

The Mirage of a Controlling Life

1 Samuel 14:24-52

My father has troubled this land...for now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great

Introduction: Control is a mirage. The ability to create the outcomes we desire, or have the people we care about thrive in the way we choose, or have life turn out the way we want it is an impossibility that we clutch onto, thinking that somehow, just somehow we can work hard enough, spend enough, and will it to happen. As humans created in God's image, we *crave order, stability, and safety*, and these in and of themselves is NOT wrong. The obvious problem is overwhelming: what we crave we cannot attain by ourselves, and trying to control creates more problems and often the *opposite* result than what we are seeking.

There is an undeniable reason for this. God created order, stability, safety, a pathway of happiness, fulfillment, and perpetuating joy when He spoke the world into existence through a word. Adam and Eve experienced these outcomes *without control*, but rather by simple, innocent obedience to God's commands. There was no opposition, no fear, no shame, no competition, selfishness, or pride. But that all changed when sin entered the world, burrowing into every nook and crevice of life and creation. Now, the world is no longer in order but there is chaos. The earth is set against us, producing thorns and thistles, not easily giving up its produce since it is under a curse and awaits its restoration (Gen. 3:18; Romans 8:20-21). Pain is prevalent. Work is hard. Temptation is now normative from an enemy that knows us and knows our weak points. And relationships are in constant conflict, with wives desires set against their husbands, and husbands both willing to abdicate their role as leader or trying to dominate their wives (Gen. 3:6: 16). Now death looms over us all (Gen. 3:19), and pressure is produced as we seek to thrive in a sin laden world, with sin infused desires and sin saturated bodies.

One of the sad but real outcomes of all of this is our propensity to **try** to control things and people around us. *Does anyone struggle with this?* If you think YOU don't but know someone who does, it probably just revealed that you actually DO struggle with it. **Seeking to control areas of life outside of our authority puts us at odds with faith and a sovereign God.** *How do I know if I'm someone who needs to be in control?* Do you struggle with **anxiety, refuse to take responsibility for anything, insist on having your own way, need to be the center of attention, lie or exaggerate, always dictate what happens with finances or where you go, or play the victim, give the silent treatment, or dominate the argument?** The desire to control will use money, power positions, or even religion to exercise overbearing authority over someone else, often leading to micromanagement, manipulation, and domineering. The world of psychology has classified this type of behavior as narcissism or obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPC). The Bible would define it as sinful man rebelling against a sovereign God. The irony of all of this is the MORE someone tries to control, be it our kids salvation or safety or the environment or people around us simply leads us to **misery, frustration, and an unsettled existence, never finding the peace or outcomes we crave.**

This is why the gospel is so important, not only for our salvation and standing with the Lord, but it frees us from trying to control things that we were never intended. We now understand the gracious nature of God's sovereign authority, resting in the fact that He does all things according His glorious will for our highest good. We are given the Holy Spirit so we can exercise **self-control**, not giving into our fleshly desires but allowing the love of Christ to control us (Gal. 5:23; 2 Cor. 5:14). We bring our flesh under control like an athlete does his body (1 Cor. 9:25-27; 1 Pet. 4:7; 2 Pet. 1:6), knowing that God has given us a spirit of power, love, and self-control (2 Tim. 1:7). We bring discipline and control to our children (1 Tim.

3:4) while they are young so that they may know the path to follow as they get older and are OUT of our control. We urge the young men to be self-controlled (Titus 2:6) and compel everyone to control their own bodies in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the those who don't know God (1 Thess. 4:4). *"A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls"* (Prov. 25:28). Clearly there are things that God wants us to control, and He gives us the means to do it. The rest we leave up to Him and refuse to enter into a competition for control!

As we come back to 1 Samuel 14, we see a man in Saul who is overwhelmed but who still chooses to clutch onto control through any means possible. We will see both this week and in a couple in chapter 15 that he has opportunity to yield himself to the LORD, to admit his sin, and seek true forgiveness, but refuses, and instead doubles down on his own strength and power. This is a similar template to MANY today ----- our own need for control, power, and authority keeping us from salvation and joy, choosing to eat the mud pies WE make rather than enjoying the banquet feast God has laid out. We will observe **three areas that Saul tried to maintain control**, each time leading to negative consequences, producing the OPPOSITE of what he hoped, and revealing the vast difference between his artificial religion vs. Jonathan's saving and convictional faith.

