

Are we People of Faith or Folly?

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- [0 : 00] So as Fiona's mentioned, the passage that we're going to be reading this evening is quite long. It's just shy of two chapters. And so I thought it would be good to give you a few things to look out for, just so we keep our attention as we go through these passages.
- But before we get into that, I just want to caveat this sermon and say that there are tons and tons of details in this passage. And I cannot go into all of them. We cannot think about all of them.
- But if you take a note of them, I would love to speak to you afterwards about it, because it's such a marvelous passage of God's word. But just two things to look out for. So as we read through this passage, there is a contrast between two people.
- We have the person of faith. I'm not going to tell you who that is. I'm going to let you guess that. And then you have the person of folly or the person who is foolish. So those are the two things to look out for.
- If you want to make a little mark in your Bible or on a separate piece of paper, look out for signs of faith and signs of foolishness. I'm just going to hand over to Corrie, who's going to come and read God's word to us.
- [1 : 02] Just as we take our seats, let's pray together. Father, as we turn to your word this evening, as we ponder its significance for our life, as we think about what it says, we do ask that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.
- Amen. Have you ever sat down and pondered what the world seems, deems as foolish?
- So I had a quick look this week, a quick Google, and I found that the world thinks that certain things are foolish. For example, not flushing the toilet to save on the water bill is foolish.
- Not investing your money early on in life apparently is foolish. Not doing something because it sounds too good to be true is foolish.
- And apparently, not forgiving yourself, no matter what you do, is foolish. And the world says that the opposite of foolishness is wisdom.
- [2 : 20] And a person's wisdom is determined by their IQ, by their state of mind, and by their actions. And so, the world says that a wise person apparently knows who they are as an individual.
- They accept that only they have the power and authority to change their own lives. They live for their own success, and they do everything they can to get what they want.
- This is the world we live in, folks. This is what the world says is foolish and what is not foolish. What a shallow view of foolishness and of wisdom.
- But the Bible has a much greater story and a simpler story. See, the definition of folly or foolishness in the Bible isn't referring to intellectual ability.
- But when the word of God speaks of someone as a fool, it's referring to someone who is living as if God doesn't exist.

[3 : 26] The fool says in his heart, there is no God. And therefore, the opposite of foolishness, according to the Bible, is actually faith. And the Bible's definition of someone marked by faith is someone who fears the Lord and who trusts in him, in his word, and in his promises.

And so the question I want us to keep in the back of our minds as we walk through these chapters in 1 Samuel together is, are we people of faith or folly?

1 Samuel 13 and 14 were read to us and you would have seen, hopefully, the contrast between these two characters, Jonathan and Saul.

And as we walk through, I want you to keep that question in the back of your mind. Are we people of faith or folly? And as we dive into these chapters, I think there are two things that we see this evening.

And the first is a faithful soldier. Chapter 13, verse 16 to 14, 23. A faithful soldier. So when we rejoin the story, the nation of Israel and the beginnings of Saul reign, we enter into a hopeless situation.

[4 : 43] Saul and his army are camped out at Gibeah and the Philistines are just a few miles away over some cliffs. And Saul was sitting with an army of around 600 men.

And as he sits there, raiding parties are going throughout his whole kingdom, wreaking havoc. So why is this so devastating? Why do I say it's hopeless? Well, look at verses 19 to 22.

In the whole ranks of the Israelite army, there were two swords. So here we have a small army that's surrounded by a vast Philistine army described in the beginning of chapter 13, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

And they have two swords. This is not the kind of story that you want to be remembered for the rest of time by your nation. This is not the situation that you can just walk into, wing it, and see what happens.

The only options that seem to be before this small army are to fight and die or to run away and die. This situation is terrible. So Saul and the nation of Israel, it seems, are a hopeless case.

[5 : 58] Lost. But now we see the first contrast that runs through these chapters. Look at Jonathan in chapter 14, verse 1, and Saul in chapter 14, verse 2.

What is the difference that you see? Jonathan comes up with a plan and Saul is relaxing under a tree. And throughout these chapters, these two are being contrasted.

Jonathan is a faithful soldier and Saul is a self-centered leader. But in this first section, the main focus is on Jonathan. So in verse 1, he makes a plan to go and attack the Philistine outpost that had departed from their camp in Michmash.

But notice that he doesn't tell his father. Why? Well, we don't actually know why, but just looking at the details that are mentioned in verses 2 and 3, Saul doesn't necessarily seem in a hurry to actually do anything about his enemy's presence in his land.

