

I Samuel 13-14 *“God Gave Israel Exactly What They Asked For”*

Introduction:

In the previous chapter (ch.12) the author recorded Samuel’s exhortation to the people of Israel in light of the ascension to the throne of their new king, Saul. Samuel began his exhortation by reminding the people that by God’s direction he had granted their request and appointed the king that they had asked for. Then Samuel reminded the people that in choosing a human king, they had rejected Yahweh as their direct ruler in spite of God’s repeated deliverances of them from their enemies. Yet even though they had rejected Yahweh, He would not forsake them. Samuel then challenged the people to obey the commandments of their God. Samuel promised that if they would do this, then He would bless them and their king. However, if they chose not to obey their God, He would become their adversary. This message from the prophet puts the next few chapters of the book in their proper context. These chapters reveal whether or not the new king would lead Israel into obedience to Yahweh, or whether he would continue the pattern of rebellion and willfulness that had characterized Israel’s history since God’s deliverance of the nation from Egypt.

In the following chapters (13-15) the narrative moves rapidly from the ascension of Saul to the reason for God’s rejection of him as king, thus emphasizing the shortness of the period of his legitimate reign and that Israel as a nation was continuing in her pattern of resistance to God’s will. Therefore, the dominant theme in these chapters is the continuing pattern of moral/spiritual failure in Israel. The chapters also reveal that contrary to the beliefs of the elders of the Israelite tribes, the appointing of a human king like those who ruled the other nations was not really the solution to the problems that plagued the nation. Rather, as should have always been evident to them, the problem was their refusal to submit to the will of their God.

There is a poignancy to this story. The name of the appointed king was “*Saul*”. His Hebrew name literally meant “*you asked*”. Therefore, as this story unfolded, and Saul’s failures multiplied, the king’s name would be a continual reminder that what the nation was experiencing was exactly what they had asked for.

I. Israel Prepares for War with the Philistines: (13:1-4)

As chapter thirteen opens we encounter a verse that is extremely difficult to interpret. It is difficult to interpret because the literal wording of the verse doesn’t seem to make sense. Because of this, the various translations render this verse quite differently from one another trying to make sense of the Hebrew text:

NKJV	NASU	ESV	NIV
Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel	Saul was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned	Saul was... years old when he began to reign, and he	Saul was [thirty] years old when he became king, and he reigned over

	forty two years over Israel	reigned...and two years over Israel	Israel [forty-] two years
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A literal rendering of the Hebrew text is “*Saul one year, and he reigned two years over Israel*”. This wording is very similar to a number of texts in I & II Kings that introduce the narratives about individual kings by stating how old they were when they began to reign, and how many years they reigned over Israel (or Judah). The difference here is that this text is missing certain words that would be necessary to complete the thought. It is generally agreed, even by conservative Evangelical scholars, that the text of this verse was corrupted through transmission. There are a number of theories about how we should fill in the gap created by the missing words, unfortunately all of them have problems. The best answer is that the original text, just like those similar to it in the Book of Kings, contained Saul’s age when he took the throne, and how long he reigned. But those original numbers have been lost. We were told earlier in this book that Saul was a “*young*” man before becoming king (9:2), suggesting he was either in his late twenties or early thirties. But in this chapter, some time had passed since he was first crowned king, because here he already had a son old enough to be a military commander, and thus would no longer be considered a young man. As to the length of Saul’s reign, we are told that it lasted for a total of forty years by the Apostle Paul (Acts 13:21), though it is likely that this was a rounded number, not the precise number of years that Saul was king over Israel.