An Impulsive Vow Revealed God-Like Control (14:24-35)

*And the men of Israel had been **hard pressed** that day, so Saul laid an oath on the people saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies" So none of the people had tasted food. Now when all the people came to the forest, 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."*

Through the faith fueled, epically audacious and downright amazing victory over the Philistines, which entailed scaling a slick and thorny sheer canyon wall, Israel had claimed an unexpected victory. The whole of the Philistine army was dispersing (14:16), found themselves in a tumultuous situation (v. 19), and even turned their swords against each other in the great confusion (v. 20). Victory was sure. God had saved. Philistines were on the run and mop up duty had commenced. But it was at this point that King Saul somehow found a way to make it about himself instead of returning praise.

After Jonathan's initial victory in ch. 13, Israel was **hard pressed** (13:6), finding themselves surrounded and causing Saul to offer an ill-timed sacrifice, refusing to wait for Samuel. Here, Israel again was **hard pressed**, a theme of Saul's leadership. At this point, instead of offering a sacrifice, he instead offered up a **curse**, a type of vow, for ALL OF HIS OWN PEOPLE! Not a blessing, but a CURSE, that said NO ONE would eat until they had vanquished Saul's enemies. Now a vow in and of itself is not wrong, but this was clearly both foolish in terms of caring for his people, but also revealed something far deeper concerning Saul's desire to control.

The Bible is NOT against vows, but gives clear cautions in committing to one. A vow is **voluntary**, something that is not required but for personal reasons is offered up to the Lord. Numbers 30 gave a chapter of stipulations of how one gets out of a *foolish, short sighted* vow, since it could be undone if was heard by a greater authority on the same day. Ecclesiastes 5:4 says *"When you vow a vow to God, do not delay in paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you not vow than that you vow and not pay."* Notice the voluntary nature and the caution in making a vow. People can make all kinds of flippant vows (God, if you get me out of this situation, or help me pass this test, or take away this pain, I will _____). But one of the most common voluntary vows we make is that of **marriage**, a covenant commitment that governments recognize but go far

beyond pre-nuptial agreements and dividing up assets and child custody. God takes our vows seriously, and the breaking of a covenant creates the splintering of families, much like a piece of wood split down the middle.

Back to Saul, the question needs to be asked *why did he make a vow at this point? Why make such a grandiose commitment in such an impulsive way?* Vows can certainly **LOOK** spiritual, but in this case, it was far from pleasing to the LORD. No, this smacked of an emotional response to the convictional victory of his son, a selfish decision that put himself back into the seat of authority, and created a *quid pro quo* with his own people. *Why do we say this?* Look at the text again. There are **two dead giveaways as to the motivation or lack of proper motivation in this vow:**

- 1) **Right as he made this curse, the people found honey covering the ground** - Not only was it on the ground, but it was “dropping” (v. 26). This was similar language to how God provided for Israel in the past as they wandered in the wilderness and needed provision, and God gave *manna*, bread from heaven six days a week, each day only enough for the day, trusting that God would provide the next day. Israel ate manna for **40 years** til they came into the land, God faithfully delivering for His people (Exodus 16:35). Here God provided again, but Saul **put himself in the place of God, denying the people what God had clearly given.**
- 2) **Jonathan’s testimony (14:29-30)** - Jonathan had NOT heard the curse (since he was actually out fighting), and when he ate, he was strengthened, while the people grew faint. Jonathan said his father had troubled the land, would show more care by allowing his people to eat, and turned a victory into a type of defeat. Jonathan saw through Saul’s seemingly spiritual declaration, and saw and experienced the consequences of a **foolish vow. What were these consequences?**
 - **Foolish vows put a family in peril** - Much like the story arc of **Jephthah the Judge** (Judges 11), the righteous judge of Israel who offered up “whatever comes out the doors of my house as a sacrifice to you” if He would deliver the victory. God delivered, and in a tragic turn of irony, Jephthah’s only daughter came out of the house with tambourines and dancing, rejoicing in God’s victory. Much like Jonathan, she took the consequences by faith, but had to either remain unmarried her whole life or was killed (Jud. 11:39-40). Again, we see this happen in marriages when vows are broken, which is a caution to those who **WILL** get married and encouragement for those who **ARE** married to pay what you vow.
 - **Proved to be *practically foolish*** - Not only did Jonathan face consequence, but he put his soldiers in a no win situation: pursue the Philistines from **Michmash to Aijalon**, some **20 miles**, but do it without food to fuel! Remember, it is **NOT MORE SPIRITUAL TO DENY YOURSELF WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN TO ENJOY!** **1 Timothy 4:1-5 speaks to this**, saying “*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require the abstinence of foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the Word of God and prayer.*” Giving up chocolate for 40 days leading into Easter does not make you more holy! If you want to fast to use that time and energy to pursue the Lord, don’t tell people about it but do it in secret (Matt. 6:16-18)
 - **Foolish vows can lead people needlessly into actual sin** - Because the people were famished, as they conquered their enemies, in a famished frenzy, they began to