He's sitting under a tree having the time of his life with his friends. One of whom is a descendant of Eli's son, who God actually cut off and said would never be a priest again in 1 Samuel chapter 2.

[7 : 20] And yet, here he sits in an ephod, a gown reserved only for the priests. So Saul seems to have reinstituted what God had condemned.

And so under this pomegranate tree, we see a king who has been rejected by God, and we saw that last week in chapter 13 verse 14. And he's sitting with a priesthood that's been rejected way back in chapter 2.

Things aren't looking good. And so Jonathan doesn't tell his dad and his king, but he goes to see what's going on in the outpost. And in verse 4, we see, for Jonathan to get to this outpost, he must climb over two cliffs.

And their names, we're giving them there, they don't really fill us with confidence when they're translated. These cliffs are roughly translated as slippery and thorny.

doesn't really fill you with confidence, does it? This isn't going to be an easy skip up Arthur's seat on a lovely sunny Saturday morning.

[8 : 27] Jonathan and his armor bearer are going to have to climb over these cliffs on their hands and knees, cuts and bruises and all. And then when they get to the top, when they get over them, they're going to have to fight.

Again, a hopeless situation. But look at this man's faith in verse 6, where he says, perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf.

Nothing, nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few. Here we have a man whose confidence is not in his own skill in battle, not in his own physical ability and not in his own king, but his confidence is solely based on the mighty deeds and will of his God.

These are the actions of a man who listened to Samuel's words in chapter 12, verse 24, if you can turn back there if you want, where he's standing and he warns the nation of Israel, but be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart and consider what great things he has done for you.

You see, Jonathan knows who's on his side. He knows that the battle will be won and we see a hint of why in verse 6. Jonathan calls the Philistines uncircumcised men.

[10 : 00] He's pointing out the fundamental difference between Israel and the Philistines. The Israelites are the chosen people of God set apart by him and for him and so they will be under his protection and his deliverance from their enemies.

And the Philistines are the people who are opposed to God. They worship man-made gods. Israel are a people who are called to be holy, God's people, recipients of his promise and the Philistines are not holy.

They are not walking in line with God. They are enemies of God and enemies of his people. And Jonathan draws that out here and we'll hear more about that next week in chapter 15. But in all of this, Jonathan is not a fool.

He knows that as he scales, he knows that the scales are tipped against him. And do you see how he leaves the decision in God's hands? When they show themselves to the Philistines and they say, wait there, then they will.

But if they say, come up, then they will know that God has delivered them into their hands. So even now, just before a fight, as the adrenaline is pumping through Jonathan's veins, as he's tired from just climbing over two cliffs, he still leaves the decision in the hands of the God who's in control of the world.

[11 : 28] And what does God do? Well, he fights for them. They are called up to the outpost, apparently to be taught a lesson, and they manage to kill 20 men.

And remember that they only had one sword against 20 soldiers who presumably had a sword each. This was no act of man, but it was an act of God.

This was God fighting for his faithful servant, God working out his extraordinary will through the means of ordinary people. He made the impossible possible.

George Muller ran an orphanage in Bristol, and on one occasion he woke up, he had 300 orphans in his care, and they had no food. The house mother came and asked him what they should do.

it was an impossible task to feed 300 children when there's not a crumb in the building. And he said, get the children ready, seat them at the table as if we're just about to eat and start the day normally.

[12 : 33] So they did. Muller walks in and he gives thanks to God for the food that they were about to receive, which was at this point non-existent, and he waited. Belly's rumbling.

And within minutes, a baker walked in and said that he couldn't sleep the night before because he knew the children would have no food, and so he stayed up to bake three batches of bread for them for free.

So they had food. And then seconds later, in runs the milkman whose cart wheel had just come off his cart, and he gave them ten big old tubs of milk because the milk would go off by the time the wheel was repaired.

And he said, take it for free. They started with nothing in an impossible situation, and then they ended with too much. God made the impossible possible.

Nothing is impossible for our great God. And so what happens in this hopeless situation that we started off in? Well, in verse 15, God is fighting for the Israelites and he sends a panic on the army.

[13 : 42] Israel are not alone. Despite their rebellion and rejection of God, he still amazingly, lovingly cares for and delivers his people.

Do you see God's goodness in this? He could have walked away from his rebellious people and their disobedient king and we would have thought, yep, you've got all the right to do that.

