

1st Samuel

Lesson 26

(a) The Sentinels

(i) What They Reported

The trembling of the earth was not so localized that it was felt only at the garrison of the Philistines. It was felt all the way to the camp of Saul. We come to what they reported. Verse 16.

“Now Saul’s watchmen in Gibeath of Benjamin looked, and behold, the multitude melted away; and they went here and there.” (14:16)

Gibeath was not far from Geba. Neither Gibeath nor Geba were far from Michmash. When the trembling occurred, the sentinel watchman of Saul reported that the Philistine camp was melting away. In other words, the Philistines were running for their lives from Jonathan, the armor-bearer, and the LORD God.

(ii) What They Discovered

Naturally, Saul wanted to know what caused the Philistines to run in fear. Saul called on the people for a warrior census. Here is what they discovered. Verse 17.

“Saul said to the people who were with him, ‘Number now and see who has gone from us.’ And when they had numbered, behold, Jonathan and his armor bearer were not there.” (14:17)

Everyone was still in the two camps, the one at Gibeath and the one at Geba, except Jonathan and his armor bearer.

(b) The Summons

(i) The Demand for the Ark

This whole situation caused Saul to immediately put forth the summons for the demand of the Ark. He did the natural thing with his summons. He turned to the possible future High Priest who was with him as a warrior in his camp and gave him an order. Verse 18.

“Then Saul said to Ahijah, ‘Bring the ark of God here.’ For the ark of God was at that time with the sons of Israel.” (14:18)

Saul’s summons order to Ahijah in no way meant that Ahijah could fulfill that demand from the king. Ahijah was of the priestly line. He was related to the High Priest, Eli, and he was related to all the priests above him. What could Ahijah do? All he could do was take the summons of Saul to his priestly relatives, who did have the authority to fulfill or reject Saul’s demand.

(ii) The Demand on the Priest

The writer tells us that while Saul was making the demand on the priest, something changed his mind. Verse 19.

“While Saul talked to the priest, the commotion in the camp of the Philistines continued and increased; so Saul said to the priest, ‘Withdraw your hand.’” (14:19)

The Ark was not needed after all, and Saul came to that conclusion when the report of the continued commotion in the Philistine camp increased. The LORD was already at work on the Philistines. Bringing the Ark would not increase the work of the LORD. Therefore, Saul changed his mind and said to Ahijah of the priestly line, *“Withdraw your hand.”* In other words, Saul was saying to Ahijah something like, “... don’t write and deliver that order after all. It is not needed. Just forget it.”

(c) The Sword

(i) Confusion in the Philistine Camp

Jonathan's action against the camp of the Philistines brought great courage to the Israelites with Saul in Gibeah and those in Geba. We see swords drawn against friends with the confusion in the Philistine camp. Verse 20.

"Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and came to the battle; and behold, every man's sword was against his fellow, and there was very great confusion." (14:20)

We would like to say that this great confusion in the Philistine camp was the work of Jonathan and his armor bearer, but it was not. It was the work of the LORD. The LORD did for Israel what He had promised He would do, and He did it many times as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges. What was that? When the people were faithful to the LORD, the LORD would defeat Israel's enemies. Once again, the LORD kept His promise and caused the Philistines to draw their swords against each other in their own camp

(ii) Comrades from the Philistine Camp

But the writer was not through with the record of this campaign. For you see, there were Hebrew defectors living with the Philistines. Mind you, that was not new. Even during the time when the Philistines were controlling Israel while Samson was becoming of age, even Samson camped with the Philistines. So, too, with the death of Samson, the reorganization of the Philistine leadership, the crowning of Saul as king, there were still Hebrews camping with the Philistines in the Promised land. We come to the comrades of the Philistine camp and what they did after the LORD shook the camp with fear and dread. Verse 21.

"Now the Hebrews who were with the Philistines previously, who went up with them all around in the camp, even they also turned to be with the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan." (14:21)

The old school Hebrews who were playing the Philistine game, drinking their cool-aid, playing both sides of the national game simultaneously, got the message and returned to the proper side. There Hebrew side – the side of the Nation of Israel and Saul as king.

(iii) Chase of the Philistine Camp

The confusion of the Philistine camp led to the deserting of the comrades of the Philistines camp. Now we come to the chase of the Philistines camp. Verse 22.

