

## SAUL'S FOLLY

1 Samuel 14:24-46

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Saul laid an oath on the people, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies" (1 Sam. 14:24).

In the 1850's the name of John Banvard was one of the most famous in America. He was the world's most renowned painter, and his innovative moving panoramas of landscapes from the American West made him an exceptionally rich man. Returning home from his triumphant tour of Europe, Banvard celebrated his elevation in the world by building himself a replica of Windsor Castle on Long Island, NY. One biographer says of him, "Acclaimed by millions and by such contemporaries as Dickens, Longfellow, and Queen Victoria, his artistry, wealth, and stature all seemed unassailable."<sup>1</sup> Yet within a short period of time, Banvard would be penniless and his reputation disgraced. What happened? As is outlined in the book, *Banvard's Folly: Thirteen Tales of People Who Didn't Change the World*, Banvard committed the crucial mistake of staking all his money and prestige in a venture that quickly got him in over his head. Building a vast museum in New York City, Banvard launched into a head-to-head battle with the great showman and promoter, P. T. Barnham. In this duel, Banvard was continually outmaneuvered, until Banvard's folly was fully exposed in the demise of his museum and collapse his fortune.

If Paul Collins, the biographer who chronicled Banvard's and others' sudden demises, had expanded his study to include the ancient world, he could hardly have found a better subject than Israel's king Saul. When it comes to gross and self-destructive folly, few can excel Saul.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Collins, *Banvard's Folly: Thirteen People Who Didn't Change the World* (New York: Picador, 2002), I.

His foolish actions and fall from national respect are chronicled in 1 Samuel 14, a chapter that reminds us of our need to be guided by the teaching of God's Word, followed in a humble spirit of prayer.

### SAUL'S FOOLISH OATH

The effect of Saul's folly on Israel is seen in the transition between the first half of chapter 14 and the second half: "So the LORD delivered Israel that day... Now the men of Israel were hard-pressed on that day" (1 Sam. 14:23-24, NAS).<sup>2</sup> The first statement belongs to Jonathan's bold assault, which received God's blessing. The second part resulted from Saul's assumption of leadership. Saul's efforts served almost to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, and by his folly the Philistines were able to survive their stunning defeat.

Jonathan's heroic assault drove the Philistines from the battlefield in panic and confusion. Now, a relentless pursuit was now called for so to destroy their forces utterly. To this end, Saul, who had roused himself from the lethargy of fear, gave orders to motivate his soldiers. "The men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies.' So none of the people had tasted food" (1 Sam. 14:24).

The text does not inform us of Saul's precise motive in making this oath, but two possibilities seem most likely. First, the king may have had a legitimate concern about the pursuit of the Philistines lagging if Israel's soldiers turned aside to loot the enemy camp for food and other valuables. Ancient soldiers had to provide their own food, so the temptation of turning aside from the fight to gain the spoils of victory was a real one. Instead of this, Saul wanted every soldier to press the fight unceasingly so as to destroy the enemy completely.

If this was Saul's intent, then his oath was foolishly harsh, both in forbidding the soldiers from eating and from binding them with a vow. Matthew Henry derides Saul's oath as *impolitic*, "for, if it

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<sup>2</sup> The presence of a waw preceding a noun gives a disjunctive force, not a conjunctive force, to verse 24. Thus, instead of continuing the prior narrative, the writer is introducing a new section, the point of which is given by this introductory verse.

gained time, it lost strength for the pursuit;” *imperious*, for “to forbid them to feast would have been commendable, but to forbid them so much as to taste, though ever so hungry, was barbarous;” and *impious* “to enforce the prohibition with a curse and an oath. Had he no penalty less than an anathema wherewith to support his military discipline?”<sup>3</sup> It was because of Saul’s foolish oath that “the men of Israel were hard-pressed on that day” (1 Sam. 14:24).

