

Jonathan – The Mighty Warrior

The first time we encounter Jonathan the son of Saul in the Divine record, is in 1 Samuel chapter 13. There we read that:

“Saul chose him three thousand men of Israel, Whereof two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in mount Beth-el, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin ...” (1 Sam. 13:2).

Here, we find king Saul dividing his army into two camps. He kept two thousand to be with him in Michmash, but only half that amount to be with his son in Gibeah. However as events unfolded, Jonathan proved to be a better warrior than Saul. We continue reading in this chapter:

“And Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that were in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, Let the Hebrews hear. And **all Israel heard say that Saul had smitten** a garrison of the Philistines ...” (1 Sam. 13:3-4).

Notice that here, whilst the smiting of the Philistines was by the hand of Jonathan’s men – numerically half that of his father’s – it was Saul that took the credit for what happened: “all Israel heard say that **Saul** had smitten ...”. That simply wasn’t true – Jonathan, not Saul was the victor. In fact, when we carefully examine the record, we find that rather than smiting the Philistines, Saul was actually retreating before them. In verse two, we read that Saul was in a place called “Michmash” with his 2,000 men. But then in verse 5, we read that the Philistines “came up and **pitched in Michmash**”. And then in verse 16, we read that: “Saul and Jonathan his son, and the people that were present with them, abode in Gibeah of Benjamin: **but the Philistines encamped in Michmash**”. So it would appear that Saul was routed, and had to beat a hasty retreat, whilst his son Jonathan was successful in his campaign against Israel’s enemies.

During the time of his retreat, we find that an arrangement had been made for Samuel to meet with Saul, but when there was a delay, Saul became impatient, and took it upon himself to offer a burnt offering which was not in accordance with the Divine principles regarding the offering of sacrifice. This was the first reason why Saul was to be rejected by Yahweh:

“Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of Yahweh thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would Yahweh have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But **now thy kingdom shall not continue**: Yahweh hath sought him a man after his own heart, and Yahweh hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because **thou hast not kept that which Yahweh commanded thee**” (1 Sam. 13:13-14).

Because he did not keep the commandment of Yahweh, Saul would be rejected: as Samuel said to him later: “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22).

By contrast to his father, Jonathan was valiant in opposing the Philistine army. In today’s reading of 1 Samuel 14, we find that once again he took the initiative to war against the enemy:

“now it came to pass upon a day, that Jonathan the son of Saul said unto the young man that bare his armour, Come and let us go over to the Philistine’s garrison, that is on the other side. But he told not his father” (1 Sam. 14:1).

Due to particular circumstances which we will not consider here, Jonathan and his armour-bearer again routed the Philistines, and Saul with his army joined in the battle: "... they came to the battle, and behold, every man's sword was against his fellow, and there was a very great discomfiture" (1 Sam. 14:20). Then we read that "So Yahweh saved Israel that day: and the battle passed over unto Beth-aven. This time, proper attribution was made to the victor: it was Yahweh, and not Saul.

But Saul in his folly made a rash commandment:

"Saul had adjured the people, saying, Cursed be the man that eateth any food until evening, that I may be avenged on mine enemies. So none of the people tasted any food" (1 Sam. 14:24).

This adjuration hindered the victory, as the men who fought became "very faint" (vs 31) with hunger, and consequently, the victory was diminished. Jonathan, however, was not present when the command was given, and was unaware of it. He did eat therefore, unwittingly contravening the command:

"But Jonathan heard not when his father charged the people with the oath: wherefore he put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in an honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth: and his eyes were enlightened" (1 Sam. 14:27).

As a digression, the eating of honey is used elsewhere as metaphor for partaking of the Word of God:

"... the commandment of Yahweh is pure, **enlightening the eyes** The judgments of Yahweh are true and righteous all together. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than **the honey and the honeycomb**. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward" (Psa. 19:8-10).

Here is the irony, Saul did not keep the commandment of the Lord, and so lost his "great reward"! But the courage of Jonathan in pursuing the enemy and partaking of the honey in order to gain the strength to do it, would provide him with great reward, and a victory. We also must have our eyes enlightened by the sweetness of God's Word, that we might have a great reward also.

SLAYING GOLIATH

As we have seen, Jonathan was a man of great faith, and a mighty warrior for Israel. But when we come to 1 Samuel 17, we find that the champion of the Philistines – the giant Goliath – defied Israel, and there was no man to oppose him:

"And the Philistine said, I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man that we might fight together. When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed, and greatly afraid" (1 Sam. 17:10-11).

