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1 Samuel 14:36-46

Twenty-fourth Message

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FAITH'S FINEST HOUR

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Introduction: A living faith and deadly religion

Today's message title is "Faith's Finest Hour"—an appropriate theme for the Fourth of July. For the last few weeks we have been examining the nature of a living faith as exemplified in Jonathan, and comparing it to a deadly, abusive faith, characterized by king Saul. The story teaches us that if we are faithful servants of Christ, and walk by faith like Jonathan, there are no limits to what God can accomplish through us in our holy pursuits. In just one day's time, Jonathan's courageous faith and bold initiative revived a nation's dead faith and through a series of divine reversals recovered all that Israel had lost to the Philistines under Saul's faithless administration.

Governed by the same jealousy that drove Cain to murder Abel, Saul stepped into the fray and redirected the swelling currents of Israel's victory into tidal pools of religious ritual in order to isolate and eliminate his son. By nightfall his irrational directives gave way to total chaos, and the king attempted to restore order with even more ritual, manipulating everyone and everything in sight. We watch helplessly as the fruit of all Jonathan's faith and work seemingly goes up in smoke under Saul's self-serving, authoritarian leadership.

As the "longest day" in biblical narrative history draws to a close, it seems as if Saul is able to play every evil card in his hand uncontested. How do we continue to walk by faith when the good we work so hard to achieve is so easily swept away by self-serving individuals who hold the reins of power?

In the face of despicable deceit and treachery, Jonathan doesn't even flinch. He exhibits calm trust in his Lord, displaying self-control, and resists the temptation to control others or manipulate outcomes. This is an authentic, exemplary faith: a fruit of the Spirit that counts on God to be responsible for others, especially those who hold the reins of power. In what could be his finest hour, Jonathan willingly submits to his father's wicked scheme, trusting in God alone for the outcome. On the surface it looks like a suicide mission. But Jonathan's faith in God gives him a perspective of life that is utterly baffling to Saul—and to most of us as well. Today we will discover new and revolutionary aspects of the life of faith that take us beyond surviving oppression to absolute triumph. As Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1).

I. Damage Control for a Depleted Victory (1 Sam 14:36-37)

A. Saul's proposes an all-night raid (14:36)

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." And they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." But the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here." (1 Sam 14:36-37 ESV)

"Even as the men were finishing their fleshy feast, Saul was drawing up plans for a predawn raid on the Philistines to take more plunder and 'not leave one of them alive.'"¹ After endless delay into the night, Saul rallies his troops back into the heat of the battle with renewed urgency. The whole thing is ludicrous, as Fokkelman explains,

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!²

For a second time in one day Saul will make his troops pay for his mistakes. Having already experienced the oppressive consequences of his irrational directives, the morale of the troops must have sunk to an all time low. In their response we can hear a veiled reluctance as his troops distance themselves from the king's actions; the Hebrew reads literally, "Whatever is good in your eyes, do." On the surface it appears as if they are giving their allegiance, but the reality is that Saul is king and they are his troops—and troops do what they are told. Though they grant consent, we hear none of the heart-felt enthusiasm of Jonathan's armor-bearer: "Do all that is in your heart. Do as you wish. Behold, I am with you heart and soul!" And the phrase "whatever is good in your eyes" sounds dangerously close to that haunting refrain of Judges, when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes," resulting in moral disaster.

Though Saul's troops refuse to voice any objection to his all-night pursuit, Ahijah the priest has enough courage to remind the king about the necessity for divine direction in holy war. It is a little embarrassing for Israel's king to be publicly reminded that he forgot to pray before engaging the enemy. How can he refuse? "Pray...ah, well...yes, we forgot to pray. OK, let's pray." The last time Saul consulted the priest for divine guidance, he aborted the process and literally drove his troops into the ground. Ahijah is going to make certain that will not happen again. The ephod is activated. How will God respond?

B. God's deafening silence (14:37)

And Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?" But he did not answer him that day. (14:37)

God doesn't even pick up the phone! Bodner notes: "On a technical level, Saul's manner of asking is faultless, and most computer programmers would agree that his questions are very 'binary'. So it is something of a surprise when the system crashes."³ Had God responded one way or the other he would have validated Saul's cha-

rade. God refuses to play in Saul's game. The silence must have been deafening.

