

1 Samuel 14

Gladys

Gladys Aylward was not a woman of wealth.

By all accounts she was also not outstanding in looks or intellect.

But she was a woman of great faith.

She was working as a parlourmaid in England when God spoke to her in the 1920s.

He called her to dedicate her life to the service of God.

And Gladys gladly heard God's voice.

She became convinced that God wanted her to preach the gospel in China.

And so she applied to the China Inland Mission.

But she failed the qualification exams.

But Gladys would not be deterred.

She heard of a certain Mrs Lawson, a 73 year old woman in China, who was looking for a replacement.

She wrote to this Mrs Lawson, offering to carry on her work.

She was accepted.

All she had to do was to get to China.

Gladys did not have enough for the ship.

But she did have enough for the train.

And so, in October 1930, Gladys set out from London with her passport, her Bible, and her remaining two pounds ninepence and set out to travel to China on the trans-Siberian Railway.

Through a tortuous route involving trains, bus, mules, and ships she eventually arrived at Yangchen, a little south of what was then Peking.

For nearly twenty years, Gladys ministered in China.

It was a ministry marked by simple trust in Christ allied with deep conviction and practical commonsense.

God blessed the ministry with fruitfulness and many people became Christian.

Gladys was not a likely candidate for Christian ministry.

But she was a faithful one.

Her faith involved risk.

It involved cost.

It was filled with courage.

And it was imbued with sacrifice.

I have begun this talk by introducing you to Gladys because my view is that she stands in line behind Jesus and the hero of this text.

What we see in Gladys is of the same shape and order as what we will see in 1 Samuel 14.

And my hope is that as we examine this passage together we might be inspired to stand in line ourselves.

So, with this in mind, let's see what God has to teach us today from his word.

Remembering where we were

Before we get started, let me remind you of where we were.

Two weeks ago we heard about how God integrated kingship into his covenant relationship with his people.

We heard that kings were to be leaders in covenant obedience and faithfulness.

We heard how they were to be subject to the covenant leadership of prophets.

Last week we heard about King Saul.

We heard about his failure and foolishness.

And we heard how Samuel promised him that God would punish him by not allowing his kingdom to endure.

God had sought out a man after his own heart.

And we heard how Samuel had left Saul.

Saul and his forces were surrounded by the Philistines.

They were without adequate weapons of war.

They were severely depleted in number by mass desertions.

They were demoralised and in dire straits.

An overview of the story

Now chapter 14 is a long chapter and we don't have time this morning to look at it great detail.

So, let me give you an overview of the story.

And when I've done this, we'll see if we can find some of the clues as to what the passage means and why God might have put it here for us.

Jonathan's partnership (1 Samuel 13:23-14:14)

The first section of our story is straightforward.

There is a detachment of Philistines at the pass at Michmash.

Without the knowledge of Saul, Jonathan decides that he will attempt a small foray against the Philistines.

He knows that God can save and he hopes that God will use his efforts to do this.

He seeks confirmation of God's willingness in a sign.

And when that sign comes, Jonathan and his armour bearer respond with courage.

They clamber up toward the Philistines and God is at work.

At first we are not actually told of Jonathan's killing.

Rather, in verse 14, we are told that the Philistines fall before him.

We get the sense that God is in partnership with Jonathan.

And this is confirmed by verse 15 where we are told that the earth quaked.

The Hebrew of verse 15 mentions God.

It tells us that the earth quaked and became a great panic of God.

Consequences (1 Samuel 14:15-23)

In verses 15 to 23 the scene moves away from Jonathan to Saul.

He sees the tumult caused by Jonathan and his armour bearer working alongside God.

He wonders who is responsible and finds out that Jonathan and his armour bearer are missing.

The ark is called upon, perhaps so that Saul can get some advice from God.

But in the end he makes a quick decision to take advantage of what is happening.

The troops rally and go into battle.

And verse 23 tells us that the Lord gives Israel victory that day.

In 1 Samuel 13:5 Beth-Aven had been a place of distress and desertion.

Now it is a place of victory and where troop numbers have swelled well beyond anything they were in chapter 13.

Saul's oath (1 Samuel 14:24-35)

In verses 24 to 35 we encounter a series of rather bizarre incidents.

In verse 24 Saul subjects his men to an oath.

He places a curse upon anyone who eats food before evening and avenging of Saul's enemies.

Now as it happened, there was an ample supply of honey that the troops came upon in the course of pursuing the battle.

They rigorously refused the prospect of a sugar hit and the energy it would give.

But Jonathan did not.

He had not heard the oath and he ate the honey and benefited from the energy and lift that it supplied.