"When all the men of Israel who had hidden themselves in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines had fled, even they also pursued them closely in the battle.²³ So the LORD delivered Israel that day, and the battle spread beyond Beth-aven." (14:22-23)

The hopeless warriors of Israel who had fled from Saul at Gilgal heard the news of the power over the Philistines and emerged from their hiding places to join in the battle with Saul, Jonathan, the armor bearer, and the army of Israel to rout the Philistine camp. In doing so, the Philistines were pushed back past Beth-aven. It was located in the mountains of Benjamin, just east of Bethel. The name means the *house of nothingness*. We do not know how to apply the name of Beth-aven to this story or where the name came from, but what we do know is that the army of Israel routed the Philistines to the place in the tribal area of Benjamin where they could do nothing.

b) The Plan of Saul

(1) The Pledge

But why had the army of Israel only pushed the Philistines to Beth-aven instead of totally defeating the Philistines? The reason rested in the plan of Saul and the pledge he made them all take the day of the battle. Verse 24

"Now the men of Israel were hard-pressed on that day, for Saul had put the people under oath, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food before evening, and until I have avenged myself on my enemies.' So none of the people tasted food.²⁵ All the people of the land entered the forest, and there was honey on the ground.²⁶ When the people entered the

forest, behold, there was a flow of honey; but no man put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath.”
(14:24-26)

Here we must speculate just a little about the timing of the day's events. Jonathan and his armor bearer had secretly moved to the edge of the Philistine camp with a plan to reveal themselves to the Philistines and wait for the Philistines to reply to them. Jonathan had a test in place to determine if it was the LORD's will to attack the Philistine army. The Philistines answered with the statement Jonathan had pre-determined would be a sign from the LORD that the LORD would help the two men defeat the Philistine garrison. The two men attacked the Philistines. The LORD caused the earth to tremble. The Philistines were confused and afraid and began to attack each other with their swords and those not hurt began to scatter from the camp. Saul felt the trembling and decided to attack. But, evidently, before his army pursued the running Philistines, Saul put all the warriors under this pledge, both the soldiers with Saul at Gibeah and the soldiers who were supposed to be with Jonathan at Geba. They all pursued the Philistines all day without a morsel of food to give them strength. As we will see, the hunger of the Israelite soldiers was why the army could not ultimately defeat the Philistines that day. We will come to that point when we reach verse 30.

(2) The Problem

But for now, the problem occurred between Saul and his son, Jonathan. Verse 27.

“But Jonathan had not heard when his father put the people under oath; therefore, he put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes brightened.”
(14:27)

Jonathan was hungry after killing at least twenty men and pursuing the Philistines to Beth-aven. He had not heard his father's pledge. There was the honey. He was hungry. Therefore, he ate.

(3) The Pronouncement

But as soon as Jonathan ate the honey, which probably took less than three seconds to happen, a soldier saw it occur and made the pronouncement to Jonathan. Verse 28.

“Then one of the people said, ‘Your father strictly put the people under oath, saying, ‘Cursed be the man who eats food today.’’ And the people were weary.” (14:28)

The news of the pledge was new to Jonathan. The deed was done. He looked at the men with him and saw that they were all weary from starvation.

(a) Jonathan's Comeback

What did Jonathan say? What was Jonathan's comeback? Verse 29.

“Then Jonathan said, ‘My father has troubled the land. See now, how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey.³⁰ How much more, if only the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found!’” (14:29-30a)

We must wonder why the army of Israel did not do what they usually did? They did not take advantage of the food left behind by the Philistines as they fled for safety. In Jonathan's eyes, his father had placed a terrible burden on the men of the army of Israel that day.

(b) Jonathan's Conclusion

What was Jonathan's conclusion? Verse 30b.

“For now the slaughter among the Philistines has not been great.” (14:30b)

What is he saying here? Jonathan is saying that the defeat of the Philistines would have been much greater that day if his father had not put that silly pledge on his soldiers of Israel. In other words, by starving his own men, Saul had hampered the victory over the Philistines.

(4) The Plunder

(a) The Crime

With Jonathan's answer that conflicted with Saul's command, the people followed Jonathan. They began to plunder the Philistine spoils because they were hungry. Thus, the plunder resulted in the crime – all because of Jonathan's answer. Verse 31.

