan's daring assault against the Philistine garrison ignited God's promise to fight for Israel (Deut 1:3), setting in motion a series of divine reversals that saved the nation from annihilation. In just one day's time, the courageous faith of the one revived a nation's dead faith, recovering all that Israel had lost to the Philistines under Saul's administration. Jan Fokkelman shows how every aspect of Israel's former distress had its counterpoint in surprising triumph.¹

A The Philistines to the east of Beth-aven	13:5
B Israel in sore straits	6a
C Israel hides in caves and holes, etc.	6b
D Hebrews flee across the Jordan	7a
E Saul's army trembles	7b
climax of the <i>descending line</i> : Saul's little faith, clash with Samuel	
motor of the <i>ascending line</i> : Jonathan, courageous through faith, liquidates the post	
E' Philistines tremble	14:15-20
D' Other Hebrews run over to Saul	21
C' Israel, having hidden, re-appears and takes part in battle	22
B' Yahweh liberates Israel	23a
A' Battle passes Beth-aven (westwards!)	23b

Though Jonathan's faith initiated the reversals, the narrator seals the day, giving all the glory to God: "So the LORD saved Israel that day" (14:23). These words are an exact quotation of Exodus 14:30, when the Lord accomplished the greatest reversal in Israel's history, destroying the Egyptian army in the sea and bringing Israel safely through on dry ground. With that historic seal, the narrator is placing the glory of this day's victory, initiated by Jonathan's faith, alongside the Exodus in Israel's "Hall of Fame" of salvation history.

I. The Structure of the Plot (1 Sam 14:24-34)

In our text today, the narrator shifts our attention from Jonathan's living faith to Saul's deadly religion. Fokkelman's outline reveals how in the heat of battle Saul changes his priorities, making religion his main concern.²

a Saul sets a taboo	14:24
b The army obedient	25-26
c Jonathan is disobedient (unconsciously)	27
x Saul's oath	28
c' Jonathan repudiates oath (consciously)	29-30
b' The army transgresses	32-33
a' Saul sets a ritual	34

Previously we saw how Jonathan's faith gave him confidence in the light of day "to do all that was on his heart," trusting God for the outcome. By contrast, the hypersensitive and jealous king imposes arbitrary religious rituals by night to manipulate a different outcome. This bizarre

move greatly depreciates the victory that God had given that day, eliciting Jonathan's censure. Saul's rituals may give the appearance of radical commitment, but in reality they are designed to serve his wounded pride by isolating his son and then eliminating him!

How often have subsequent monarchs, popes, presidents, priests and pastors perverted piety for the sake of personal gain! There are great lessons to be learned in this text. May God grant us a clear eye to discern the difference between a living faith and deadly religion. Equally important is that we might know how to walk by faith, when oftentimes the good we work hard to achieve seems so easily swept away by self-serving individuals who hold the reins of power. Why does God sometimes allow his greatest works to be depreciated by those who are unfaithful? What can we draw on for hope when that happens?

II. Saul's Rash Oath and Jonathan's Repudiation of It (1 Sam 14:24-30)

A. A stupid oath (14:24)

Now the Israelites were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, "Cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!" So none of the troops tasted food. (14:24 TNIV)

Having given the divine viewpoint of the battle, with its glorious rout of the Philistines, the narrator now gives an altogether different perspective through a flashback of events that occurred simultaneously with verses 20-23. Despite the day's amazing reversals there were deep undercurrents of discontent among Saul's troops, whom the narrator describes as being "hard pressed" (a verb that connotes cruel and dehumanizing oppression³). The identical term is used in 13:6 to describe their condition when they seemed doomed before the Philistine onslaught. How in the world could Israel's troops continue to be "hard pressed" after Jonathan's massacre and the divine panic destroyed the Philistine army and sent them fleeing in terror? What happened?