But instead, he is acting on their behalf, not because of who they are, not because of what they have done, but he is acting on their behalf and fighting for them because of who he is.

And then Saul does a roll call and realizes that his son and armor bearer were missing and he turns to his priest in verses 18 and 19 for advice. He calls for the ark of the Lord to be brought, probably because he wanted to hear God's voice.

And so Saul had been sitting and waiting for something to happen when he should have been acting. And now he should be listening to guidance, but in verse 20 we see that he brushes it off.

[14 : 54] He quickly changes his mind and instead of focusing on God, he focuses on himself and says, no, forget about the ark, I'm going to war. All of Israel come out to help and in verse 23, the amazing truth that despite all of this rebellion, the Lord saved Israel.

This was not the act of a mighty king who trusted in God, nor was it the act of a faithful servant who served the Lord selflessly, but this was the act of an almighty God working for the good of his people.

But why are we given this story? Why are there so many details in these two chapters that we can't even get to? Well, this story shows us the reactions of people in relation to God.

There is either faith or folly. Jonathan was wise. He listened to Samuel's warning and he remembered who was on his side.

Saul was foolish and he sat when he should have fought and he acted when he should have listened. One man guided by the counsel of God and had confidence in him whilst the other was guided by his own selfish ambition.

[16 : 16] Isn't this true for our own fallen, broken hearts? Are we people of faith or folly? How often do we face a difficult situation in life and rely on ourselves, on our own intuition and we sit under the pomegranate tree as it were?

God. But wouldn't it be far better if we acted in confidence, in the knowledge of who is on our side, who we are living for and serving and in full dependence on him?

And I'm not saying that we should let go and let God because that can be dangerous if we follow it to its full conclusion but I am saying that we should take the example of Jonathan and trust God and get going.

think about that little church that about 51 years ago stepped out in faith and bought the very building that we sit in this evening.

Did they sit under a pomegranate tree? Absolutely not. They stepped out in faith and they trusted that this was God's plan, that he would build his church and nothing would prevail against it.

[17 : 32] And what's the result? Well 51 years later we sit here this evening. The community has been blessed through ministries that the church runs.

The church has grown in number but more importantly people have come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. People trusted in God and they acted.

God has given us all the revelation that we need about his will for our lives in this book that we hold in our hands. We are called to live distinct lives, radical lives of faith lived out in the ordinary tasks of everyday life.

And in all the difficulties that come with life we are to throw ourselves on the power and strength of an almighty God to uphold us and to guide us. Listen to God's word.

trust in him and let your life be marked by faith in him. That is how you become a person of faith and not a person of folly.

[18 : 45] The second thing that we see in these chapters is a self-centered leader. In chapter 14 verse 24 to 52 a self-centered leader. Verse 23 ends on such a good note.

That God saved Israel that day and so we'd expect rejoicing and celebration after that wouldn't we? But instead we see the sheer folly of a leader who's more preoccupied with himself and his own glory than he is with God's.

Verse 24 Israel was in distress that day. Why? Well because in Saul's haste, the haste that we got a glimpse of in verses 19 and 20, he seems to have put an oath over Israel saying, cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies.

Do you see Saul's problem? The man who didn't obey God at the beginning of chapter 13 now makes no reference to God at all.

No expression of faith or confidence in him, but he is obsessed with avenging himself on his enemies and he's coercing his people into doing it for him.

[20 : 07] And this oath and curse is such a contrast to Jonathan's words in chapter 14 verse 6, isn't it? Perhaps the Lord will act on our behalf.

Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving whether by many or by few. Now we're not sure why Saul made this oath, but in verse 24 we're given an indication as to Saul's motives.

He was serving his own purposes. He might have thought that his reputation was at stake because he's the king of Israel after all. And so he does everything he can and puts an oath on a people to fight until the end of the day.

But Saul would have known that if victory happened on the battlefield then people scattered. And what followed was hours and hours of chasing down the fleeing enemy to complete the victory.

Hours of running up and down over and around hills, searching high and low for enemies that may be lurking. And these men would already be tired from the emotional distress of not knowing what was happening at the beginning of the day.

[21 : 18] They would be starving. But Saul focuses on his own reputation instead of his men and instead of God. And do you see how in verse 24 the focus is very much on himself?

I have avenged myself on my enemies. Saul, wake up. Do you not see that it is God who is fighting on Israel's behalf?