The question that comes to mind, is What about Jonathan? In his campaign against the Philistines, he demonstrated a fearless faith in the power of his God to save – why didn't he come against Goliath? One suggested reason, is that he was waiting for a deliverer to show himself, and save his people. Jonathan knew that Saul had been rejected, and would be replaced. We already saw this in 1 Samuel 13, but we also read in chapter 15:

"Samuel said unto him, Yahweh hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou" (1 Sam. 15:28).

Notice that here, the promise was that the kingdom would be given to a “neighbour” of Saul, and not a son. Also, many years earlier it had been established that the kingdom would come through Judah, whereas Saul and Jonathan were from Benjamin: “... the sceptre shall not depart **from Judah**, nor a lawgiver from between his feet ...” (Gen. 49:10). Putting these things together, we see that Jonathan most probably knew that he was not going to possess the throne over Israel himself. It would be given to a man, a neighbour, who was better than his father. In the events that transpired regarding Goliath, David appeared on the scene, as a champion for Israel. So he told the giant: “... Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of Yahweh of armies, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied” (1 Sam. 17:45).

We know how the narrative describes the victory of the shepherd boy over the Philistine’s mighty man, with a stone and a sling. But the events that immediately follow are most interesting in our consideration of Jonathan. The victorious David was brought before the king, and they had a conversation. Then we read:

“And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan **was knit** with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:1).

Doubtless, the conversation between Saul and David would have included reference to the Philistine’s defeat, although the details are not given to us. But it was as a consequence of that conversation, that Jonathan was united in love to the newly emerged deliverer of Israel. He had evidently found a kindred spirit in David, and so loved him as his own soul.

Interestingly, the expression used in 1 Samuel 18 is picked up again by the Apostle Paul, and applied to the unity that should exist between believers in Christ. He spoke of his care for the brethren:

“that their hearts might be comforted, **being knit together in love**, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding ...” (Col. 2:2).

This is an illustration of true Scriptural love: not some shallow sentiment, but a shared conviction of spiritual things. This is the kind of love that Jonathan and David had, and it is the basis of love between believers in Christ.

As we intimated earlier, it would appear that Jonathan knew that he would not be king. This comes out in the events that happen next: “Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle” (1 Sam. 18:4). By removing his royal garments, and giving them to David, Jonathan was making a statement that he knew that it was David who would be king, and not himself. The spirit of this event also lies behind the Apostle’s words in Romans 12: “be kindly affectioned one to another **with brotherly love**: in honour **preferring one another**” (Rom. 12:10).

Saul also knew that David would be king, and saw him as a threat. Hence, he persecuted him, and sought to bring about his destruction. As head and shoulders above the rest of the people (1 Sam. 10:23), Saul should have been valiant in defeating the giant Philistine, but instead he exerted his energies in pursuing a man after God’s own heart. This inevitably brought much sorrow upon the two friends: “they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded” (1 Sam. 20:41).

In these events, we again see the true spirit which should exist between men of like precious faith. “a man that hath friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a

brother” (Prov. 18:24). So Jonathan was a source of encouragement to David, more than his own natural brethren, who didn’t even imagine that he would be king over them. And again:

“And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular ...” (1 Cor. 12:26-27).

Even so, Jonathan shared David’s grief and suffering. Yet he looked to better days ahead. Both men trusted implicitly in the promises of God:

“... And Jonathan Saul’s son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God” (1 Sam. 23:16).

Again, this is the best way that brethren in Christ can help each other: to strengthen their hands in God. We have numerous examples of this in Scripture: we have Moses and Joshua:

“... But charge Joshua and encourage him, and strengthen him ...” (Deut. 3:28)

And Paul to Timothy:

“Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1).

And the general principle is expressed:

“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the Living God. But **exhort one another daily**, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12-13).

Saul manifested an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the Living God, yet despite this, his son Jonathan was loyal to him to the end. 1 Samuel 31 describes how the Philistines came against Israel once more, and Jonathan, despite knowing what the outcome would be, remained with him, and fought by his side. But this time both Saul and his sons – including Jonathan – were slain and overcome by the Philistines. Here is the tremendous irony: Saul’s purpose was to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam. 9:16), yet instead they overcame him. He sought to make David fall at the hand of the Philistines, yet they instead destroyed him.

In this short consideration of Jonathan, we see an example of a mighty warrior, even greater than his father. Yet also a man of immense faith and humility, recognising the purpose of God in David, his beloved friend. These two men were united in the hope of the promises of God, and in the day of resurrection, they will be reunited, and be granted the greatest victory of all: even over sin and death itself.

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