The answer in one word is: Saul. Saul had an incredible opportunity to enter into the saving work of God and exploit the advantage that Israel had been given in the day's victory. But instead of using his command to the glory of God and the good of his people, he used it to get revenge for his wounded ego. In order to isolate and condemn his absent son, we learn that he imposed an oath on his troops, banning them from food until "I am avenged on my enemies." Whose war is it now? Fokkelman observes how this would not sit well with battle-weary troops who were ordered to get the job done on an empty stomach: "A general who withholds food from his army during the battle is not quite right in the head. And if he clothes that decision in religious form as well, he is certainly possessed of an evil spirit. That same Saul who was initially too preoccupied with the military aspects (13:8) now pays too little attention to them and a deficit of religiousness has now become a surplus."⁴

The result of Saul's ban is that by the day's end, his handicapped army is in the same deplorable condition as when they were being crushed by the Philistines. Oh the joy of religion in the hands of a fool! Based on the LXX (the Greek version of the Old Testament), the NRSV translates

verse 23a: “Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day.” The Greek version is harsher: “And Saul was ignorant with great ignorance in that day” (i.e., “How stupid could he be?”). It sounds similar to Samuel’s earlier indictment, “You acted foolishly” (13:13).

B. The oath is put to the test (14:25-27)

Now when all the people came to the forest, [lit: Now all the land entered the forest⁵] behold, there was honey on the ground. And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping, but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath. But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath, so he put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes became bright. (14:25-27 ESV)

Having given his summary of the day’s events, the narrator shifts our focus to the moment when Saul’s oath was put to the test. As the pursuing army enters the forested region of the hill country, they face a severe test of their loyalty. Oozing out of the ground in front of them is an abundance of luscious honey. Fearful and intimidated by the king’s oath, the army refuses to partake of the gift. But Jonathan, unaware of his father’s vow, is governed by the freedom of his faith. He sees the honey as a divine gift, a veritable Garden of Eden in the wilderness to refresh his body and soul in the pursuit of God’s glory. Jonathan plunges his staff into the heart of the sweetest honeycomb and takes a large portion of it in his hand and places his hand to his mouth. Its energizing effects are immediate. Instead of a curse, his whole being “lights up” with renewed vigor.

This moment in salvation history deserves to be immortalized by poets, painters, musicians and singers, for it is an exquisite cameo of divine renewal and strength given to those who by faith “do all that is in their heart” (13:14; 14:7). Twenty times in the Old Testament, the land of Canaan is described as a land “flowing with milk and honey,” where God’s people would “eat bread without scarcity” and “lack nothing.” God commanded Israel to “eat and be full” from his banqueting table. In appreciation, they were to bless the Lord for the “good land” he had given them (Deut 8:7-10). Now as the troops pursue their enemies into the dense forest, the land pours forth its bounty to give aid to the pursuers, energizing them for the divine pursuit. What an exquisite portrait of spiritual life! If I were to capture this moment in poetry, I would write:

God’s faithful servant,
as he serves his Creator,
is renewed in his strength with the life of heaven,
through the creation.

King David paints a similar image of the Messianic king, who drinks from heavenly waters to renew his strength as he executes holy judgment upon the nations of the earth:

**The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter chiefs
over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the way;
therefore he will lift up his head. (Ps 110:5-7 TNIV)**

The divine nourishment guarantees his success.

In contrast to Jonathan’s freedom and vitality are the fatigue and discouragement of the troops, who have become “faint” under the tyranny of rules and regulations that have absolutely no connection with reality. Which group do you identify with?

C. The oath is repudiated by the son (14:28-30)

Then one of the people said, “Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be the man who eats food this day.’” And the people were faint. (14:28)

One of Saul’s troops spies Jonathan enjoying his tasty treats and dutifully informs him that his spontaneous “coffee break” was in direct violation of the king’s command. As we listen to the dialogue between the duty-bound soldier and the king’s son, who is free, the question will be, Who will influence whom? Will Jonathan cower in guilt and shame when he discovers he has violated an explicit order from his commander-in-chief? Or will he plead innocence based on his ignorance? The answer is, neither. The man of faith takes a higher road and goes on the offensive.