An additional motive behind Saul’s oath that becomes more likely when we consider the context of his recent experiences. Saul was becoming more religious since his rejection by Samuel for the sin of improperly offering the sacrifice at Gilgal. After Saul’s initial battle that began this war with the Philistines, Samuel had directed the king to go to the ancestral meeting place and wait for seven days for the prophet to arrive and make the sacrifice that would bring God’s favor. As the time period drew to its end without Samuel having arrived, and as his military situation got worse by the minute, Saul had impetuously offered the sacrifice himself, in violation of God’s commands. For this Samuel rebuked Saul and informed him of the Lord’s rejection of Saul’s kingship (1 Sam. 13:8-14). In the aftermath of this rebuke, Saul seems to have devoted himself to religious observance at the same time that his heart grew more reckless and hard. One example is the way Saul first sought divine guidance after Jonathan had attacked and then impatiently interrupted the priests when God refused to answer (1 Sam. 14:18-19). As a further example of this renewed commitment to religious observance, Saul ordered the Israelite soldiers to fast during their battle, perhaps as an attempt to regain the favor of the Lord who was silent to him.

The Bible’s commentary on Saul’s rash vow is given by means of an episode involving his son, Jonathan, the hero of this chapter. Jonathan was leading the vanguard of the assault against the fleeing Philistines. At one point, Jonathan and the soldiers following him came upon a forest where “there was honey on the ground” (1 Sam. 14:25). Apparently, the bee hives were so thick in this spot that “the honey was dropping” from them (v. 26). Saul’s soldiers, fearing the threat of his oath, painfully passed through without eating. “But

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:277.

Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath, so he put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth” (1 Sam. 14:27). This was no act of rebellion, and Jonathan’s zeal for battle was unflagging. In fact, the honey had an immediately positive effect on his battle-readiness: “his eyes became bright” (1 Sam. 14:27). However, right when Jonathan was flushed with this new source of energy, a soldier stopped him, saying, “Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be the man who eats food this day’” (1 Sam. 14:28).

Jonathan responded candidly: “My father has troubled the land” (1 Sam. 14:29). This was a provocative statement, because it is the same terminology used previously in the Bible for an individual whose sin causes Israel to lose God’s blessing. In the Book of Joshua, Achan brought “trouble” on Israel by his sins of stealing consecrated items from the ruin of Jericho (Jos. 7:25-26). Jonathan, who surely knew his father’s heart and motives well, candidly states that his father’s sin and folly were hindering Israel from enjoying God’s full blessing in battle. This was the practical effect of Saul’s oath, for “the people were faint” (1 Sam. 14:28). Jonathan sadly exclaimed, “See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines had not been great” (1 Sam. 14:29-30).

As a spiritual leader, Saul erred by requiring more of God’s people than God himself has asked, which Saul did by demanding a fast in the midst of battle. Moreover, Saul’s unbiblical requirements resulted in unintentional evils (as extra-biblical requirements have a tendency to do!). William Blaikie comments: “It was cruel in Saul to impose a fast at such a time, all the more that, being commander-in-chief of the army, it was his duty to do his utmost for the comfort of his soldiers.”<sup>4</sup> Saul’s example reminds parents, for example, that harsh and unfeeling commands, especially in the name of religious observance, merely embitter children against the parent’s rule and religion. Likewise, church leaders who invent their own extra-

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<sup>4</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 233.

biblical rules for conduct do more to hinder than to advance the cause of the gospel.

### SAUL'S FOOLISH ORDERS

One of the unintended evils of Saul's foolish vow involved the sin of his famished soldiers in violating Israel's food regulations.

Despite their physical weakness, the Israelites had pursued the enemy from Michmash to Aijalon (1 Sam. 14:31), a distance of twenty miles over rugged terrain. By the day's end, the soldiers were so starved that they "pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground." The problem was that they "ate them with the blood" (1 Sam. 14:23). Blood being a symbol of life, the Israelites were not permitted to eat meats that had not yet had the blood drained out of them (usually this was done by hanging the meats: see Lev. 19:26). Moreover, "the blood of an animal was the part that made atonement in sacrifices," so Israelites could not eat blood-filled portions (cf. Lev. 17:10-14).<sup>5</sup>

Once again, Saul was keen to make an impression by his outward show of religion. This was, as he saw it, a perfect opportunity to display his religious worthiness. Accordingly, when told, "the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood" (1 Sam. 14:33), Saul responded with zeal. Scolding as "treacherous" the soldiers who had violated God's law in sheer desperation because of Saul's oath, the king immediately took charge. Every man was to "bring his ox or his sheep and slaughter them" on the great stone that Saul had rolled into their camp. "Do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood," he adjured them. Finally, after the fast had provoked the mess of his army's sin against the Lord, Saul made proper mess facilities, "so every one of the people brought his ox with him that night and they slaughtered them there (1 Sam. 14:33-34).

