

1 Samuel 14:24-52

Saul's Foolish Vow

King Saul almost derailed the Israelite victory and put his son in jeopardy because he ordered the soldiers to abstain from eating during the battle until complete victory was won.

1 Samuel 14:24 - "And the men of Israel were distressed that day: for 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."

This was probably to save time and hurry to the battle, but it also robbed them of strength to fight. But by attaching a vow or oath to his command, Saul transformed what might have been a plausible idea into a heavy weight to his people.

Also note that this was all about Saul - "that I may be avenged."

In fact it was a curse on the people. But Saul was the one who vowed, meaning he was foresworn to execute anyone who disobeyed. If he didn't follow through, he himself would be subject to the Law that decreed of those who broke a vow "the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin." (**Deuteronomy 23:21**)

More specifically, the rabbis note that both the king and the Sanhedrin had the right to excommunicate or "ban" someone. So any person who disobeyed Saul's order was under a ban, which was punishable by death.

The Problem With Vows

Here's a good lesson for New Years, the time of year we're reading this chapter. New Year "resolutions" are simply vows - which rely on human strength or will to carry out. Vows, promises, goals, expectations are all frowned on by God. But if someone does vow, he has to fulfill it to the letter. (In contrast, only God fulfills all His promises).

- **Ecclesiastes 5:5** - "Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay."

- **Numbers 30:2** - "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth."

- **Deuteronomy 23:23** - "That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth."

Jesus was even more forceful:

- **Matthew 5:33-37** - "Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."

James expands on this, explaining that it is really "boasting":

- **James 4:13-16** - "Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil."

So here we see Saul falling into what is a faithless way of thinking. It is called "will worship" in the New Testament. Colossians even addresses the particular circumstances of Saul's vow:

- **Colossians 2:23-24** - "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh."

Honey

1 Samuel 14:25-26 - "And all they of the land came to a wood; and there was honey upon the ground. And when the people were come into the wood, behold, the honey dropped; but no man put his hand to his mouth: for the people feared the oath."

The honey was dripping onto the ground from the beehives in the trees.

The Promised Land is described as "flowing with milk and honey" (**Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3**). "flowing" points to abundance. Milk stood for the basic sustenance that God would provide, and the honey was the added sweetness of experiencing His presence. David said, "taste and see that the Lord is good" (**Psalms 34:8**).

The taste of the Manna was "like wafers with honey" (**Exodus 16:31**)

Spiritually the milk or sustenance is the word - "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (**Matthew 4:4**)

- **Psalms 19:9-10** - "The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."

- **Psalm 119:103** - "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

Solomon adds the thought that honey also represents wisdom:

- **Proverbs 24:13-14** - "My son, eat honey, for it is good; yes, the honey from the comb is sweet to your taste; know that wisdom is the same for your soul; if you find it, then there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off."

Ultimately, it combines with the type of the love between the Bride and the Bridegroom:

- **Song of Solomon 4:11** - ""Your lips drip honey, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue, and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon."

Peter refers to both the milk and the honey when he says: "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious (or good). (**1 Peter 2:2-3**)

John the Baptist was said to have survived on a diet of locusts and wild honey in the wilderness (**Mark 1:6; Matthew 3:4**). Samson once ate honey out of the skull of a dead lion's carcass (**Judges 14:8-9**).

All this to say that, Saul's oath served to prevent Israel from partaking of honey that day, which spiritually represents the word, wisdom and sweetness of the Lord.

Jonathan Unwittingly Breaks the Vow

1 Samuel 14:27 - "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."

Jonathan is not perturbed when he hears this. He correctly evaluates his father's command and oath as a mistake.

1 Samuel 14:29-30 - "Then said Jonathan, My father hath troubled the land: see, I pray you, how mine eyes have been enlightened, because I tasted a little of this honey. How much more, if haply the people had eaten freely to day of the spoil of their enemies which they found? for had there not been now a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?"

"troubled the land" = "clouded" or confused their minds

By eating the honey, Jonathan was in danger of death by his father's hand. This recalls Jephthah's rash vow that led to the death of his daughter (**Judges 11:35**).

But as in the previous incident, Jonathan trusted in God for victory, not in any human

scheme like Saul's vow.