In verse 28 he is told by one of the soldiers of the oath by Saul.

Jonathan clearly thinks the oath is incredible stupid.

His speech here is parallel to the speech by Samuel in chapter 13.

In chapter 13 Samuel made it clear that Saul was foolish.

Here Jonathan comes with all the authority of his leadership in the earlier part of the chapter and accuses him of troubling Israel.

The lack of food clearly exhausts the troops.

We are told this in verse 31.

And in verse 32 we are told the results of this.

In their exhaustion they act rashly.

They slaughter animals but don't perform the required draining of blood.

Saul sees this and acts quickly to make an improvised altar and slaughters the animals properly.

Consequences (1 Samuel 14:36-46)

In verses 36 to 46 we see the consequences of Saul's oath.

It is now evening and Saul proposes that the troops push on against the Philistines.

The priest Abijah suggests inquiring of God.

They receive no answer from God.

Saul interprets God's silence as being because of sin.

As God is silent, now the people are also silent.

Saul turns to the ancient rite of consulting the Urim and Thummim.

The lot falls to Jonathan.

Saul uses the same words that Samuel had used toward him, 'Tell me what you have done.'

Jonathan does not shy away from the truth.

Saul promises to fulfil his vow and to have Jonathan killed.

The people come to Jonathan's defence.

They acknowledging his partnership with God and ransom him in some way.

And Saul withdraws from pursuing the Philistines.

Summarising Saul's reign (1 Samuel 14:47-52)

Finally, the chapter is wrapped up by a report on Saul's reign as king.

The Israelites had wanted a king in order to protect them against the growing military threats around them.

And these verses tell us that Saul was a success in this way.

He was victorious against enemies on the east, south, north and west.

He is a successful war leader who lost only one battle, his last, on Mt Gilboa against the Philistines.

Foolish or malicious?

There is an overview of the story.

Now before we look in detail at Saul and Jonathan as they appear in the story, I want to talk in particular about Saul and his oath.

You see, I think that there is some ambiguity in our passage.

I think that the best case scenario is that Saul is simply foolish.

While there are sometimes issues of self denial associated with holy war, food is not usually one of them.

Depriving his armies of food was a foolish mistake.

It resulted in victory not being as comprehensive as it might have been.

It also resulted in the soldiers' sin of eating without the proper ritual being performed.

But there is another, more sinister possibility.

This passage clearly shows the beginning of disintegration in Saul.

He is king but he has lost the support of the prophet Samuel.

He is in a crisis where his own leadership and authority are under threat.

We see this in his constant resort to oaths.

He knows that God is in the process of replacing him.

And even though God has promised an end to his dynasty, I can't help wondering if Saul sees Jonathan as a possible successor.

Twice now Jonathan has exerted leadership within Israel and been successful.

Once in chapter 13.

And now in a spectacular way in chapter 14.

And it is clear that God is with Jonathan and that Jonathan has the support of the people.

And so, I can't help wondering if Saul utters the oath deliberately, knowing that Jonathan was not around to hear it.

I think that the writer is letting us know this in verse 17.

I wonder if perhaps he was seeking to at least discredit Jonathan, if not something more sinister.

No matter whether Saul's act was foolish or malicious, it significantly diminishes Saul.

He is clearly a man on the way out.

In this chapter he is without Samuel and in his desperation has reverted to priests from the house of Eli, which stands under the judgment of God.

He is on the edge of his people, who cannot follow his leadership without question.

And he is distant from his son.

Here is a man dissolving before our eyes.

The good and the bad of Saul's reign

Now before we take a look at Jonathan, I just want to reflect on what the author seems to be doing in chapters 13 and 14.

You see, he begins chapter 13 by listing the regnal years of Saul.

He concludes by telling us of the great victories that Saul won.

And by doing this the writer is making an important point.

You see, he wants us to know Saul DID accomplish what Israel wanted out of a king.

He DID protect them against the foreign armies that they were so worried about.

But the stories in between tell us that these accomplishments were not without cost.

Just as God had made clear in chapter 8, kings are people with personal interests.

They are interested in securing their own future.

They are people who manipulate others and use their power in ungodly ways for ungodly means.

They can be foolish or even malicious.

And these factors make kingship a fragile proposal at best.

Jonathan

However, I think that this passage does offer us hope.

It offers us hope in the portrayal of Jonathan.

You see, I think that Jonathan is offered by the writer as a contrast against Saul.

Let me explain by making a few observations.

First, I want you to notice the explicit contrasts between Jonathan and Saul in this passage.