In verse two we read, “*Saul chose for himself three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in the mountains of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent away, every man to his tent.*” It should be remembered that it was largely due to the reality of the Philistines’ domination of Israel that led the elders of the tribes to petition Samuel to appoint a king, therefore the people would have had the expectation that Saul would begin the process of repelling the Philistines from Israelite territory. So, when we read in this verse about Saul’s selection of three thousand men, this would have been part of his efforts to fulfill that expectation. These three thousand probably represented a choice of men to serve as retainers or an imperial guard, rather than the total of the volunteers for the war, as a successful campaign against the Philistines would require more soldiers than what we read about here. Standing armies in the ancient Near East were made up of professionally trained soldiers and mercenaries. They served at garrisons and border posts as well as providing for a palace guard. The number of three thousand might represent three distinct companies of soldiers. Therefore, this verse indicates that for the first time, Saul was establishing a standing army in Israel, rather than relying on a militia of citizen volunteers.

Geographically, all the places that are mentioned in this chapter are in Benjamite territory, and thus the events in this chapter took place in the heart of Israel’s land demonstrating that the Philistines had an armed presence throughout Israelite territory at this time. Michmash specifically was a strategic location since

it was located near a crucial pass on the way to Ophrah, a road in Israel's central highlands that led to Geba a town nine miles north of Jerusalem.

In verse three we read, "*And Jonathan attacked the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, 'Let the Hebrews hear!'*" The Hebrew word translated as "*garrison*" could also be used to refer to the residence of a high-ranking political officer. Because of this, some have suggested that what is referred to here was the assassination of a philistine officer, an act that signaled a revolt by Israel against Philistia. This conclusion however seems unlikely because the assassination of a single official would not require a company of a thousand men, in fact such a large group would make a simple assassination more difficult to carry out. Rather, the traditional translation is to be preferred, and this is to be understood as an attack on a military outpost that the Philistines maintained in the region of Benjamin. Saul's act of blowing a trumpet would be understood as a call to war among the people of that day. One interesting aspect in this verse is the use of the title "*Hebrews*" by Saul. Elsewhere in the OT we only find non-Israelites using this term to designate the descendants of Jacob. Because of this it would seem that Saul was using this title in a purely ethnic sense, meaning that Saul wanted those Israelites that had been conscribed into the Philistine army by force to now withdraw from them and join him in the fight against their oppressors.

In verse four we read, "*Now all Israel heard it said that Saul had attacked a garrison of the Philistines, and that Israel had also become an abomination to the Philistines. And the people were called together to Saul at Gilgal.*" The repetition of the verb "*heard*" in these two verses was intended to heighten the narrative suspense as it stresses that all the Israelite people were made aware that open hostilities had been initiated against the Philistines. The Hebrew word translated as "*abomination*" refers to a loathsome or odious stench. It became an idiom that figuratively conveyed the idea of a person coming to abhor or despise someone or something. The idea in this expression is that what the Israelites had done had inflamed the passions of the Philistines to the point where they would be motivated to retaliate.

This detail, that the people were called to gather at Gilgal, indicated that Saul was anticipating a response by the Philistines, and he wanted to be prepared to meet them with his entire force of soldiers.

II. Saul's Sin: (13:5-9)

In verse five we read "*Then the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. And they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth Aven.*" In this verse we have another corruption of a number in the text. It is clear from the overall description that the actual number of chariots was 3,000 not 30,000. We know this because the term "*horsemen*" designated those who maned a chariot. If there really were thirty thousand chariots it would mean there were five chariots for every charioteer. However, the usual number of charioteers

would be two, thus, three thousand chariots would complement the reference to six thousand horsemen. The explanation for the textual problem is that the words for 30,000 and for 3,000 look almost identical, so one could easily be mistaken for the other when the text was being copied. The description of the Philistine army as being “*as the sand which is on the seashore*” echoes the language of the size of the army of the coalition of Canaanites that came against Joshua (Josh.11:4), and the army of the Midianites that came against Gideon (Judg.7:12). It would be instructive to remember that in both cases Yahweh delivered His people despite the overwhelming odds. This metaphor was used to convey the idea of an uncountable number. In this case, it describes the number of foot soldiers assembled by the Philistines. Since we are told that this vast Philistine force encamped at Michmash, the garrison site that Saul had just attacked, it must be assumed that either Saul did not completely wipe out that post, or that following the defeat of that site, Saul and his forces had surrendered Michmash to the advancing Philistine forces and had retreated to the eastern city of Gilgal.