The king must act quickly before the shame of the holy insult divests him of the last remnants of his integrity. But Saul, the master of deceit, rises to the challenge and takes complete control of the situation. Under the veil of sacrificial zeal he plays the ultimate card in the deck, transforming God's rejection of him into a death sentence for his son.

II. Damage Control for God's Silence (1 Sam 14:38-45)

A. A deadly solution (14:38-39)

And Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today. For as the LORD lives who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die." But there was not a man among all the people who answered him. (14:38-39)

In a bold move, Saul calls a solemn assembly to find the perpetrator of the sin. Fokkelman captures well the psychological panic going on inside the king's soul: "To Saul, the fact of being ignored is so humiliating and so painful that he at once provides an 'explanation': a 'sin' must be the cause for God's silence. Once again he moves on the ritual plane and once again forgets to search his own heart. He places the blame outside himself. Thus this incident (vv. 36-37) becomes the detonation mechanism for the bomb that Saul has up his sleeve."⁴

Saul pulls a scene right out of the book of Joshua, when Achan's sin shut down Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. God instructed Joshua to present the nation before the Lord, first by tribe, then by clan, followed by household, and finally the individual who had sinned would be selected. And then came the terrible sentence:

"He who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel." (Josh 7:15)

With blasphemous hypocrisy, Saul adopts the same procedure and veils his treachery with an oath in God's name. Fokkelman translates:

**"Yea, as Yahweh lives, the deliverer of Israel:
Yea, if it lies in my son Jonathan,
Yea, he shall surely die."⁵**

Saul portrays his devotion to God as comparable to Abraham's, who was willing to pay the ultimate price, "though it be in Jonathan my son." Yet with the mention of Jonathan's name, one cannot help but see his intentions. And Saul's curse, "he shall surely die," contradicts his earlier commitment to save lives on the day of salvation: "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has worked salvation in Israel" (11:13). Unfortunately for Saul, all this posturing gives away his malicious intent. Having tipped his hand with his melodramatic speech, the army responds just as God had done. To a man they are silent, refusing to participate in Saul's hypocrisy. As Fokkelman observes, "All Saul's religiousness and ritual zeal cannot conceal the fact that his true ambition is ego-bound *par excellence*."⁶

B. Royal Roulette: Losers guaranteed (14:40)

Then he said to all Israel, "You shall be on one side, and I and Jonathan my son will be on the other side." And the people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you." (14:40)

With no support from God or his troops, Saul hastily presses on with the details of the procedure. In his impatience, he organizes the ballot in such a way as to get to the verdict as soon as possible. His actions betray the fact that he already knows what he is looking for. In response, Saul's troops respond as previously, yet slightly nuanced with even less support: "What is good in your eyes, do." Once again the army distances themselves from the king's plan, refusing to give their consent or advice. The echo resonates with the refrain from Judges. We can't help but wonder if Jonathan's fate will be similar to Jephthah's unnamed daughter, who was given over to death because of her father's stupid oath (Judg 11:30-31, 34-40).

C. Praying (or "playing") with loaded dice (14:41-42)

Therefore Saul said, "O LORD God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O LORD, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim." And Jonathan and Saul were taken, but the people escaped. Then Saul said, "Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan." And Jonathan was taken. (14:41-42)

This is Saul's first recorded prayer and it speaks volumes about his character. Before all Israel he feigns contrition before a holy God, takes God's covenant name in vain, parades himself as God's servant concerned for his glory alone, and elevates his trust in God as exemplary regardless of what it costs him. It's a sickening sham, perverting everything that *is* holy, righteous and good. But to our amazement, the phony procedure works exactly according to plan. With two quick roles of the dice,⁷ Jonathan is selected. If there was any objection, Saul could safely reply [or, "I must die!"]

**The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD. (Prov 16:33)**

D. Jonathan ups the ante (14:43-44)

Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done." And Jonathan told him, "[Indeed] I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die." [or, "I must die!"] And Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan." (14:43-44)

Pretending to be surprised by the verdict, Saul interrogates Jonathan as to the nature of his transgression, knowing Jonathan's words will testify against him, bringing about his condemnation.