Do you not see that God should be your focus because it is ultimately his people that you are leading? No. In his foolishness he puts them under a vow and weakens them.

Now Jonathan, his own son, hadn't heard this vow and so in his tired and hungry state he eats some honey. And he is warned about the vow in verse 29 to 30 and he points out the foolishness of his own father.

Saul has made trouble for the country. Now why did this bring trouble? Well there are two reasons. One, it meant practically that they were weak and they were tired.

[22 : 27] But two, because of what it led to in verses 31 and 32. Once the oath was no longer upon them, notice the language that the author uses.

They pounced on the plunder and butchered the animals on the ground and ate the meat together with the blood. This is the language that we'd expect of a pack of wolves.

They've been roaming the forest for days with no food but then they catch their prey and then they devour. But sadly this is not speaking about a pack of wild animals.

This is speaking of God's chosen people. Who are acting like wild animals and who are acting as if there is no law. The Israelites were not allowed under the law to consume blood and you can look that up later on in Deuteronomy 12 verses 23 to 24.

But in their hunger and desperation for food, all of their thoughts about God and about living according to his law have gone out the window. Obedience to a self-centered foolish oath led to the disobedience to a good God and his law.

[23 : 43] Saul sees this problem and he jumps immediately to problem solving as opposed to getting to the source of the problem. Don't we do that all the time? He doesn't ask why this has happened which would reveal his own sin but instead he asks how he can fix it.

And he assumes again the role of a priest and builds an altar in verse 35. And we've seen this before in the beginning of chapter 13. Saul, when are you going to learn your lesson? And in this whole situation it seems as if Saul is trying to do the impossible.

It's as if he's trying to earn back the favour of God. But there is nothing, absolutely nothing that any human being can ever do that will earn them God's favour.

Saul is trying to work himself into a right relationship with God. That is not possible. God is the one who gifts faith. God is the one who reveals himself to his people.

God is the one who makes people right with him. No human effort can make a person right with God. That is a miracle that God works in people's lives.

[25 : 05] And in verse 36 again we see Saul's foolishness because he thinks that he sorted it out. God is the one who wants to keep pursuing the Philistines. Again, no reference of God, no expression of faith in him.

And it's only when the priest says, should we maybe ask God what he thinks about all this? Does he say, oh yeah, I forgot about that. And he thinks to inquire as to whether this is God's will or not.

And so we ask God in verse 37 and at the end of the verse we see the devastating state of Saul and Israel. God did not speak to him.

God was withholding his voice from Saul. This silence from God led Saul to conclude the sin was in his camp. And so he calls all the people together and they cast lots to see who is at fault.

And in verse 39, Paul says, Saul says that whoever is found guilty will die. So lots are cast.

[26 : 15] And it turns out that Jonathan had broken the oath and took some honey. And do you see the foolishness of this king? His priority is for him to do everything and anything he can to get back in God's good books that he says in verse 44, may God deal with me be it ever so severely if you do not die, Jonathan.

Saul was so eager to make himself right with God and gain his favor that he was determined to even kill his own son. And the irony of this whole situation is that Jonathan was the one who's faithful.

He was the one who took matters into his own hands and trusted God to work on his behalf. Jonathan was a man of faith and Saul is the man of folly. Saul was putting his oath on par with the commands of God.

But I was thinking this week, why didn't God change the lot? And why didn't he make Saul out to be the guilty one? Because the passage is portraying him as the man who's not walking in the will of God.

So why did God let Jonathan be picked? Well, as we look on, we see that the people of Israel rally around Jonathan to protect him.

[27 : 37] And they're now not listening to Saul's commands. Saul, the king who sets himself up as this mighty and strong one of Israel, is being brought to his knees.

He's being humbled. Whilst the humble one who is faithful and serving God is protected. This episode results in the people of Israel recognizing God's work.

And they say in verse 45 that Jonathan's deeds were the acts of a man who was being helped by God. See, they're starting to lose confidence in their king.

Maybe they were starting to realize that God was right after all. What a surprise. And that this earthly king that they cried out for wasn't actually what was best for them.

But Saul continued to reign as king and he continues to live in his folly and we'll see that as we go on. And we see his lack of confidence and faith in God and we get a hint of that again at the end in verse 52.

[28 : 46] Whenever Saul saw a mighty or brave man he took him into his service. Saul is basing his confidence in himself.