Flush with this success in external religious observance, Saul "built an altar to the LORD," presumably using the stone on which the animals had already been slaughtered. The text adds the suggestive note: "it was the first altar that he built to the LORD" (1 Sam. 14:35).

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<sup>5</sup> David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 374.

Matthew Henry offers the sage comment that “Saul was turning aside from God, and yet now he began to build altars, being most zealous (as many are) for the form of godliness when he was denying the power of it.”<sup>6</sup> In all of these actions, Saul shows no sign of penitence towards God, of grieving over sin, or a real zeal in honoring the Lord. “He feels only that his own interests as king are imperiled. It is this selfish motive that makes him determine to be more religious.”<sup>7</sup>

Feeling that he once more had his legs under him, Saul proposed a new endeavor against the Philistines: “Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them” (1 Sam. 14:36). The wisdom of this order is questionable, given the fatigue and evident raggedness of the army. Moreover, notice that this plan is roughly opposite of his orders during the day. Earlier, Israel must not eat lest their plunder of the Philistines cease the pursuit; now, Saul presents the chance of plunder as the motivation for their nighttime assault.

Saul was a man who desired to succeed, but who was guided by no strong or deep convictions. The soldiers followed him with a lack of conviction appropriate to such leadership: they replied, “Do whatever seems good to you” (1 Sam. 14:36). What a contrast between this response and the earlier words of Jonathan’s armor bearer, who benefited from the inspiring convictions of the warrior prince. Offering one set of foolish orders after another, Saul would never hear the words that were eagerly spoken to his son: “Behold, I am with you heart and soul” (1 Sam. 14:7). Saul and Jonathan instruct us that true spiritual leadership requires more than expedient opportunism and outward religious observance, but that the people of God are to be led by true biblical convictions expressed with consistency and a passionate, principled faith.

## SAUL’S FOOLISH LOT

Earlier, we heard Jonathan’s frustration with his father’s expedient folly. Now, it is another of those closest to the king who expresses concern over the wisdom of his commands. The priest,

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2:277.

<sup>7</sup> William G. Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 230.

presumably Ahijah the high priest, said, “Let us draw near to God here” (1 Sam. 14:36). This was his polite way of suggesting that they consult with the Lord before acting on Saul’s plan. Saul, perhaps deriving new hope from his most recent religious observance, agreed to seek a revelation from God: “Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?” We can only imagine his frustrated anger when the Lord “did not answer him that day” (1 Sam. 14:37).

We do not know exactly what were the Urim and Thummim (the high priests’ objects for divining God’s will) or precisely how they functioned. Presumably, they were some form of lots, and given the example here they must have had the ability to answer not only Yes and No, but also to signify that God offered no revelation. Imagine the effect this failure must have had on Saul’s troops, standing by to renew the assault, to witness God’s silence towards their king and high priest! God’s refusal to give an omen was an ominous omen in itself.

God’s refusal to speak to Saul or Ahijah subjected the king’s religious observance to public ridicule. Saul obviously felt it necessary to provide a rationale for this failure, and remembering Israel’s earlier lesson in which Achan’s sin had hampered the whole nation (which Jonathan had likewise recalled earlier that day), “Saul said, ‘Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today’” (1 Sam. 14:38). Is it possible that Saul was this hard-hearted in refusing to acknowledge himself as the source of God’s disfavor? More likely, as his actions suggest, Saul was simply blind to his real spiritual standing. How ironic, and tragically foolish, for the king to seek to identify the sin that had alienated the Lord, while refusing to address the Lord’s condemnation of his own sin!