Then Jonathan said, “My father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great.” (14:29-30)

Informed of his father’s oath, Jonathan repudiates it as senseless and stupid. The oath did not raise the level of their commitment to God, nor did it aid the soldiers in pursuit of their enemies. The bottom line is that Saul’s vow only served to deprive Israel of a greater victory.

Last week, we watched a similar drama play out on our own national stage, as President Obama removed General Stanley McChrystal from his position as top war commander in Afghanistan, following disparaging remarks that the general made to Rolling Stone magazine. It is a serious offence for a general to publicly voice any negative opinions about his commander-in-chief. How then should we view Jonathan’s actions as he goes a step further than the general? When he accuses his father of “troubling the land,” he is not mincing words. The verb ‘*akar*’ connotes ‘to bring disaster, throw into confusion, ruin,’ and has ‘ominous overtones’ in the Old Testament. It is a key word from Joshua through Kings and is best known from the story of Achan in Joshua 7 (when Achan’s sin brought an abrupt halt to the conquest and plunged Israel into defeat). Also, in 1 Kings 18:17-18, Elijah and Ahab dispute which one of them is the one ‘troubling’ the land.⁶ In Israel’s most recent past, it evokes the shocking memory of Jephthah’s rash vow that jeopardized the life of his daughter (Judg 11:35). These memories heighten the suspense as to how the tension between father and son will play out.

It doesn’t take a genius to see the glaring contrast between faith and folly. To these weary soldiers, Jonathan’s faith exudes a freedom and confidence that rings true to the reality and context of their situation, while Saul’s oath was contrary to common sense and detrimental to their health. No wonder Saul was beginning to lose the moral support of his army.

If your faith is not coherent and in sync with reality, you are most likely operating under the false premise of phony religion. This was Jesus’ response when his disciples came under a similar accusation in the gospel of Mark:

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.” (Mark 2:18-20 ESV)

The issue at hand is not *if* one should fast, but *why* one fasts. In the Old Testament, fasting was carried out as an expression of humility under the hand of God’s judgment, and done in expectation of his restoration.

The Jews of the first century continued to fast according to this model. Though they were back in the land after the Babylonian captivity, they felt as though they were still in exile under the cruel domination of the Romans. Israel longed for full restoration. So, while the Mosaic Law required fasting once a year for the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:1-34), the Pharisees and their disciples fasted weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays, longing for Israel's restoration. As Isaiah wrote:

**“And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.” (Isa 62:5 ESV)**

Jesus explains that fasting is not something arbitrarily imposed on the body from without to cultivate spirituality, but an inner response to a present reality much bigger than oneself. Jesus' mention of the bridegroom implies that they are living in that revolutionary hour, the time of Israel's restoration. The party is here, the exile is over, and the nation is to rejoice.

If Saul's troops are not yet convinced of his inability to lead, the next scene confirms Jonathan's words that the king's oath has “troubled the land.”

II. Saul's Oath Drives His Troops to Sin (1 Sam 14:31-35)

A. A bloody mess (14:31-33a)

They struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. And the people were very faint. The people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground. And the people ate them with the blood. Then they told Saul, “Behold, the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood.” (14:31-33a)

God was with his people that day, granting them victory in their pursuit of the Philistines all the way to Aijalon, about 20 miles west of Michmash. But inside the camp all was not well. Saul's troops, having been deprived of food, are pushed beyond the breaking point. By nightfall, with the vow no longer in force, their hunger rages out of control and they pounce on the spoil like vultures to carrion. Taking no time to properly prepare the animals, they slaughter them on the ground and eat the flesh uncooked, with the blood, transgressing the Law which forbade Israel from eating blood (Gen 9:4; Lev 3:17).

In contrast to the chaotic gluttony of Saul's troops, Jonathan's eating was measured and self-controlled, with energizing results that enhanced his holy pursuit. So who “troubled” Israel this day?