The rabbis debated whether Jonathan was wrong in disobeying his father here. Both a son and a student are forbidden from disputing their mentor, unless serious damage may result from the ruling. This is the case here.

1 Samuel 14:31-32 - "And they smote the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon: and the people were very faint. And the people flew upon the spoil, and took sheep, and oxen, and calves, and slew them on the ground: and the people did eat them with the blood."

But now Saul's vow would have another unexpected result. When evening came, and the vow was no longer in effect, the people who were fainting from hunger, fell on the flocks of sheep and oxen of the Philistines, killed them and began to eat the raw meat, or at least cooked quickly without first draining the blood as required by the Law. (**Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 7:26** - "You must not eat the blood of any bird or animal in any of your dwellings.")

The prohibition was to forbid eating a creature while it was still alive, or when it had a flicker of life or "life-blood" still in it.

Rashi adds that their sin could also have included killing in their haste a mother and her offspring on the same day (**Leviticus 22:28**).

Those in positions of spiritual authority must always remember not to place too much on those in their trust. Otherwise they might be caused to turn away from God.

- **1 Corinthians 10:13** - "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

To his credit, Saul devises an emergency procedure to mitigate the error. He calls on everyone to bring those animals that are left to a central location where they can be properly slain and bled according to Law and then eaten legally.

1 Samuel 14:33-34 - "Then they told Saul, saying, Behold, the people sin against the LORD, in that they eat with the blood. And he said, Ye have transgressed: roll a great stone unto me this day. And Saul said, Disperse yourselves among the people, and say unto them, Bring me hither every man his ox, and every man his sheep, and slay them here, and eat; and sin not against the LORD in eating with the blood. And all the people brought every man his ox with him that night, and slew them there."

After this initial stage of the battle, Saul decides to offer peace offerings in gratitude to God for the victory.

1 Samuel 14:35 - "And Saul built an altar unto the LORD: the same was the first altar that he built unto the LORD."

Rather he laid the foundation of an altar, and it was completed later, according to the rabbis.

[**NOTE:** The rabbis add a fanciful story that at this time Saul instructed the people about the correct length of a sacrificial knife, and because of his meticulous attention to this detail, God granted him miraculous possession of an iron sword, weapons forbidden to Israel by the Philistines.]

Saul's Unanswered Request of God

1 Samuel 14:36 - "And Saul said, Let us go down after the Philistines by night, and spoil them until the morning light, and let us not leave a man of them. And they said, Do whatsoever seemeth good unto thee. Then said the priest, Let us draw near hither unto God."

Saul had left Gibeah for the battle just as he had begun to consult the Urim and Thummim. Now Saul again asks the High Priest to ascertain God's will for the completion of the battle.

1 Samuel 14:37 - "And Saul asked counsel of God, Shall I go down after the Philistines? wilt thou deliver them into the hand of Israel? But he answered him not that day."

This must have been extremely frustrating for Saul. He wanted to completely annihilate the Philistines. Apparently, since Saul did not stay for an answer the first time, God would not now give him one.

Saul asked about victory, because he recalled in **Judges 20:18** how the Israelites had asked whether they should attack the Benjamites, but didn't ask whether they would be victorious, and then suffered a terrible defeat. The Talmud states that only one question at a time may be posed to the Urim and Thummim.

God's silence indicated to Saul that someone had sinned - as when Achan sinned at the battle of Jericho (**Joshua 7:14**). So he calls for a similar interrogation of the tribes.

1 Samuel 14:38-39 - "And Saul said, Draw ye near hither, all the chief of the people: and know and see wherein this sin hath been this day. For, as the LORD liveth, which saveth Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die. But there was not a man among all the people that answered him."

Some sages suggest that Saul had heard that Jonathan had disobeyed his command about eating, and he chose this way to make it known to the people. Possibly he only wanted to give the impression of unbiased devotion to justice, while suspecting that the people would come to Jonathan's defense. But there's no way to know.

One midrash says that Saul noticed the radiance of the stone representing the tribe of

Benjamin in the High Priest's breastplate had dimmed, so he suspected the culprit was from his own tribe.

1 Samuel 14:41 - "Therefore Saul said unto the LORD God of Israel, Give a perfect lot. And Saul and Jonathan were taken: but the people escaped."

