

Hasty Oath of No Tasty Food

1 Samuel 14:24-46

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Now turn with me once again to the book of 1 Samuel, and we find ourselves in chapter 14. You will remember that Jonathan, Saul's son, has taken this bold and courageous step by going into the camp of the Philistines, he and his armor-bearer. He has seen that as a signal from the Lord. Jonathan in particular is being guided by a principle; you see that in verse 6. He says to his armor-bearer, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the Lord will work for us for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few." Jonathan I think understood that this was the Lord's battle. And then Saul eventually joins the battle. That's where we finished last Lord's Day evening at verse 23. We're going to pick it up now at verse 24 of 1 Samuel 14. Let's look to God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we bow as Your children before You, grateful for the Gospel, thankful this evening that we are washed in the blood of Christ, that we wear His perfect righteousness as our own, that You have reckoned Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him. We thank You for giving to us the Scriptures. We thank You that it is a lamp unto our feet, a light unto our pathway. We thank You too that it is sweeter than the honeycomb. And tonight we ask again for the blessing of the Holy Spirit, that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Verse 24 - this is God's holy, inerrant Word:

And the men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so Saul had 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. 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. 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. 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.”

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.” 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.

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.” 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 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. 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.” 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 lost between me and my son Jonathan.” And Jonathan was taken.

Then Saul said to Jonathan, “Tell me what you have done.” And Jonathan told him, “I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die.” And Saul said, “God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan.” 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.

Well is that exciting or what? That's an incredibly exciting story. Don't you wish

you could be there? That is God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now we've seen something of Jonathan's, extraordinary bold initiative — Jonathan and his armor-bearer. And the way this story is being told by the story writer, the Holy Spirit of course, we are meant I think to draw a contrast. There's Jonathan and then there's Saul. Saul has already been told that the kingship is removed from him. You see his impulsive behavior, you see something of his concern about public image, you see something of his paranoia. Now, Dr. Elkin, who isn't here so I can talk about him, Dr. Elkin says, maybe junior too, that this means that Saul has a schizotypal personality disorder. He would know.

All I can tell you is the text tells us back in verse 13 of chapter 13, that Samuel says to Saul, "You have done foolishly." Saul is a fool. He's a fool, a fool in the Bible sense of the term, a fool who looks to himself and looks to his reputation and looks to his own self-advancement in the world rather than to the things of God. And he does three extraordinary foolish things in this passage tonight.

I. A foolish vow.

The first, he makes a foolish vow, or better yet a foolish oath. He involves not just himself, but he involves in particular his people - these men, these soldiers who are fighting the Philistines. The Philistines are on the run and Saul, in verse 24, orders, makes this oath, curses anyone who eats that day. Now these Israelite men would be pursuing the Philistines in the course of this chapter. They pursue the Philistines about twenty miles over very rough terrain and one of the things, at least in this period of history, that an army of this kind would do in order to sustain themselves would be to plunder, loot if you like, the enemy camp for food and whatever else was valuable at least for their present needs and circumstances. And Saul utters this oath that none of his men are to eat any food until the evening. It's militarily stupid. Now there's no emergency dry food packs that these men are carrying that modern soldiers carry and you just add water and you've got risotto or whatever it is. You notice on several occasions, you see there at the end of verse 31, but again it's at the end of verse 28, that the people are "very faint." That is to say they're hungry, their energy has been drained. It's been a time of battle, it's been a time of physical and emotional and spiritual exertion.

Now, have you noticed that ever since Samuel said to Saul that the kingship was being withdrawn from him that Saul has become more and more religious? When Jonathan initiated this attack you remember, in the first part of this chapter, Saul you remember called for the Ark of the Covenant, perhaps because he thought the Ark of the Covenant could go with him into battle despite the consequences that that may have had, knowing the history of 1 Samuel chapter 6, that it resulted in disaster. He turned to the Ark of the Covenant.

Now he is ordering a fast. He is making a religious scruple. He is binding the consciences of his people according to a religious oath that they must not eat food with dire consequences if they do. Now what happens, of course, is that Jonathan who hasn't heard this oath in the forest, the forest is dripping, coming down with honey, dripping down from the trees. And he dips his staff into the honeycomb and lifts it up and takes a good wedge of this honey and eats it and his eyes light up. Now, I'm not sure whether that's meant to be a particularly extraordinary spiritual thing. I eat honey a lot but this has never happened to me, so this may be an extraordinary thing that's happened to Jonathan. But perhaps all that we're meant to infer from this is that it revived him. The sugar, the energy that this provided him, gave him energy and it showed itself some way in his eyes.

And then his men tell him about his father's oath not to eat, and he says in verse 29, "My father has troubled the land." Now, that's a bold and daring thing for a son to say before his men about his father, who technically is still the king of Israel. He's using words that are taken out of Joshua and the story of Achan. Achan was said to have "troubled the land," and Jonathan is now accusing his father in making this oath of "troubling the land," of binding the consciences of these men with a religious oath with consequences for noncompliance. It's a form of legalism. He's violating, in Jonathan's eyes, he is violating the consciences of these men.