What follows is as shocking as it is admirable. Without even a flinch, Jonathan ups the ante. His words are honest, straightforward, and yet inspiring beyond imagination. His crime: "Indeed I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand." "Jonathan begins by clearly and emphatically admitting responsibility... (literally, "taste I have tasted")."⁸ He doesn't skip a beat, leave anything out, deflect the blame or protest his innocence because he did not hear Saul's oath. This would have been a great moment on the stage of history for the son to pull the rug out from under his father by exposing the stupidity of his oath and his treacherous ways, but he doesn't. He doesn't even express pain that his father just threw him under the bus. Instead, like an obedient sheep to the slaughter, he presents himself for the sacrifice in a mere two words (Hebrew, *hineni 'amut*): "Here I am; I must die." Those words are neither a

spontaneous protest nor a manipulative ploy. This is the pinnacle of a living faith. It is Jonathan's finest hour. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words come to mind: "It is the characteristic excellence of the strong man that he can bring momentous issues to the fore and make a decision about them. The weak are always forced to decide between alternatives they have not chosen themselves."⁹

Jonathan's faith in God gives him a perspective of life that is utterly baffling to Saul and leaves Jonathan exempt from his father's attempts to manipulate and control. Nothing Saul tries "works" on Jonathan—and that's what faith does: it makes us free, impervious to the schemes of those who would control us through brazen power or underhanded manipulation. If you have no fear of death, no one can threaten you or exert control over you. While evil "works," faith "rests."

Jonathan's astonishing attitude and steadfast calm must have taken Saul aback. There is no rebellion or unauthorized reach for the crown present in his son. Jonathan is a loyal subject and he will be loyal to the death. Fearful of being upstaged by his son's admirable character, Saul raises the ante with yet another oath: "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan." Fokkelman reflects how the mention of his son's name torments Saul with warring emotions: "How much charged with fury, jealousy, and other venom? And the reverse: how much absolute loneliness, despair and grief at being discarded fill Saul and keep him from his fellow-men?"¹⁰

This is the third oath we have heard on Saul's lips in this chapter (vv. 24, 39, 44). When those in leadership have to habitually resort to the gravest form of speech to assert their authority, it's a sign they have lost all control and have no authority.

Having heard one too many oaths from their king, the people call a halt to Saul's pitiful charade.

III. Overruled! (1 Sam 14:45-46)

Then the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Far from it! As the LORD lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day." So the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die. Then Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place. (14:45-46)

Jonathan's refusal to take matters in his own hands backs Saul into a corner and forces him to play every evil card in his hand. Despite all his posturing and manipulation, he is no match for his son. His evil schemes only work to reveal the glory of the savior. With Saul's bold-faced treachery fully exposed, the entire army steps up to the plate and courageously rescues Jonathan with an oath greater than Saul's. They begin by reminding Saul of his earlier code of ethics. If faithless men should be put to death on the day of God's salvation, how much more the one who was responsible for salvation! The thought of such a thing is reprehensible to them. Their oath seals the divine logic by irrevocably binding the living God with the one who "worked with God this day." The result? Jonathan is ransomed by the people, and Saul's ridiculous oaths are shattered by the divine logic of a united front that protects life against the forces of death at any cost.

Having lost all his support, Saul is speechless. The king, whose voice dominated the chapter with vociferous commands, irrational demands and blasphemous oaths, now has nothing to say. Jonathan's faith "has the last word, not to mention the silence after."¹¹

For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. (1 Pet 2:15-17 NASB)

As the exposed and humiliated king steps off the stage he no longer bothers to keep his general's mask on. It too was a charade. The Philistine army, who earlier thought they were on the verge of annihilation, make their flight home from Aijalon unimpeded, wondering, What happened to the Israeli army? The reports of what occurred in the Philistine press the following day were as confusing as they were astonishing. But in Israel there was no confusion about what happened that day, for this was faith's finest hour.

In closing I would like us to reflect on the impact of Jonathan's radical faith.