In his own strength and in his own army. This is a self-centered leader whose life is marked by folly. Are we people of faith or folly?

Saul was trying so hard to be made right with God again. He was thinking that he could do that. And it looked as if that was his main goal. But the reasoning behind that was not God's glory.

His reasoning for that was himself. And the tragic thing about Saul's story and the reason that as we read this we can kind of feel sorry for him can't we?

Is because the tragedy that he faces that leads to his foolishness is the same tragedy that affects every single human heart in this world. Saul's problem was that he forgot God.

[29 : 57] Isn't that the case and the danger for everyone? There are thousands of people walking around Edinburgh this evening. Millions of people in the world who are living lives marked by folly.

Living as if God doesn't exist. Refusing to acknowledge who he is and his will for their lives. Millions of people are living under the false assumption that they can make themselves right with God.

if they live good lives. If they treat people well. If they're kind to others. If they don't hurt anybody. Then surely they'll be good enough to reach this place that they call heaven.

And do you know what that means? That means that millions of people are dying and walking into an eternity without God with a false sense of hope.

God alone is the one who can save. God alone is the one who can make people right with him. God alone is the one who takes people from being marked by folly to being marked by faith.

[31 : 09] If that is you this evening. If you are trying your best to reach God please stop because your efforts are in vain.

But instead obey God's word. trust in his ways and have faith in him because only then can you be made right with him. God makes the first move.

Let us not be like Saul. Let's not forget God. Let's be people who are marked by faith not by folly. Let's start living as if God exists and is alive because my friends he is.

And as we draw to a close I want to say that this story is not just to tell us about two different reactions to God. It isn't just there to teach us about godly leadership but it is there to teach us a much greater story.

You see in Jonathan we see a man of faith. We see the qualities of a leader. One who knows God's power. Knows God's wisdom. Knows God's goodness. And one who trusts God completely.

[32 : 18] But in comparison to Jesus Christ Jonathan is nothing but a faint shadow. See Jesus didn't climb over cliffs and kill 20 enemies.

He didn't spend hours chasing enemies down to defeat an army that would ultimately come back again in the future. No. Jesus went into the wilderness by the spirit and was tempted by Satan.

He was beaten. He was whipped. He was mocked. And yet he remained silent. And he walked up a hill with a cross on his back and was nailed to the tree in perfect obedience to the will of God the Father.

And he died a horrible death. But in the process of his agony he defeated sin. Our true and lasting enemy that sets us on the path of an eternity of God's judgment.

Jesus took the death that we deserve and he rose again defeating not only the powers of sin and Satan but he defeated death itself. And that's why later on in the New Testament in 1st Corinthians Paul the writer of the letter can say this.

[33 : 35] Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where oh death is your victory? Where oh death is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law but thanks be to God.

He gives us the victory through who? Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. This is the leader that we follow. This is the man whose life was marked by unfaltering obedience and trust in the will and goodness of God.

And this is the one in whom and through whom we can be made right with God. Jesus is the only answer. Are we people marked by faith or are we people marked by folly?

Think back to what the world deems to be foolish and what the world deems to be wise. See the opinion of the world regarding these things is worthless.

The only opinion that matters as we stand before God on that final day is God's and God's opinion of who we are. And my prayer is that every single person in this room tonight can say that our actions, our speech and our thoughts are characterized by a living faith in the one triune God.

[35 : 01] The God who set the great plan of salvation for the world into motion. The son who carried out that plan obediently died on a cross and rose again triumphantly.

The Holy Spirit who dwells within every Christian and he was making us more into the image of Jesus Christ. If we trust in Jesus and if we live by the power of his spirit, then we are people of faith set apart by God and for God.

But if we reject Jesus and we walk away from him, then we are foolish. Which path will you choose this evening? Are we going to be a people of faith or a folly?

Let's pray. Let's pray. And just in the silence of our own hearts for a moment, let's reflect on our stance before the almighty God.

O our great God and our redeemer, forgive us for the times that we have walked away from you and our lives have been marked by foolishness.

[36 : 23] Thank you that through your son and his atoning death on the cross, we can know 100% that we are part of your family, a privilege that we do not deserve.

And yet in your goodness, in your faithfulness, you chose to set us free from the sin and the judgment that we deserve. Father, I pray this evening that our lives would be marked by a faith in you, the only one who deserves our lives.

Help us live lives for your glory, for your honor and your fame. We ask this in your son's name. Amen.