We can see similar results from the Catholic Church's mandate that priests must be celibate. Perhaps with good intentions that priests should imitate the life of Christ with regard to chastity, the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 decreed that after ordination priests could not marry. In 385, Pope Siricius left his wife in order to become pope, and decreed that priests were no longer permitted to have sexual relations with their wives. The practice, however, has been fraught with controversy and difficulty for centuries. In 836, the Council of Aix-la-Chapelle openly admitted that abortions and infanticide took place in convents and monasteries to cover up activities of sexually active priests. St. Ulrich, a holy bishop, argued from Scripture and common sense that the only way to purify the church from the worst excesses of celibacy was to permit priests to marry.⁷

Simple enough—and the apostle Paul would agree.

B. The new ringmaster of ritual (14:33b-35)

And he said, “You have dealt treacherously; roll a great stone to me here.” And Saul said, “Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, ‘Let every man bring his ox or his sheep and slaughter them here and eat, and do not sin against the LORD by eating

with the blood.’” So every one of the people brought his ox with him that night and they slaughtered them there. And Saul built an altar to the LORD; it was the first altar that he built to the LORD. (14:33b-35)

Informed of the transgression of his troops, Saul takes no responsibility for the fact that he was the contributing cause of the men's hunger that drove them to sin. Instead of searching his heart and humbly repenting, he attempts to bring order out of the chaos by transforming it with religious ritual. Like a zealous priest, he castigates his troops for “treachery” and for profaning God's holiness in their “haste” to eat. This is a bold move by someone who was just removed from office for his inability to “wait on the Lord,” not to mention his “treacherous” violation of sacred boundaries. What drives such behavior? Fokkelman's insight into Saul's psyche is penetrating: “Owing to his internal chaos, it is too much for him to look upon the disorder outside himself, a pathological need to have matters under control causes him to act again as the carpenter-critic with his petty regulations.”⁸

Psychologists today label such behavior “passive/aggressive.” Out of the shame of his passivity and failure, Saul overcompensates by being overly aggressive and hyper-controlling as the zealous defender of God's holiness. The king steps into the chaos and becomes the ringmaster of control, transforming the scene into a ritualistic meal. Every soldier is brought in line, here and now; the slaughter of the animals is done to specifications; the blood is duly separated and the flesh is cooked and eaten. At the end of the meal, rather than returning to the pursuit, the king takes precious time to build an altar to the Lord. The narrator adds a telling note: for Saul, this was a first.

The whole thing is a sham. Is this the work for which Saul was anointed king? Or is ritual the priority of the hour, while the Philistines are making their escape? Once again Saul neglects his calling as commander-in-chief of the army to feign religious devotion to God.

When Israel had asked for “a king like all the nations have,” she wanted to overhaul that old “kingdom train” with a new, shiny “royal” engine in the hopes that it would take her across foreign boundaries and conquer powerful foes. You would think that Saul, as a general at war, would keep his vision focused on his main objective, taking advantage of every opportunity to achieve victory. Israel had hoped the experience would be like boarding one of Europe's high-speed bullet trains. But to their great disappointment, following Saul into battle was more like boarding an inter-city train doing its daily “milk run.” With all the stops and starts, they wondered if they would ever reach their destination. Nothing could be more frustrating to troops trained for combat, not to mention the king's son. After what must have seemed an endless delay into the night, the whistle blows and the train lurches forward with renewed urgency.