In verse six we read, “*When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits.*” The reaction described here is that of some of Saul’s army, not the general populace. What happened here with the Israelite army repeats what happened during the Midianite invasion in Gideon’s time (Judg.6:2). The implication here is that though the Israelites anticipated a counterattack by the Philistines, they were totally unprepared for the magnitude of the Philistine force that was sent against them. Because of this there were a large number of desertions among the Israelite forces. In the area where this conflict was unfolding there were many caves that provided an effective refuge for those seeking to escape pursuers. The sheer number of the caves made it unlikely that those hiding in the maze of caverns would be found.

In verse seven we read, “*And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.*” Here we are told that some of the deserters fled Israelite territory completely by crossing eastward beyond the Jordan River. It was unlikely that the Philistines would follow these deserters beyond the Jordan River. The reference to how Saul’s army was trembling in fear is yet another allusion to the Gideon story, because the Israelite defenders had the same response in anticipation of facing the Midianites (Judg.7:1-3). Beyond the ongoing allusion to the Gideon story, the account of this fearfulness among Saul’s troops explains the impatience Saul would display as he waited for Samuel’s arrival.

What was not clear to Saul or his army at that time was that this attack by the Philistines was meant as a test of Israel and her new king. A test to see whether the king and the nation would believe in their God and obey His directives. The key idea in this account is the need for Saul to be obedient to God’s commandments and thus be worthy to rule. This was a prophetic perspective on kingship that would continue to challenge Israel’s rulers as long as there was an Israelite kingdom.

In verse eight we read, *“Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him.”* In this verse we are told that Saul waited in Gilgal for seven days, and that he did so in obedience to instructions he had been given by Samuel. The wording in this verse mirrors what found in chapter ten, verse eight, implying that it was the instruction given in that verse that the author was alluding to here. However, the instructions given by Samuel in chapter ten were given two years prior to the events that are recorded in chapter thirteen. This reality implies that the connection between these verses is not that Samuel spoke in that earlier period to give instructions for this specific episode, but instead Samuel had given instructions regarding an annual event that Saul was to observe, and over which Samuel was to preside. It is further likely that this was not a random event, but that this religious observance was meant to coincide with the uprising of Israel against the Philistines. But in regard to this is the question, was Samuel late for his appointment, or did Saul act prematurely? Some interpreters argue that the verse implies that Samuel was late and that Saul was forced to act. However, the instructions actually imply that Samuel would arrive on the seventh day. According to the Law of God, sacrifices were normally offered twice a day, once early in the morning, and then again at twilight (Num.28:1-6). Therefore, Samuel’s promised arrival could be at any time during the daylight hours of the seventh day, and it would still have been a faithful fulfillment of the promise. Since Samuel arrives just as Saul had begun the sacrifices, it indicates that Saul simply ran out of patience and in desperation commenced with the offerings on his own.

In verse nine we read, *“So Saul said, ‘Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me’. And he offered the burnt offering.”* Saul’s conundrum was that he wanted on the one hand to have the ritual performed in order to secure God’s blessing, but on the other waiting for Samuel was interfering with the strategic element of timing. His choice was an attempt to acquire the ritual benefit (by offering the sacrifice himself) and still try to take advantage of striking before the strategic military moment passed. In that culture, had Saul not made the offering, but called his troops to go into battle without such an offering, this choice would have shattered his army’s morale, for they would assume that God would not fight on their behalf.

III. Samuel’s Rebuke of the King: (13:10-14)

In verse ten we read, *“Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him.”* This account seems to indicate that Samuel’s arrival was not coincidental, but intentional. Since Samuel arrived just after Saul made the sacrifice it indicates that Samuel was watching from a distance to see if the king would obey the instruction or give in to the pressure to disobey it. Though Samuel arrived after the offering of the burnt sacrifice, he arrived before Saul had the opportunity to offer the fellowship offerings.