IV. Faith's Finest Hour

A. The oppressed acquire an authentic voice

Though our focus has been on the two leading protagonists, we mustn't forget Saul's nameless troops, who experienced an amazing character transformation, similar to Hannah's in chapter 1. Like Hannah, their lives were characterized by oppression and they had no voice. At the outset of the Philistine offensive, Saul verbally abused them, berating them as cowardly "Hebrews." The majority lived up to the name, fleeing their posts in terror. Those who remained huddled around their king, who had taken refuge in the darkness of a cave—an apt metaphor that Saul was "in the dark" about his son's courageous exploits. At last, when the troops finally rallied to the battle, Saul literally drove them into the ground, but no one challenged the irrational oath. When their hunger raged out of control, their leader berated them as treacherous creatures and promptly marched them into the confession booth. Still, the oppressed do not speak.

But beneath the silence there was the memory of that one moment when they witnessed the son who was free—free from his father's oath, free from the abusive dietary restrictions, and free to speak his mind. Jonathan's example gives them courage to speak. When Saul launches another irrational plan, they speak in a way that isolates the king and creates space between them. Finally, when the king rolls the dice with his son's life, they become a united voice of truth, justice and life. There is something mysteriously inspiring when people witness a person of faith giving himself completely over to God. Though cowards are always present, some find a renewed courage to proclaim the truth come what may. This is what happened to the Roman centurion: when he saw the way that Jesus "breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39).

Our faith has the greatest impact, not when we are successful, but when we die. This why Paul insists in his New Covenant teaching that, "death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4:12). What was the key factor that motivated Paul to follow Christ with such passion, courage and enduring self-sacrifice? A key contributor was beholding Stephen's angelic look as he was being stoned to death, and hearing his final words, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

B. The impact on Israel's future king

Not only did Jonathan's faith impact Saul's entire army, it also had a tremendous impact shaping David's faith. Jonathan's sacrificial love

enabled David to trust God while living under Saul's death sentence for thirteen years. Like Jonathan, David never made an illicit reach for the crown. If the throne was to be his, it had to be the pure gift of God. And while he waited he developed a voice with God in prayer that has been immortalized for us in the Psalms. Though the road was painful, the fruit of such trust is a freedom the world knows nothing of, but one which David could celebrate with gusto.

**Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the LORD
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun. (Ps 37:1-6)**

No wonder David spoke of Jonathan's sacrificial love as "more wonderful than the love of women" (2 Sam 1:26).

C. Preparing Israel (and us) to receive the Servant

The impact of Jonathan's faith went far beyond his generation; it endured for centuries and ultimately prepared Israel to embrace the Servant. No greater honor can be granted a hero of the faith.

**Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law. (Isa 42:1-4 ESV)**

D. The model of faith for all believers

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet 2:21-25)

1. Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 160.

2. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 70.

3. Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 143.

4. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 71.

5. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 73.

6. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 79.

7. "This version comes from the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text has the short and cryptic "Show *thammim* ["completeness, wholeness, integrity"—i.e. "don't hold back, give a complete answer"]. Saul's frustrated reference to his failure to receive an answer from the oracle makes a great deal of narrative sense. The Septuagint version also makes intelligible the process of oracular lottery. The Urim and Thummim were two divinatory objects attached to the ephod, probably in a special compartment. They may have been in the form of stones or tokens with lettering on them. They provided indication of binary oppositions: thus the question addressed to the oracle had to take the form of yes or no. The opposition may have been underscored by the fact that Urim and Thummim begin, respectively, with the first and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. More specifically, Urim might be linked with *'aror*, "to curse," and Thummim with the root *t-m-m*, "whole or innocent." Robert Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 83-84.

8. After taking full responsibility for his deed, Jonathan "chooses with precision, the minimal verb 'taste' rather than 'eat' and holds back its minimal object, 'a bit of honey,' for the every end of the sentence." Alter, *The David Story*, 84.

9. http://www.famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/dietrich_bonhoeffer_quotes.html.

10. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 74-75.

11. This is John Felstiner's description of the figure Shulamith in Paul Celan's poem "Deathfugue," one of the most compelling poems to emerge out of the Holocaust. "Paul Celan's fugue runs out on a name that resonates as strangely in German as in English and preempts them both, being Hebrew. Darkened by ash, 'Shulamith' ends the poems holding onto what Nazism tried to erase: rooted identity. Archaic, inalienable, she has the last word, not to mention the silence after." John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 41.

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