slaughter sheep and cattle without properly preparing them, allowing the blood to drain out according to the Law (Lev. 17:10-14; Deut. 12:15-18; 20-25). This caused Saul to offer sacrifices on an altar to atone for the sin of the people. This gives us pause: *before you say you will never _____ or your family will never _____*, a standard that the Bible does not lay on us, be aware that in violating this vow you would be **sinning in a way that the Bible does not call sin**. We actually do not want to make rules for ourselves that the Bible does not, but live principally by faith in all areas of life. This led to the public showdown between father and son, Saul and Jonathan, before all people.

Seeking to Kill His Son Revealed Selfishly Driven Control (14:36-46)

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. And Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this has arisen today. For as the LORD lives who saves Israel, though it be in my son Jonathan, he will surely die.

Saul knew something was off. He gave a command to go forward to the soldiers, and they responded with **"Do whatever seems good to you."** YIKES! That was less than supportive. Then, as he tried to inquire of God as to next steps, He received the big thud of silence as God put up an iron curtain. Instead of looking at the **core** of the problem, which would have been his OWN SIN, he brings Jonathan before the whole of nation, and does what **seemed to be spiritual and full of integrity**: *"though it be Jonathan my own son, he will surely die."* Whether Saul saw this as an opportunity to kill his son of whom he was jealous, an issue he will continue to have with David in coming chapters, or was simply trying to curry favor with his people, neither came into fruition. Like a Politician in a debate who tries to get a reaction from the crowd but only hears crickets, **none of the people responded to his conclusion**.

Refusing to be outdone in his foolishness, he did the next logical, seemingly religious thing: he brought out the **Urim and Thummim**, the rocks given to discern God's will or who would be voted off the island. Again, the people responded with **"Do what seems good to you"**, distancing themselves from the decision. The rocks separated Saul and Jonathan from the people, then Saul from Jonathan. What did this mean? Maybe nothing, since God was not answering. Or perhaps God chose Jonathan! Either way, Saul interpreted this as a green light to go ahead with his plan, emboldened that this was God's will. People can often make decisions like this today, using "God's will" as a veil for justifying them doing what they want without considering all that God has called them to. But again, as is the case today, Saul's true motives were clarified as decisions were revealed.

Believing that he was now justified and thinking the people would be with him since God had spoken, Saul brings Jonathan to the forefront and demands an explanation. In a consistent show of conviction and faith driven courage, Jonathan stated simply what he had done (I ate the honey) and what he was prepared to do (Here I am, I will die). Living by faith and conviction frees us from the fear of death, knowing that truly following God's will may cost us everything. We will see when the roles are reversed in chapter 15 that Saul was anything but confident when he faced the prospect of death brought on by sin. After Jonathan's admission, Saul stated, **"God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan."** Feigning sorrow, he thought this would satisfy the people. But a strange thing happened that is quite unprecedented in the OT: the people trumped the king!