In verses eleven and twelve we read, “*And Samuel said, ‘What have you done?’ Saul said, ‘When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash, then I said, ‘The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the LORD.’ Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering.’*” Samuel’s opening question ignored Saul’s greeting, showing that the significance of what Saul was doing made social niceties unimportant. In his response, Saul defensively blamed three other parties for his disobedience: his soldiers, Samuel himself, and the Philistines. The Hebrew word translated as “*compelled*” literally expresses that Saul forced himself to perform the sacrifice because he feared the Philistines would attack before he was able to secure Yahweh’s favor by his act that he portrayed as spiritual obedience. It should be understood that Saul’s desire to make the offering need not be interpreted as an expression of a deep spiritual faith in Yahweh. Given what we read elsewhere about Saul, it is more likely that his choice was an expression of practical prudence. For in general, kings in the ancient world normally did not want to go into battle without some assurance that they would be victorious, and normally they sought that assurance through some sort of divine omen. This is most likely what Saul was seeking, for both himself, and for his fearful soldiers.

However, the reality was that Saul’s excuses and rationale did not change the fact that he had disobeyed God. Rather, his excuses only revealed his unbelief and disobedience more clearly. For in Saul’s response, he inadvertently betrayed his flawed perspective:

1. His concern about his dwindling forces revealed a belief that the strength of the human army, not the power of God would decide the battle.
2. His concern with offering a sacrifice reveals a faulty theology that elevates religious ritual over personal obedience to God’s Word, as if performance of the ritual on its own could in some way guarantee Divine favor.
3. Saul did not comprehend the boundaries of his role. He was a king, but one who was under the spiritual authority of the prophet/priest Samuel.

Saul was judging the situation he was in, from what he was seeing before him, rather than from a perspective of faith.

In verse thirteen and fourteen we read, “*And Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue.’*” Samuel asserted that the king’s actions were to be condemned as foolish, for no line of reasoning, no matter how compelling they may seem, could ever justify disobedience to Yahweh. The Hebrew word translated as “*commanded*” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to the commands of God’s Law through Moses (Ex.24:12). The usage of this common terminology indicates that Samuel’s words, spoken in the context of his role as Yahweh’s prophet, carried the same authority as those of Moses, meaning that every word spoken under Divine inspiration has equal authority.

But the question is, what precisely was Saul's sin? Some interpreters argue that Saul did not sin by making the sacrifice. They argue that David did the same thing and was not rebuked for doing it. Therefore, these interpreters conclude that Saul's sin was disobedience to Samuel's particular command that he was to wait seven days. However, the above argument rests on silence. We are told that David made offerings but never given details about how this was done. The simple fact that a priest was not mentioned, does not in itself prove that David did not engage a priest to offer the sacrifice on his behalf, particularly since David, unlike Saul, had a number of priests at his disposal. The difference here is we are specifically told that Saul made the offering in the absence of the priest. The historical narratives were written in conscious awareness of the revelation of God's Law. That Law specifically commanded that the sacrifices were to be done by a legitimate priest. Therefore, what Saul was doing was similar to that of the self-proclaimed priest in the concluding chapters of the Book of Judges (chs.17-21). It was certainly a sin to ignore God's instruction to wait for Samuel, but the greater sin was the violation of God's Law about sacrificial offerings.