Thus the setting is provided for the third of Saul’s almost comical follies in this chapter. Calling for the lots again, he bombastically uttered yet another oath: “Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today. For as the LORD lives who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die” (1 Sam. 14:38-39). Just as Jonathan embodied the triumphant faith of Gideon of old, Saul imbibed the folly of Jephthah, the judge whose vow resulted in the needless death of his daughter

(Jud. 11:30-40). Standing by, the people were speechless: “there was not a man among all the people who answered him” (v. 39).

Saul proceeded by establishing the context for his inquiry: “he said to all Israel, ‘You shall be on one side, and I and Jonathan my son will be on the other side.’” Once again, the people responded with unenthusiastic submission: “Do what seems good to you” (1 Sam. 14:40). Saul then turned again to the Lord: “O LORD God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O LORD, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.”

It is not obvious why Saul divided the lots between himself and his son on the one hand and the rest of Israel on the other. Perhaps this reflected his guilty need to exonerate himself, and he added Jonathan in an attempt to bolster his case. Having exonerated himself, he could then safely play the role of Joshua in calling for the new Achan to emerge and face judgment. But this plan, too, was frustrated by the Lord. The lots were cast and “Jonathan and Saul were taken, but the people escaped” (1 Sam. 14:41). Saul now had no choice but to go forward: “Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan,” he demanded. “Jonathan was taken,” so Saul said to him, “Tell me what you have done” (1 Sam. 14:41-43).

Imagine Jonathan’s quandary, having committed no open sin against either Saul or the Lord, yet now being identified as Israel’s transgressor. Again, in perfect candor, Jonathan set forth his heinous crime: “I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die” (1 Sam. 14:43). Saul, a mere mockery of the kind of spiritual leader Joshua had been, immediately let loose yet another oath: “God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan” (1 Sam. 14:44).

Was it the Lord who spoke through Saul’s lots to identify godly Jonathan? It is possible that the Lord did answer this one plea from Saul, as a way of increasing his judgment. Jonathan did violate the oath of Israel’s king, however innocent were his intentions, so it is conceivable that the Lord spoke so as to uphold the formalities of justice. This explanation, however, runs against the current of everything that we read in this chapter, in which God’s blessing rests not on religious formality but the sincerity evidenced by Jonathan.



The king's son was not the cause of the Lord's disfavor; indeed, it is only in response to Jonathan's bold faith that the Lord exerted his power for Israel's victory that day. Therefore, a second explanation makes better sense. Without God's presence, the Urim and Thummim simply were not able to function properly. Jonathan's selection by lot for judgment – when Jonathan was the one faithful man on that day – merely proves the vanity of the religious observance without the endorsement of God's presence. Blaikie comments that even "Saul ought to have seen it. And he ought to have confessed that he was entirely out of his reckoning. Frankly and cordially he should have taken the blame on himself, and at once exonerated his noble son."<sup>8</sup> Such an action, however, required a character and godliness that Saul did not possess.

This chapter witnesses the folly of king Saul both frustrating Israel's success and in alienating the king from all of his most loyal followers. His foolish vow alienated him from his son, who could not help but criticize his father before the army. His foolish orders alienated the priest, who awkwardly suggested that Saul seek divine counsel before acting on his plans. Now, Saul's foolish lots alienated him from the mass of the people themselves, who simply would not allow such an outrage of justice to take place.

Just as God's faithful people have sometimes risen up from their pews against an unfaithful pulpit, now Saul's army countered the king's oath with one of their own: "As the Lord lives," indeed, they answered to Saul, "there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground" (1 Sam. 14:45). Saul may be king, so that the soldiers had done their best to obey his foolish commands, but there were limits to what he could demand of them. They would not stand for Jonathan's execution. "Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel?" they demanded. In an obvious affront to their king, they added, "he has worked with God this day." Thus "the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die" (1 Sam. 14:45). Saul's credibility was now completely shattered – a remarkable achievement for a king on a day when God granted so great a victory over his enemies – with the effect that the pursuit came to a complete halt:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 237.

“Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place” (1 Sam. 14:46). The Philistines would survive to fight again, and Saul would never again possess so great an opportunity from the Lord to defend his people.

### SAUL’S FOLLY AND FALL

Modern examples of calamitous folly and precipitous fall, such as Banvard’s folly, pale in comparison to the folly and fall of Israel’s king Saul. His willful sin had resulted in his rejection by the Lord (1 Sam. 13:13-14). Now, his willful folly had resulted in his fall from any hold on credibility as the leader over his nation, even while Saul remained enthroned as king. God would continue to bless the faithful people, as he blessed Jonathan in this battle, so that Saul’s reign would yet witness many successes. But for Saul, all that now remained was a final rejection from the Lord, followed by years of bitter, rebellious power as the king awaited his inevitable judgment.

What lessons should we derive from Saul’s foolish behavior? The first lesson is that our religion must begin with a true saving relationship with the Lord. The recovery of God’s favor requires those who have sinned to humble themselves before the Lord, seeking his grace. The absence of such humble contrition, with a frank admission of his sins and failures, is the glaring omission from the many accounts of Saul’s reign.

The difference between sinful Saul and the sinful David who will follow him as king is the same as the difference between the sinful apostle Peter and the apostate disciple Judas, both of whom betrayed Jesus on the night of his arrest. The difference between David and Peter, on the one hand, and Saul and Judas on the other, is a humility that repents of sin and seeks the Lord’s mercy and grace. David’s great prayer of repentance begins with both a fervent plea for mercy and a trusting faith in God’s offer of forgiveness through the sacrificial blood of Christ: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” (Ps. 51:1-2). David’s faith was looking forward to the true Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, represented by the blood of lambs and goats, who takes away our sin (Jn. 1:29) and restores us to God’s

grace. There was nothing keeping Saul from this same kind of sincere repentance and faith, with the result that he must have been restored to the Lord's favor, except the hardness of his unbelieving heart. Here we see Saul's chief and greatest folly: at every point he resorted to outward shows of religious observance, the point of which was to help him avoid the opening of heart in humble contrition before the Lord.

This is a lesson that applies to every sinner who is beset by the folly of his or her own sin. Do not think that God can be bought off with petty good works, religious formalism, or cash payments. God calls on every sinner to confess his sin and appeal to the blood of the Savior whom God has sent, Jesus Christ. He promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). Jesus renders the verdict on Saul's failed religion: "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk. 18:14). Seeking always to exalt himself, Saul's proud progress is all downwards, whereas if he had lowered himself in humility, the Lord would surely have brought him upwards in true spiritual progress and strength.

Secondly, Saul shows the need for spiritual leaders to be sincerely motivated for God's will and the salvation of God's people, and not for mere self-interested gain. Christian leaders of all kinds, including pastors and parents, who rely solely on the authority of their position, without an inspiring example of faith and a living ministry of God's grace, are as likely to harden their followers against the Lord as they are to lead them into salvation. Consider the remarkable fidelity exhibited by Jonathan and the faithful endurance of Israel's soldiers, who did their best to keep Saul's foolish oath. Yet in the end, the bitter effects of hard-hearted spiritual leadership can only alienate true-hearted followers, so that unfaithful rulers find their strongest opposition in the most faithful servants.

Thirdly, Saul reveals the course of affairs for even the best of us if we are not guided by the revealed Word of God. Notice the absence of the prophet Samuel and the silence of God! Herein lay the Lord's chief judgment on Saul's unbelief. How tragic it is when believers foolishly place ourselves in the same position, by failing to consult

and daily meditate on the precepts of God's Word. Blaikie states the final lesson of Saul's folly, warning us: "What a fearful thing it is to leave God and His ways, and give one's self up to the impulses of one's one heart? Fearful for even the humblest of us, but infinitely fearful for one of great resources and influence, with a whole people under him!"<sup>9</sup> Let us fear, indeed, that such a calamity should befall us, our families, or our churches. Instead, let the wisdom of the Psalms speak the desire of our hearts:

Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all the day long.

Remember your mercy, O LORD...; according to your steadfast love  
remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD! (Ps. 25:4-7).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 240.