Saul is sitting under a pomegranate tree in verse 2.

He has an army with him.

But he is inactive.

He is also accompanied by Ahijah.

And Ahijah is a man with a particular pedigree.

Ahijah is from a defunct priestly family.

He is brother to Icahabod, who got his name because of a defeat of Israel by the Philistines involving the Ark.

The associations here are not good.

And this is exacerbated by the fact that Saul's actions throughout chapters 13 and 14 simply appear to bring distress to Israel.

Contrast that with Jonathan.

He simply has an armour bearer and faith in God.

And whenever he acts, Israel is encouraged and fortified.

But there is more in the passage.

For example, in chapter 11 the Hebrew word linked with salvation is used three times in relation to Saul.

It is not used that way in this chapter.

No.

Instead, the same word is used three times in relation to Jonathan.

In verse 6 Jonathan notes that the Lord can save by many or by few.

In verse 23 we are told that as a result of Jonathan's initiative God gave victory, or 'saved' Israel that day.

In verse 45 the people acknowledge that it is through Jonathan that God has worked a great victory or salvation.

But there is even more within the passage.

Take a look at verse 5.

Verse 5 refers to a crag.

The word used here is quite unusual.

In fact, it is only used one other place in the Bible.

And that place is 1 Samuel 2:8.

There our English translations use the word 'pillar' instead of 'crag'.

Nevertheless, it is the same Hebrew word.

And verse 8 is followed by reference to God guarding the feet of his faithful ones.

And perhaps 1 Samuel 14 has another echo of this when it talks about Jonathan climbing up to the Philistines on hands and feet.

Now there are many other echoes of 1 Samuel 2 in 1 Samuel 14.

1 Samuel 2 talks about the enemies of the Lord being shattered.

It talks about the Most High thundering in heaven.

And it talks about the fact that it is not by might that one prevails.

You see, my view is that 1 Samuel 1 and 2 lies as a theological backdrop for most of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

And Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 is constantly sitting under the surface of the narrative.

For 1 Samuel 2 gives us the theological undergirding for kingship.

And it tells us that what God requires of kings is what is seen in Hannah.

God requires faith, not might.

He requires confidence that God is the God of the helpless.

That the Lord alone makes poor and rich.

That the Lord alone will lift the needy from the ash heap.

That the Lord alone will guard the feet of his faithful ones.

That the Lord alone will give Israel victory and shatter adversaries.

That the Lord alone will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his Messiah.

Friends, my own view is that 1 Samuel 14 is designed to show us what God's Messiah looks like.

And he is not like Saul.

No.

Rather, he is like Jonathan.

Jonathan has no position of power in this story.

In the previous chapter his father's actions have deprived him of any right of kingship.

He is therefore one who is without a seat of honour in terms of his future prospects.

But this man acts like Hannah.

In courage he calls upon God to act.

He puts his faith and trust in God.

And God exalts him.

God fights before him and with him.

Jonathan does not prevail in his own might.

He prevails because God is with him.

And the Lord gives him strength.

The Lord exalts his power.

Friends, please understand what I am saying.

In my view, Jonathan stands as a precursor of Christ here.

He is humble.

He has no apparent self interest.

He courageously depends upon God despite the odds.

He fights for God's people.

He is an agent of salvation.

He is willing to suffer for others.

He is not zealous for fame or honour or kingship.

But he IS zealous for God.

And in these ways he is precursor of David as we see him against Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.

But he is also a precursor of Christ who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

He is a precursor of Jesus who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

He is a precursor of Jesus who did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

And people of faith and courage like Gladys Aylward stand in line with such people.

Which pursuit?

Friends, today I want us to learn from this story.

In Christian ministry we are people who are faced with great temptations.

And the greatest temptation will be to succeed.

It will be to make a name for ourselves.

It will be to be a great preacher or a leader of a growing church or a person known for what they have achieved.

But what God wants of us is not success.

He wants us to be children who have no rights.

He wants us to come to him dependent and feeble.

He wants no arrogance.

No might.

No boasting.

And no self sufficiency.

You see, in God's upside down world it is the feeble who gird on strength.

It is the hungry that are fat with spoil.

It is the barren who bear children.

And it is the poor who are made rich and exalted.

What God wants of us is humility and godliness.

Now perhaps he will grant us success.

Perhaps he may give us honour among other women and men.

But equally, he may not.

But it is not success he is after.

He is after faith and confidence and dependence.

So, my challenge to you today is to determine that your ministry will be characterised by these things.

For these things are of eternal value.

These things will last long after the shouts of praise from humans have died away.

These things will stretch on into eternity.