"a perfect lot" = a flawless verdict, "let it fall upon the guilty person, and let the innocent go free." The Targum has, "cause it to come in truth."

Although God had not responded through the Urim and Thummim, Saul asks that He speak instead through this lottery process.

But this in itself seems an arrogant and presumptuous way of stating it, as if God did not always bring forth the truth. However, the rabbis explain this was a prayer always invoked by anyone casting lots.

1 Samuel 14:42-43 - "And Saul said, Cast lots between me and Jonathan my son. And Jonathan was taken. Then Saul said to Jonathan, Tell me what thou hast done. And Jonathan told him, and said, I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and, lo, I must die."

By including himself, Saul may have had a dawning realization that he may have been at fault somehow.

The Law was clear:

- **Leviticus 27:29** - "Any condemned person who has been banned from mankind shall not be redeemed, he shall be put to death."

Now Saul realizes the rashness of his oath. Jonathan's response could be translated as an astonished rhetorical question: "Am I to die [for sinning unwittingly?]"

But most of the rabbinical commentary translates it that Jonathan understands he must die despite knowing he is innocent.

Josephus (Antiqu. I. 6. c. 6. sect. 4.) represents Jonathan speaking with a generosity and greatness of soul: "death is most sweet to me, which is for the sake of maintaining thy piety and religion; and after so glorious a victory, it is the greatest consolation to me to leave the Hebrews conquerors of the Philistines."

1 Samuel 14:44 - "And Saul answered, God do so and more also: for thou shalt surely die, Jonathan."

Saul adds even more to his original oath now concerning his son. This was obstinance bordering on madness, like Jephthah. To maintain his own "rightness" he would sentence his son to death. This is eerily the opposite of the similar situations of Abraham and Isaac, and the Father "so loving the world" that he sent His son Jesus to

the cross.

But Saul also must have felt that since God had spoken through the lottery, Saul had no authority to countermand the decision.

1 Samuel 14:45 - "And the people said unto Saul, Shall Jonathan die, who hath wrought this great salvation in Israel? God forbid: as the LORD liveth, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground; for he hath wrought with God this day. So the people rescued Jonathan, that he died not."

"rescued" = "redeemed" him by risking their lives to present their legal arguments - that his sin was unintentional, and God had used Jonathan to inflict a miraculous defeat on the Philistines. Rashi notes that the people annulled Saul's vow retroactively through the legal mechanism of "an element of regret" on the part of the one who uttered the oath.

The Targum adds, "for it is known before the Lord, that in ignorance he did it this day." This of course would have been Jonathan's legal excuse. Not hearing the command and vow, he did not purposely break it. But he didn't defend himself, because he believed God had delivered his sentence.

As we've noted before, Israel's monarchy was not absolute. The will of the people was influential not only in approving the king initially, but in cases like this, where the people exposed their own lives by sometimes correcting their leaders' mistakes.

Josephus adds that the people also prayed to God for Jonathan that his fault might be forgiven.

Saul Consolidates the Kingdom

1 Samuel 14:46-48 - "Then Saul went up from following the Philistines: and the Philistines went to their own place. So Saul took the kingdom over Israel, and fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, and against the children of Ammon, and against Edom, and against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines: and whithersoever he turned himself, he vexed them. And he gathered an host, and smote the Amalekites, and delivered Israel out of the hands of them that spoiled them."

It seems the will of God was that the Philistines would not now be utterly destroyed, that they might be a rod of correction to chastise the people of Israel later.

Amalek

- **Deuteronomy 25:19** - "Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it."

Saul is said to have "delivered Israel out of the hands of them that spoiled them (the

Amalekites)." But that was not all he was supposed to do. The command was to wipe them out. Saul failed to do that in the next chapter, and that was one reason the kingdom was taken from him.

Saul's Family and Officers

1 Samuel 14:49-52 - "Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, and Ishui, and Melchishua: and the names of his two daughters were these; the name of the firstborn Merab, and the name of the younger Michal: And the name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam, the daughter of Ahimaaz: and the name of the captain of his host was Abner, the son of Ner, Saul's uncle. And Kish was the father of Saul; and Ner the father of Abner was the son of Abiel. And there was sore war against the Philistines all the days of Saul: and when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he took him unto him."