As a consequence of his disobedience, Saul's dynasty would come to an end (*"your kingdom will not endure"*). The severity of God's judgment on Saul must be seen in the light of God's holiness. Saul had now violated the holy standards of Yahweh by disobeying the Law of Moses (Lev.6:8-13) and the word of His Prophet Samuel. The implication here is clear, if Saul had not sinned, his descendants would have continued to rule after him, but now, when he passed, his dynasty would come to an end. Some have speculated that if he had not sinned then he and David would have had concurrent reigns so that the promise of an everlasting kingdom would have been fulfilled for both of them. This sort of speculation is silly. God's providential purposes do not have alternative possibilities. God foreknew that Saul would sin before he ever came to the throne. In fact, that was ultimately God's point, that having a king like that of the other nations was a tragic desire that would lead the people of Israel to ruin. So, God gave them that sort of a king to demonstrate this to them. But this verse also makes it clear that Saul's dynasty was not doomed from the start (in the sense that God sabotaged Saul), rather the dynasty failed because of the disobedient choices that Saul himself made after ascending to the throne.

In the latter portion of verse fourteen we read, *"The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."* In reading these words it is important to recognize that there is no specific reference to David in Samuel's words here. Nor is there any suggestion that the rise of the next king's dynasty was contingent on the fall of Saul's. All Samuel said was that Saul's kingship would end and someone else's would begin. The emphasis in Samuel's words was on the difference that would exist in the one chosen to be the next king. It is important to see that there is a contrast in language here between God's declaration about how the next king would be chosen and what was written regarding the choosing of Saul. Here we are told that God would seek for Himself a man (Yahweh was going to appoint His own nominee), in chapter eight we were told

that Yahweh would make a king for the Israelites, and this was based upon their demand for one like those who ruled over the other nations (vs.22). Therefore, the next king would be God's choice, not Israel's choice. The statement "*a man after His own heart*" means that God was now going to select someone of his own choosing (according to his own will or purpose rather than according to the will and purpose of the Israelites). This wording does not relate to the sort of piety He would seek in the one who would be the next king, rather it expressed the exercise of God's will in rejecting Saul (a man fulfilling Israel's desire, 9:20) and replacing him with someone who was measured by a different criterion, His own. However, from what is revealed throughout the Scriptures about what God values, it is clear that God would choose someone whose heart reflected godly priorities, someone who had a profound committed to God, to His Word, and to His purposes. He would seek out someone like-minded who would be obedient to Him.

The result of this would of course be that Saul's son would not succeed him, and that the rest of Saul's reign as king would demonstrate the futility of attempting to fulfill God's purposes apart from His enabling grace.

The structure of the narrative also seems to form a parallel between what happened to Saul and what had happened to Adam in the Garden (Gen.3). Together these express a consistent theological perspective that views the loss of privilege and position as inevitable consequences of violating God's commandments. Therefore, the idea is that God chooses those who obey His commandments as those who will serve Him in significant roles, and those who disobey Him lose those roles.

IV. The Realities of Israel's Situation: (13:15-23)

In verse fifteen we read, "*Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people present with him, about six hundred men.*" In this verse we read that Samuel departed south to Gibeah. The immediate focus on Saul is not on where he went next, but on the status of his army. Here we are told that the defections from Saul's army had reduced the size of his fighting force from 3,000 to 600. The reference to Gibeah of Benjamin indicates that Saul and Jonathan gathered the remaining soldiers in the same town to which Samuel had departed. This movement indicates that though the Philistines were to the north of them, they could still move to the south.

In verses sixteen through eighteen we read, "*Saul, Jonathan his son, and the people present with them remained in Gibeah of Benjamin. But the Philistines encamped in Michmash. Then raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies. One company turned onto the road to Ophrah, to the land of Shual, another company turned to the road to Beth Horon, and another company turned to the road of the border that overlooks the Valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness*". In these verses we are told that the Philistines continued to fortify their position in Michmash which served as their base camp. Geographically, Gibeah was only a mile or two away from Michmash where the Philistines were garrisoned. The two towns were separated by a deep ravine – a narrow but strategically important pass from the Jordan valley into the Ephraimite hills.