The people not only did not lift a finger against Jonathan, they united in his defense: **"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"** (v. 45). The people ransomed or delivered Jonathan, overruling the king, and Saul

apparently simply took it and moved on. There are a few things we learn about Saul and ourselves here:

- **Saul cared about appeasing the people, not leading** - Once the people stood up to Saul, he backed down. Once he had to stand alone, he wilted. This is the dead giveaway of character and motivation. Saul was NOT convictional, but played to the praise of man, not the gaze of God. He was a man-pleaser, looking to control outcomes to garner favor (see Eph. 6:5-8).
- **Saul took no responsibility for the situation HE put the people in, but looked to blame others** - Again, Saul had an opportunity, just like Adam in Genesis 3, to take responsibility for HIS sin, to admit his wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness, turning from his selfish control and enjoy hearing the voice of the Lord once again. Leaders take responsibility for their sin. Christians take responsibility for their sin. Saul refused, showing that he was not a good leader nor a man who pleased the Lord by faith.
- **The people saw through the artificial religiosity of Saul, but followed the conviction of Jonathan** - This is worth considering for a moment. The people, though bound by positional authority structures (king - people), did not **respect or follow Saul**, and if they did, it was out of fear of reprisal. Fear is a powerful motivator and can get people to do what you want, but it is a terrible way to have influence. Notice that Jonathan had the **respect of the people, they stepped in for him, and were willing to follow him. Leadership is more about influence than positional authority, and Jonathan had it. Why?** It was clear that Saul was trying to keep control instead of living out what he believed.

This is so instructive to parents, disciple makers, youth workers, coaches, and any Christian in a position of influence. People that follow us can smell and tell when we are fake, going through the motions, doing the token things without believing in their power. Parents who talk the talk about God and the gospel but who are nominally committed to the Word, prayer, the church etc. show their children that these things are not highly valued, that a number of things are MORE important (entertainment, making money, sports, etc.). The best give we can give to those who follow us is not being cool or relevant, not trying to act like them or know the up to date songs on Spotify, but living out consistently, in conviction what we say we believe. Saul would do the external and grandiose, but not the regular and obedient. And the people knew it. People will not follow an act, but will follow someone who lives out the realities of the gospel in their life, including obedience, asking for forgiveness, taking responsibility, and doing the hard things.

Functioning According to Worldly Power Revealed Prideful Control (14:47-52)

When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought all his enemies on every side...and he did valiantly and struck the Amalekite and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them...there was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul. And if Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he attached him to himself.

The chapter ends at first glance in an incongruous way. Saul is lauded for being a valiant warrior who fought against all of Israel's enemies and delivered. He was the Warrior-King they wanted, and he played the role well. However, this also betrayed Saul's downfall. Despite all of his valiant warfare, **there was hard fighting all the days of Saul against the Philistines.** Compare that to the days of Samuel's leadership, a less than mighty warrior but faithful priest: *"So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel"* (1 Samuel

7:7:12-13). Saul was mighty and powerful, but it only produced conflict and distress, not peace.

Finally, as a parting shot, Saul would latch onto any strong or valiant man, seeing power as a means of maintaining power. Saul's M.O was control and power, and for him, the more power he had, the more control he wielded, the better it would be. This is a far cry from what Paul said in **2 Corinthians 12:9**, ***"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."*** When we are weak we are strong, and Saul showed that the reverse is also true.

To sum up and conclude, Dale Davis captured the difference between Saul and Jonathan. Saul felt entitled and thus tried to build HIS kingdom, focusing on himself, seeing God as someone to be leveraged rather than worshipped, One to further him, not Someone to yield to. Jonathan saw it clearly, and was willing to die for that conviction.

*"In our minds self-fulfillment is a right. If we're genuine and discipline ourselves, our efforts should be crowned with success. Should we be of a religious bent we happily acknowledge that "God and/or Jesus" assists us in our quest. One can always use such help. But Jonathan seemed to know better. **The kingdom was not Saul's or Jonathan's; it was YAHWEH's kingdom.** For Jonathan, then, the kingdom was not his to seize, not his to rule, but his to serve. I think the rest of 1 Samuel will support my point. **Maybe a tragic life isn't tragic if it's lived in fidelity to what Christ asks of us in the circumstances He gives us.**"¹*

The control we try to maintain over circumstances and people is a mirage, a mere distant picture that vanishes the closer you get. We gladly yield ourselves to God in faith and repentance, knowing that He forgives and controls all things, to bring us into rest and peace in Him. That is a far better place.

¹ Dale David, "1 Samuel: Looking at the Heart", p. 148.