And Saul now becomes super-religious again. And he calls for an altar to be gathered because the men, having seen the effect of this honey, now begin because they are hungry, they are starving, and they kill these animals and they disobey the laws, the Levitical laws of Leviticus 17 about draining the blood, and they eat this flesh with the blood — probably cooked of course, but they've violated now biblical law. And Saul calls for a stone to be brought in, an altar to be erected, all because of a foolish oath, a foolish oath.

It's a bit like Jephthah's oath. Now however you interpret Jephthah's oath, and we've heard a sermon recently from Joel Beeke and I'd probably take the opposite interpretation of Joel's on that particular passage, but that's immaterial — the oath itself, the oath itself, you remember the oath? They're chasing the Ammonites and he says to God, "If you give me the Ammonites, the first person who walks out of my house I will sacrifice to the Lord." What a stupid, foolish thing to say. And this oath that Saul makes here is another example of a foolish, unnecessary oath.

Let's not mince words here. Saul did a stupid thing. He did a very stupid thing and he did it in the name of religion. It's possible to do really stupid things in the name of religion. It's possible to do really silly things invoking Bible and invoking God and invoking religion to back it up, but it's still stupid. It's still an extraordinary foolish thing that Saul did. That's the first thing.

II. Avoiding responsibility.

The second foolish thing that he does is blame shifting. He shifts the blame. He proposes, in verse 36, to go down now to the Philistines by night and his men are to plunder as they go. Now, you notice that Saul is now advocating the very opposite of what he had been advocating. He had been saying that the motivation for plunder was this vow of fasting. Now he's saying, "Let's go down," and the motivation for going down by night against the Philistines is there's food to be plundered from the enemy camp. Now someone close to him, Ahijah the priest, sensing perhaps that all was not well in Saul's mind, says to him, "Let's draw near to God." Now that's probably code language. Ahijah's got his life in his hands talking to Saul, saying to the king almost anything. So he can't say, "Saul you've done a stupid thing" like I just said. So he says, "Let's draw near to God." And given Saul's present state of mind, religious talk, performance mentality on Saul's part, the fact that he could do something and perhaps now earn more brownie points with God he agrees to it, and it's the Urim and Thummim.

It's like the biblical version of Las Vegas, I suppose. I have no idea what Urim and Thummim actually were, in fact, and if anybody says he does, they don't. They were possibly stones or possibly made of some other material and there seemed to have been two of them. And it looks as though what you do is you throw them up in the air and the priest, the high priest, would call out "heads or tails" and if both of them land heads or tails, then that would declare one thing or another but if one was heads and the other tails then, I don't know what.

But this is how God revealed His will to the Church in its infancy, before the Church had a Bible, before the dawning of the New Testament, before the dawning of the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. In its infancy, this is how God often revealed His will. And Saul asks, "Shall I go down against the Philistine's by night?" And guess what? God didn't answer. Saul hadn't sought the Lord before, he hadn't waited for Samuel, he had offered the sacrifice himself. He hadn't looked to God and sought His will and guidance before and now that he's asking for God's guidance. God — you know, He has a sense of humor here. He says nothing. He's absolutely silent. Is this a good plan? And there's absolute silence. But Saul has an explanation. The reason why God is silent is, there's an Achan in the camp.

You remember the story of Achan from Joshua chapter 7? He saw the shekels of silver, the wedge of gold, the goodly Babylonish garment, and he saw and he took and he coveted and he hid. Remember those four verbs? He saw, he coveted, he took, and he hid. And remember there was the Urim and Thummim and they were separated by tribe and then by family and then Achan was taken and he was killed. It's a somber moment in Joshua chapter 7, and Saul is saying, that's the problem. The reason why God isn't answering is because there's an Achan in the camp. But it's not Saul. It's not Saul. Somebody has sinned. Now

you and I, reading the story of course, know in part that's true because Jonathan has sinned and who's to blame here? Is it really Jonathan who's to blame or is it Saul who is to blame? And you have a classic case of shifting blame here. It doesn't dawn on Saul that he may be the problem; that he may be in the wrong. He makes a foolish vow and then the second foolish thing he does is he shifts the blame.

III. Failure to recognize error.

And the third foolish thing he does in this passage is he doesn't know when to quit. He doesn't know when to quit. There are more lots cast. You notice, by the way, it's sort of loaded from the start — there's Saul and Jonathan on one side and then there's the people on the other. And I'm absolutely certain that Saul intended these lots to reveal that this Achan would be among the people. And Jonathan is taken. Jonathan is taken. It is remarkable, it is astonishing, you have to admire this man Jonathan that he says he's ready to die. Foolish oath or not, he is ready to die. He is submissive to his king. He is submissive to his father. And Saul says, "You shall surely die." And then the people rise up. The soldiers rise up and they issue an oath of their own saying that not a hair of Jonathan's hair will fall to the ground and Saul's credibility is gone. You understand that? He's lost the respect now of his people. There isn't a man now among his people that respects and admires him as a king or as a military leader. They have gone to a man against him and his credibility is shot. He does three incredibly foolish things.

Application.

Now what's this saying? I mean this is a fascinating story. I would love, I would dearly love, to have been an observer. I would love to eavesdrop some of the events that are described in this passage. It's a classic story; it's full of tension; it grabs you where it almost hurts, but what's the point? What's it saying to you and me tonight? And I think it's saying, I think it's saying at least two things.

It's saying, first of all, when your relationship with God isn't based on grace, when your relationship with God isn't based on grace you end up behaving like Saul. Saul is a classic example of someone who's trying to perform, of somebody who's trying to do, who's using religion to earn the favor of God. He uses religion as a crutch. He uses religion when it's convenient for him. He uses religion almost like a superstition and you see what happens? You end up with legalism.

Now I know the world thinks Christians are legalistic — actually we are free. We are free, because being justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone we are free to live God's law in absolute freedom. We have been set free. When we know Jesus Christ we are free indeed, Jesus says, because we now understand who

we really are. We now understand what the point of life is. We now understand, in Jesus Christ, who our Father is.

But you see, apart from grace, the whole world, just like Saul, is caught up in a treadmill of works righteousness — a treadmill, a performance mentality of trying to earn the favor of God. Saul needed to say, “I was wrong. I'm sorry. I was just dead wrong.” Do you know how hard it is to say that? I mean even as Christians we can default into this. You know. even when you know that you're wrong, to admit that you're wrong is another thing, and to admit that you're wrong in front of your people and before your son is another step again.

You know Oliver Cromwell, and you have to understand here the dynamics, Oliver Cromwell is an Englishman, an Independent, and he's speaking to Scotsmen who are Presbyterians and he's saying to them, “I beseech you in the mercies of Christ to think it possible that you may be mistaken.” It's a very famous line from Oliver Cromwell as an Englishman saying to Scotsmen and as an Independent saying to Presbyterians, “Think it's possible, just remotely possible, that you may be mistaken.”

And it doesn't seem to dawn on the consciousness of Saul whatsoever that the fault, the blame here, lies entirely in himself. He needs to come before God and say, “I'm a sinner, unworthy of the least of Your mercies.”

But that's not what we see in these pages. You see Saul caught in the trap of legalism and performance and making rash, silly oaths that get not just himself, but everyone else in trouble. That's the first thing. Unless your life is built on the foundation of grace, I think you're always going to find yourself making silly, foolish decisions when it comes to religion. It's grace I think that frees us in Jesus Christ.

Now the second thing I want us to see here is it's about Jonathan, because I think the chapter is set up deliberately to contrast Jonathan and Saul. Your heart goes out to Jonathan. He's handsome, he's young, he's energetic, he's got initiative, drive, he's charming. He doesn't seem to put a foot wrong in this chapter. To be sure, he has broken Saul's oath by eating this honey, but be honest, you're on Jonathan's side here. Who's on Saul's side here? Your heart goes out to Jonathan — his initiative, his insight, his imagination. And you contrast that with the stupidity of Saul.

And you see, what you're expecting — no you're not because you're too well-taught in the Bible because you know how this story ends, but if you didn't know what the next few chapters were, wouldn't you begin to think, “You know who the next king of Israel is going to be? And he's going to be a great, great king. I mean he is going to be the leader that we really need. It's going to be Jonathan.” I mean, if you didn't know the next few chapters, if you hadn't ever read them, wouldn't you be reading this chapter saying, “Well this is a setup. The way this

story is being told is a setup. It's setting us up for Jonathan. Jonathan's going to be the next king and he's going to be a great king.”

But he's not going to be king. He's not going to be king. In fact, Jonathan is going to fall foul of his father's sin. Jonathan will fall under the shadow of Saul. And from one perspective it's a tragedy, isn't it? But I don't think that Jonathan would say that. I think Jonathan understood it, perhaps better than we understand it, because Jonathan understood that this is the Lord's battle. “He can win by many or He can win by few,” he's said. Jonathan was willing to die without so much as a complaint because Jonathan understood that peace and contentment and integration is to be found in submitting oneself to the sovereignty of God.

You see, we think that this is justice — Jonathan's a good guy, he does all these extraordinarily good things, he deserves success. Right? Tell me that's not the way you think, because we are a product of the 21st century because we think goodness on our part deserves success.

But Jonathan isn't successful from a worldly point of view.

And before you say, “That's unfair.” And tell me you're not tempted to say, “That's a little bit unfair.” — Jonathan himself is saying to you, “This is the Lord's battle.”

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.
He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will.
Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain.
God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain.

You know, there's a lesson here. It's an extraordinary lesson and it's the lesson that John Calvin saw in the very first sermon that he preached on the book of Job in 1554. “It is a great thing,” he said, “to be subject to the majesty of God.” “It is a great thing to be subject to the majesty of God,” and I think you see a little glimpse of that in Jonathan.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for this day. Thank You for the blessings of the Lord's Day. Thank You for Your Word. This happened three thousand years ago and yet it still speaks to us and ministers to us because this is Your holy, inerrant Word. Now grant us Your continued blessing as we go our various ways this evening. Watch over us. Set Your angels to guard our every step and receive our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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