Therefore, the armies were stationed on opposite hillsides of the ravine. The Hebrew word translated as “*raiders*” is a word that literally means “*spoilers*”. These groups would have been sent out with two objectives. First, pillage local farms and villages to gain provisions to support the army of the Philistines. Second, destroying any provisions that were left so that they could not be used to support the Israelites in their rebellion against the Philistines. The word is found outside the Bible for military units that included chariots. These units were designed to repress attempts at rebellion. This indicates that the Philistines employed the military tactics of the Egyptians. Of course, given Saul’s small number of soldiers he was in no position to check these Philistine raiding parties. It was partly due to the depletion of Saul’s army, and their lack of proper weaponry that encouraged the invading Philistines to plunder the Israelite countryside. The geographical references here indicate that the Philistines were sent to the north, west, and east to raid the surrounding countryside. The position of the Philistine forces meant that there was very little opportunity for the Israelites to gain reinforcements from other portions of the land.

In verses nineteen through twenty-one we read, “*Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, ‘Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears.’ But all the Israelites would go down to the Philistines to sharpen each man’s plowshare, his mattock, his ax, and his sickle, and the charge for a sharpening was a pim for the plowshares, the mattocks, the forks, and the axes, and to set the points of the goads.*” The details given in these verses reveal that the Israelite forces were at even more of a disadvantage than was previously disclosed. This parenthetical note explains that the Israelites were at a big disadvantage because they were not skilled in the manufacture and use of iron. Specifically, because the Philistines had kept them from metallurgy for fear the Israelites would make swords and spears. The Philistines had apparently learned sophisticated metallurgy from the Hittites or other Anatolian peoples with whom they had come in contact as part of the Sea Peoples, prior to their migration from the Aegean Sea area to Canaan. Ancient peoples encountered many technical difficulties in smelting iron, including maintaining a consistently high temperature, adequate draft, combining a proper amount of carbon and iron, and heavy tools to remove slag from the iron itself. It is not certain where iron smelting began, but it was widespread throughout the Near East by the end of the second millennium B.C. The widespread use of iron in place of bronze is now thought to be the result not only of the availability of the technology for smelting iron but also of the increasing difficulty of procuring the tin needed to make bronze. But what must be noted, however, is that the text does not indicate an inferiority in iron technology but the absence of blacksmiths. Bronze weapons would have still been very useful to the Israelites. It is likely that these verses indicate that blacksmithing had been outlawed so as to prevent the manufacture of metal weapons of any sort. We see in these verses the traditional use of the title “*Hebrews*”, that it was used by non-Israelites to refer to the Israelites. The idea then is that we are told that the Israelites had to go to the Philistines even to get their farm implements sharpened.

This indicates how much control the Philistines had over them. The cost for the service of having their farming tools sharpened was a “*pim*” This was a unit of measure that was equivalent to two-thirds of a shekel in weight, with silver as the main currency of the time. This weight was equivalent to a quarter of a modern ounce, and the high price was charged because they would have been sharpening potential weapons that might be used against them. This reference adds that the Philistines had gained wealth from the Israelites through their ban of metal working in Israel. The smithing charges here were exorbitant when measured against the fact that the average monthly income at that time was approximately one shekel. The implements that were sharpened (plows, mattocks, pickaxes, goads) were for agricultural enterprises. They may have been made of iron or bronze, but the Israelites were prohibited from operating the smithies needed for sharpening them. Iron plows seem to be more likely since many have been uncovered throughout Palestine for this period. The earthly effectiveness of the Philistines’ policy was revealed here in the depleted, ill-equipped army that remained with Saul.

In verses twenty-two and twenty-three we read, “*So it came about, on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan. But they were found with Saul and Jonathan his son. And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash.*” The chapter closes with a reference that the Philistines began to advance into the pass that separated them from the Israelites. The situation was desperate. From an earthly point of view there was no way that the Israelites could emerge victorious, and seemingly, the king had alienated Yahweh and His prophet. One might have supposed at this point that Israel’s rebellion against Philistia was doomed to come to a quick and brutal end.

V. The Individual Who Embodied the Contrast needed for Blessing: (14:1-23)

The fourteenth chapter tells a story that serves as a radical contrast to the story told in chapter thirteen. The story in this chapter portrays what a godly man did in contrast to an ungodly man, and also how God used the faith of that godly man to bring a deliverance that could not come through the unbelieving and disobedient king. The story in this chapter centers on Jonathan, the son of Saul, a man who would never become king because of the sin of his father. But Jonathan was a very different man from his father. In these verses we read:

“Now it happened one day that Jonathan the son of Saul said to the young man who bore his armor, “Come, let us go over to the Philistines’ garrison that is on the other side.” But he did not tell his father. And Saul was sitting in the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree which is in Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men. Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod’s brother, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, the Lord’s priest in Shiloh, was wearing an ephod. But the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. Between the passes, by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistines’ garrison, there was a sharp rock on one side and a sharp rock on the other side. And the name of one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh. The front of one faced northward opposite Michmash, and

the other southward opposite Gibeah. Then Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armor, 'Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will work for us. For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few.' So his armorbearer said to him, 'Do all that is in your heart. Go then; here I am with you, according to your heart.' Then Jonathan said, 'Very well, let us cross over to these men, and we will show ourselves to them. If they say thus to us, 'Wait until we come to you,' then we will stand still in our place and not go up to them. But if they say thus, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up. For the LORD has delivered them into our hand, and this will be a sign to us.' So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines. And the Philistines said, 'Look, the Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden.' Then the men of the garrison called to Jonathan and his armorbearer, and said, 'Come up to us, and we will show you something.' Jonathan said to his armorbearer, 'Come up after me, for the LORD has delivered them into the hand of Israel.' And Jonathan climbed up on his hands and knees with his armorbearer after him; and they fell before Jonathan. And as he came after him, his armorbearer killed them. That first slaughter which Jonathan and his armorbearer made was about twenty men within about half an acre of land. And there was trembling in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and the raiders also trembled; and the earth quaked, so that it was a very great trembling. Now the watchmen of Saul in Gibeah of Benjamin looked, and there was the multitude, melting away; and they went here and there. Then Saul said to the people who were with him, 'Now call the roll and see who has gone from us.' And when they had called the roll, surprisingly, Jonathan and his armorbearer were not there. And Saul said to Ahijah, 'Bring the ark of God here' (for at that time the ark of God was with the children of Israel). Now it happened, while Saul talked to the priest, that the noise which was in the camp of the Philistines continued to increase; so Saul said to the priest, 'Withdraw your hand.' Then Saul and all the people who were with him assembled, and they went to the battle; and indeed every man's sword was against his neighbor, and there was very great confusion. Moreover the Hebrews who were with the Philistines before that time, who went up with them into the camp from the surrounding country, they also joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. Likewise all the men of Israel who had hidden in the mountains of Ephraim, when they heard that the Philistines fled, they also followed hard after them in the battle. So the LORD saved Israel that day, and the battle shifted to Beth Aven."

This passage reveals that Jonathan, unlike his father had real faith in God. He firmly believed that Yahweh could deliver His people anytime that He chose to do so. Jonathan also revealed that the choice to act lay not in the perfunctory performance of a religious ritual, but in actively seeking to know God's will. When God provided the sign that He would deliver the Philistines into the hands of this man of faith, Jonathan acted without hesitation because of his firm conviction that God would win the victory through him and his fellow Israelites. In this narrative we find yet another similarity to the story of Gideon in Judges. Once again, God

created confusion and fear within an enemy camp, this time aided by an earthquake, which led to the routing of a superior enemy. These parallels with the story of Gideon in Judges was not a coincidence or a manufactured story. Instead, God was repeating history to reinforce important truths. For one, it reinforced that despite their claims of devotion to Yahweh, the Israelites were still not investing their faith in Him to deliver them, but were trusting in human strength and religious tradition. Additionally, Saul was just like the flawed judges that had failed to deliver Israel in the past, and he failed for the same reasons, his lack of faith and obedience. Finally, this episode proved once again, as in the case of Gideon, that only God could deliver His people, and that He would do it if His people would respond in faith and obedience as Jonathan had.

VI. Saul's Rash Vow: (14:24-46)

In these next verses we read about another way in which Saul acted like the judges of old:

“And the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, ‘Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies’. So none of the people tasted food. Now all the people of the land came to a forest; and there was honey on the ground. And when the people had come into the woods, there was the honey, dripping; 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; therefore he stretched out the end of the rod that was in his hand and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his countenance brightened. Then one of the people said, ‘Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed is the man who eats food this day.’ And the people were faint. But Jonathan said, ‘My father has troubled the land. Look now, how my countenance has brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?’ Now they had driven back the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. So the people were very faint. And the people rushed on the spoil, and took sheep, oxen, and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood. Then they told Saul, saying, ‘Look, the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood!’ So he said, ‘You have dealt treacherously; roll a large stone to me this day.’ Then Saul said, ‘Disperse yourselves among the people, and say to them, ‘Bring me here every man’s ox and every man’s sheep, 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 slaughtered it there. Then Saul built an altar to the LORD. This was the first altar that he built to the LORD. Now Saul said, ‘Let us go down after the Philistines by night, and plunder them until the morning light; and let us not leave a man of them.’ And they said, ‘Do whatever seems good to you’. Then the priest said, ‘Let us draw near to God here.’ So Saul asked counsel of God, ‘Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will You deliver them into the hand of Israel?’ But He

did not answer him that day. And Saul said, 'Come over here, all you chiefs of the people, and know and see what this sin was today. For as the LORD lives, who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die.' But not a man among all the people answered him. Then he said to all Israel, 'You be on one side, and my son Jonathan and I will be on the other side.' And the people said to Saul, 'Do what seems good to you'. Therefore Saul said to the LORD God of Israel, 'Give a perfect lot'. So Saul and Jonathan were taken, but the people escaped. And Saul said, 'Cast lots between my son Jonathan and me'. So Jonathan was taken. Then Saul said to Jonathan, 'Tell me what you have done'. And Jonathan told him, and said, 'I only tasted a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand. So now I must die!'" Saul answered, 'God do so and more also; for you shall surely die, Jonathan.' But the people said to Saul, 'Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great deliverance in Israel? Certainly not! As the LORD lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.' So the people rescued Jonathan, and he did not die. Then Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place."

Though there are many details that could be drawn from this narrative, the purpose of this portion of the story is to further illustrate the failure of King Saul. Saul repeated the sin of Jephthah, by making another rash vow, without thought. Saul's vow was foolish and didn't even make sense from an earthly point of view. The physical drain of hand-to-hand combat is enormous, and he had forbidden the people to eat. Because of this they could not refresh themselves, and as Jonathan pointed out, it inhibited what God could have otherwise done through the Israelites. It was simply about Saul asserting his authority. And the nature of his vow was just like Jephthah's, putting a beloved family member at risk. And worse, like Jephthah, he did not recognize that God would not be pleased by a murder necessitated by a rash vow. Only the outrage of the people, that Saul would kill the man through whom God delivered them, stopped Saul from doing what Jephthah ultimately did. And in the midst of this, Saul was too spiritually blind to see that it had been his own sin that was the cause of God not speaking to him, not that the vow that was broken.

Conclusion:

All of this was contributed to the message about how crucial it was for a leader of God's people to have the right sort of character. Saul was not a godly man, he was a man like the kings of other nations, precisely what the people had asked for. When his story was over it would be clear, that only a godly king would bring sustained blessings to God's people. But the most important part of the story is the revelation that despite Israel's failures, and the failures of their leaders, their God was still providing deliverances. He would not let their sins destroy His ultimate purpose for them.