"They struck among the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. And the people were very weary.³² The people rushed greedily upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slew them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood." (14:31-32)

Saul and his men must have pursued the Philistines to Beth-aven. When the men who were stationed at Geba caught up with Jonathan, they pursued the Philistines as far as Aijalon. At Aijalon, they took the lead from Jonathan and ate because they were hungry and because they saw Jonathan eat.

We often speed through passages and miss some important points. If you will remember, Saul pursued the Philistines from Michmash to Beth-aven in the eastern portion of the tribal area of Benjamin. Here we learn that Jonathan pursued the Philistines from Michmash to the village of Aijalon. What does this mean? It means that while Saul was headed east to pursue some of the Philistines stationed at the garrison of Michmash, Jonathan was headed west for the same purpose. Aijalon was a town that was originally in the tribal area of Dan, near the border of Dan and Benjamin. By this time, the border of Benjamin had been moved, and Aijalon was in the tribal area of Benjamin. Picture this, Saul was just about as far east as he could go and still be in the land of Benjamin, and Jonathan was just about as far west as he could go and still be in the land of Benjamin.

(b) The Charge

Well, we all know how people are! Someone had to tell Saul. The charge of the crime was delivered to Saul. To make the charge worse, they lied about the facts. Verse 33.

"Then they told Saul, saying, 'Behold, the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood.' And he said, 'You have acted treacherously; roll a great stone to me today.' (14:33)

What was the lie? In the statement by the tattletale, it is found in the words, "by eating with the blood." It is true that in the Law of the LORD, no man was to eat the blood of an animal because the life of the animal was in the blood. It was the law. But, the writer did not tell us that these Israelites with Jonathan did not properly kill the animals to drain the blood before cooking the meat and eating. Since the days of Moses, all the Israelites knew how to prepare meat for cooking and eating properly. Why would they change their habits now? However, the charge against Jonathan and the men was super-charged with those words, and it caused Saul to think the worst of his son and his son's leadership. It was a treacherous act in Saul's mind. Therefore, he called for a large stone to be rolled into the center of his camp at Beth-aven.

(c) The Contribution

(i) Saul's Second Offering

What did Saul do with the big stone? Saul made it into an altar where he could make a contribution. It was Saul's second offering to the LORD. Verse 34.

"Saul said, 'Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, 'Each one of you bring me his ox or his sheep, and slaughter it here and eat; and do not sin against the LORD by eating with the blood.' So all the people that night brought each one his ox with him and slaughtered it there." (14:34)

If this was Saul's second offering to the LORD when was his first offering? The first offering occurred when Saul failed to wait on the arrival of Samuel at Gilgal just a few days before this point in the story. At Gilgal, Saul sinned. As we will see, at Beth-aven, Saul will sin again with this altar.

Meanwhile, with the stone in place, Saul orders the offering of animals to feed the men. They are told to dress the animals correctly so they will not be guilty of eating the blood like he has heard that his son, and the soldiers with his son, have done. With the king's approval, Saul's army would eat that night of the spoil of the Philistine animals.

[\(ii\) Saul's First Altar](#)

But to eat, Saul's First altar had to be built. Verse 35.

"And Saul built an altar to the LORD; it was the first altar that he built to the LORD." (14:35)

Why was this action Saul's second contribution but, at the same time, Saul's first altar? The answer is easy. There was already an altar at Gilgal that had been there since Joshua crossed over with the nation of Israel for the first time. Saul did not build an altar in Gilgal. But in Beth-aven, no altar existed; therefore, Saul built an altar for the contributions. It was his first altar to build, and it is also an indication that it was early in Saul's reign as king. It was still in his second year of reign.

[\(5\) The Pursuit](#)

Where would the army of Saul acquire the animals to offer on his new altar? The writer tells us of the pursuit of the men, under the order of Saul, to gather the spoils of the Philistines to contribute to the altar and eat. Verse 36.

"Then Saul said, 'Let us go down after the Philistines by night and take spoil among them until the morning light, and let us not leave a man of them.' And they said, 'Do whatever seems good to you.' (14:36a)

Why did Saul give this instruction to his men? They had pursued the Philistines to Beth-aven, where they stopped to rest. They were exhausted and hungry. Saul had not acquired his goal with the Philistines; therefore, he could not let his men eat until he had reached his goal. His need to be consistent in his order overrode his ability to do right by men and let them eat. Therefore, he ordered his men to attack the Philistines who were beyond them, passed Beth-aven, destroy every one of them by night, gather the spoils, and return to Beth-aven to eat.