Then Saul said, “Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them.” (14:36)

Fokkelman points out how ludicrous this is: “The man who allowed them no food by day now allows them no rest by night. Since he himself has made the day unproductive by an obstructive taboo, the job is still unfinished and Saul intends to continue the pursuit during the hours of nightfall—are not those hours themselves unproductive? The man who found ritual perfection more important than the military requirements of the situation now cannot get enough of the battle. How hopeless Saul has lost his balance!”⁹

III. Reflections on the Life of Faith

A. Expectations of faith at work

Jonathan's story teaches that if we are faithful servants of Christ and walk by faith, we can accomplish much in our holy pursuits—yea, even more than we dreamed through “divine reversals.” The opposite is equally, painfully true: sometimes we have to sit by and watch the fruit of our labor go up in smoke under the heavy hand of self-serving individuals who hold the reins of power. Many of you have experienced this in your jobs, when companies go through massive personnel changes because of acquisitions, market downturns or just bad management. Others have felt it more keenly in the home, when a spouse becomes unfaithful and the children you love become pawns of control through a painful divorce.

When Saul's myriad bad decisions all through the day finally yield to total chaos in the night, he attempts to force restoration by means of controlling and manipulating everything he can—men, meat, sacrifices, and even a son. In contrast, Jonathan responds to the chaos in a completely different manner, exhibiting self-control and purposefully refusing to attempt to control others or outcomes—those things that are the purview of God alone. Jonathan's is an authentic, exemplary faith, a fruit of the Spirit that counts on God to be responsible for others, especially those holding the reins of power. And contrary to popular belief, self-control is not always displayed by stopping oneself from doing something bad; self-control is also an affirmation, exemplified by Jonathan's freedom to enjoy the luscious honey in the forest.

Jonathan's faith in God gives him a view of life that baffles Saul and leaves Jonathan exempt from Saul's attempts to manipulate and control. Nothing he tries “works” on Jonathan. And that's what faith does: it makes us free, gloriously impervious to the schemes of those who try to control us through overwhelming power or underhanded manipulation.

B. A faithful voice of critique

Jonathan's severe criticism of his father was neither insubordination to his rule as commander-in-chief, nor an effort to undermine the outcome of the battle, but rather a critique that Saul had crossed the line and established himself as a “priest.” Saul's preoccupation with religion brought their pursuit of the Philistines to an abrupt halt, just as Achan's sin had done to Joshua's conquest. Thus, Jonathan's purpose was not to launch an ad hominem attack against his father so much as it was to unceremoniously throw out Saul's faithless worldview and offer one informed by faith in God. Like Jonathan, when we insist on describing circumstances *as seen through the eyes of faith*, our comments can be understood by others as criticism, rebellion and insubordination, though nothing ought to be further from the truth. Our job is not to criticize or usurp, but to insist that the perspective of faith be articulated, both in our world and within the community of believers.

Jesus gave a similar critique of the Pharisees, who feigned religious devotion with their meticulous rules and lengthy prayers, but devoured widows' houses. Whenever anyone takes on a “priestly” role for personal gain, we have the right and responsibility to expose their evil ways.

C. Our ultimate influence: Our faith

Ultimately our influence is not found in our work but in our faith; and Jonathan's faith stands out brightest when he is a minority of one. By faith he continues to be a loyal soldier in Saul's army and makes no attempt to become the new leader.

From this point on, his greatness is not being in the limelight conquering the Philistines, but taking on a supporting role to serve another king, who is a man after God's own heart. And his finest hour will be when he goes down with Saul's sinking ship, that another may wear the crown. That, my friends, is the life of faith.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 1:6-7)

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 61.
2. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 69.
3. Saul's oppression was set in motion in no small way when he labeled the Israelites as “Hebrews” (“cross-overs”) a few verses past. It is a short distance from dehumanizing someone verbally to oppressing them physically.
4. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 64.
5. The text is difficult, but Tsumura's comments are helpful. “Most modern translations take the phrase (“all the earth”) as referring to the people (NASB, NIV, NRSV)... In the present context, however, “everyone” has been referred to us using the phrase the men of Israel in v. 24. Verse 25 gives the background information about “where” rather than “who”... Thus, Now all the land entered the forest, which probably means something like “[as they went along] the land became forested.” David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 371.
6. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 373.
7. <http://www.futurechurch.org/fpm/history.htm>.
8. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 67.
9. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 70.

© 2010 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino