

Cole Community Church Growth Groups
Leaders Guide for 1 Samuel 14:15-23
Week of January 8, 2012

YHWH's Victory

Saul and his small army is outnumbered, outmaneuvered, and outgunned in their showdown with the Philistines. He has a nervous group, he has lost Samuel's help, and Samuel has told Saul that he will lose the kingdom. Israel has very little chance of success. But, Jonathan, who set off the battle in 13:3, goes with his armor bearer and defeats a small contingent of Philistines. His brave action causes a small commotion among the Philistine army, and Saul recognizes an opening. In 14:15-23, we see how YHWH delivers Israel despite overwhelming odds and despite Saul's faithlessness.

Read 1 Samuel 14:15-23.

1. How does YHWH turn Jonathan's small victory into a major victory for Israel?

Jonathan is faithful, obedient, and courageous, and his victory over the garrison is enabled by YHWH. But, Jonathan has killed 20 men and there are tens of thousands left and only 600 fighting with Israel. The odds are still stacked against Saul and the Israelites.

However, at the moment that the Philistines begin to absorb news of the attack, YHWH sends an earthquake (v. 15). This reveals to the Philistines that there are divine forces at work in this battle, and if the Philistines remember their previous encounters with YHWH (chapters 4-5, 7), then their memories might add to their uncertainty. They begin to "melt away" (v. 16) and Saul notices. So far, Saul and his little force have done nothing, and the giant Philistine army is falling apart.

Saul begins to put together an attack, and as he does, a number of "Hebrews" (v. 21) - these are Israelites who have been conscripted into the Philistine army - begin to fight against the Philistines. The narrator refers to these soldiers as Hebrews because the term is derogatory, indicating the ethnic group but not their status as YHWH's covenant people. These Hebrews are dressed as Philistines and, presumably, have Philistine weapons. They are harder to pick out, and so the army appears to be turning on itself.

Finally, Israelites who have been afraid and hiding begin to fight (v. 22). Saul's army of 600 has become a decent fighting force, and the Philistines are in chaos. YHWH has turned the odds from impossible to realistic, and Saul just needs to be faithful and wise and he should win this battle. Or, more accurately, YHWH wins the battle (v. 23).

2. What does Saul do to show (again) his spiritual foolishness? Why does YHWH give Israel the victory despite Saul's foolishness?

In verses 16-17, Saul sees that the Philistines are in chaos and decides to try and take advantage. So, he gathers the army and gets Ahijah, the priest with the ephod (v. 3), to remind the people that they fight for YHWH. According to Torah, this priestly address was required before Israel went to battle, though we do not always have a record of the address. Deuteronomy 20:1-4 indicates that the priest shall address the people as a reminder that YHWH fights with them. As Ahijah is getting ready to give this address, Saul notices that “the commotion in the camp of the Philistines continued and increased” (v. 19). Saul’s odds are getting even better, and he might miss his opportunity if he has to wait for the priest, so Saul stops Ahijah and sends the troops to attack.

This is foolish. We can understand why Saul made sacrifice in chapter 13 from a military perspective, and we can understand why he makes a similar military decision here in chapter 14 from the same military perspective. But, both decisions reveal Saul’s focus to be a military focus. He is not looking at the world from the perspective of a person who follows after YHWH’s heart. YHWH has turned an impossible battle into a potential victory, and Saul’s vision can’t see that YHWH has been the one to do it; he still thinks that his military strategy will accomplish the victory. The narrator reveals that in reality YHWH has won the victory (v. 23). Saul has had very little to do with it.

Why does YHWH give Israel victory despite Saul’s foolishness? YHWH wants to preserve His people, despite the foolish ignorance of a few. In fact, He reveals to Abraham that he will preserve many foolish people for the sake of a few righteous ones (Genesis 18). He is a gracious God who wishes that everyone might be saved, and He has chosen Israel as His special possession, despite their sin. He will not abandon the nation, even for the sins of the nation’s chosen king.

One more note about this, related to the monarchy in Israel. In 1 Samuel 12, Samuel gives his great speech. In that speech, he notes that the nation’s wickedness will cause YHWH to bring judgement on Israel and her king. He does not say that the king’s wickedness will cause judgement, but that the people’s wickedness will. This indicates to me that the king is a part of the nation, but not above and over the nation in YHWH’s sight. The kings’ actions in Israel’s history deserve judgement, but it is not because the kings acted wickedly that YHWH judged Israel. Instead, Samuel’s speech implies that the people listened to the kings and were led astray, and for that reason YHWH judged.

3. Where is Christ in this victory?

Christ is here in YHWH’s activity saving His people. YHWH was always the only hope that Israel had for victory in this battle, and YHWH’s activity through Jonathan and by commanding nature gives Israel victory. YHWH reveals himself as for Israel, and does not need faithful national leadership to be faithful to His covenant promises for Israel. Similarly, Christ is true Israel, and reveals himself as for the nation of Israel despite

faithless national leadership. Christ saves Israel and the nations despite their faithlessness and opposition.

Also, Christ, like Ahijah, is pushed aside by Israelite leadership. Christ, the true high priest, is scorned because his interest in following the Father gets in the way of Israel's strategies. Ahijah was called to remind the people that they fight for and with YHWH, but Saul refused to let him do his job. Christ was sent to show Israel the Father, but the Israelite leaders refused to give him a hearing and instead sent him to Pilate to be executed.

Finally, Christ steps in despite overwhelming odds and wins a great victory over sin and death. As we said last week, Jonathan's statement in 14:6 is the great theological statement of this chapter - nothing can stop YHWH from saving, whether with many or with a few. Christ reveals that nothing can stop God from saving, not even death itself.

4. How can the Body of Christ be like Christ and Jonathan, and avoid being like Saul?

The Body of Christ is about Christ and his Father, guided by the Spirit. Our job is to be like Christ and do what we see the Father doing, not to try and manipulate and control others for our own advantage. We can be like Christ when we participate in Christ's saving activity in the world. When we see the Spirit moving, we can encourage and join with the Spirit's movement.

Like Christ and Ahijah, we may be pushed aside by national and religious leadership. Our job as the Body of Christ is not to align ourselves with leadership but to challenge and encourage leadership to align itself with Christ. Leadership may listen or it may dismiss the Body, but if we have listened to the Spirit then we have done our job.

The early church was an example that God wins victories despite the odds, and even in the face of death. Early Church Father Tertullian said that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" because the Body of Christ was growing despite, rather because of, the deaths of many Christians. The Body of Christ today can be faithful by not trying to avoid trouble but by being faithful to God's leading. Not even death can stop God from saving.

5. Have you tried to manipulate God? How can you become more like Christ this year and work with God and His Kingdom, rather than try to get God to work for you?

Our priorities are not always God's priorities. When they are different, it is our job to align our priorities with God's, not His job to align His priorities with ours. Saul thought that the monarchy and preservation of Israel was up to him. Instead, Israel is God's and

it is up to God to save it. Saul looked at his circumstances and tried to figure out how he could save himself and Israel, and he determined that manipulating God and the people by performing the sacrifice would help him. It is not my job or your job to save the Church, the New Israel. Instead, that is up to God. It is not my job to save my family, or my country, or my house, or my wayward child, or anything else. God is the God who saves, and nothing can stop Him from saving. My job is to look to see what God is doing and participate with Him, as Jonathan does in 1 Sam 14, and as Christ does.

Lord, show us where we are manipulators like Saul, and lead us and mature us to be faithful followers like Jonathan and Christ. Shape our perspective so that we don't see our lives through our circumstances and instead see life through Your eyes and through your salvation. You made us for Yourself, You gave us Your salvation, and You continue to draw us to Yourself. Thank You. Thank you for Christ, and in his name we pray.

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