

Spiritual Entropy

Introduction to the life of David Pt.7: The Disintegration of Saul 1 Samuel 14

Summary: God handed Saul a victory on a platter (through Jonathan's faith) and Saul turned that victory into a draw. His lack of love for God's will resulted in his disintegration (loss of courage, wisdom, virtue, authority, and success). Movement away from God results in spiritual entropy, which means movement toward Him reverses spiritual entropy! So solve the problem of Saul-itus by seeking God.

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Introduction: Saul in Trouble

If you were here last week you remember that Saul is in deep trouble in Gibeah. He sent almost his whole army home, just keeping a standing force of 3000. And Jonathan attacks the Philistines. The Philistines respond with absolutely staggering force - thousands of chariots, and troops as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They are coming at Israel with chariots, and they have not allowed any blacksmiths in Israel so Israel does not even have swords or spears. With the exception of Saul and Jonathan they had to fight with wooden and stone weapons.

Then the Philistines start a campaign of terror - sending our raiding parties from Micmash in every direction (vv.17-18), to terrorize and demoralize the people – destroy their crops, steal things from them, ruin everything they could ruin, etc. And it worked. The Israelites realize Saul does not have a chance, and they just run and hide in caves and holes in the ground – some even left the country.

And the soldiers are scared too. Saul's tiny little army starts to fall apart, and 80% of them defect. So now he is down to 600. The Philistine camp is at Micmash, which controls the roads from the north. So Saul is completely pinned down. He has the largest recorded Philistine army camped less than two miles away and all hope of assistance from the northern tribes is cut off.

Then the Philistines begin to tighten the noose.²³ Now a detachment of Philistines had gone out to the pass at Micmash. They are starting to make their move toward where Saul is. Guarding this pass was strategic, because it completely bottled Saul up. Now if Saul tries to go this way, as soon as his men started trying to climb up the steep cliffs to the pass the Philistines could pick them off like shooting fish in a barrel.

We are about to read about a big time battle between the Philistines and the Israelites. This whole chapter is about that battle. But the focus of the chapter is not primarily a military one.

What this chapter shows us is what happens to a man who has been blessed by God, whose heart has been changed by God, who has been made into a new man, and who has been given the Holy Spirit and the promise of success by God - what happens to a man like that when his heart begins to cool toward God? What happens when a man comes to the point where he is very committed to God, but he doesn't have a heart after God's own heart? He is devoted to serving the Lord, but in his heart he does not really love the things God loves.

God hands Saul a victory

1 Sam.14:1 One day Jonathan son of Saul said to the young man bearing his armor, "Come, let's go..."

The armor bearer was probably an apprentice who not only carried weapons but also fought alongside the one he was carrying weapons for. (At least this one did)

Jonathan ... said to the young man bearing his armor, "Come, let's go over to the Philistine outpost¹ on the other side." But he did not tell his father.

Jonathan is going to go down into this deep canyon and climb up to where the Philistine garrison is. How are Jonathan and his armor bearer going to pull that off with that detachment of Philistine soldiers there?

The writer will just let you wonder about that for a minute. He lets the suspense build while he gives us a little side comment in verses two and three, where he explains to us that instead of consulting Samuel, Saul now has a priest from the rejected line of Eli with him. God's Word came out of the mouth of Samuel, and Saul did not like it. And so he found someone else.

It is a really bad sign when a person hears someone proclaim the truth of God and their reaction is anything other than delight. When someone hears the words of God and says, "I do not need anyone telling me what to do!" and takes no delight in them, and rejects the human instrument through whom those words come – that comes from a heart that does not love the will of God.

Anyway, while Saul is busy seeking alternatives to God's Word Jonathan is on the move with his armor bearer heading toward the Philistine outpost.

3 ...No one was aware that Jonathan had left. ⁴ On each side of the pass that Jonathan intended to cross to reach the Philistine outpost was a cliff ... ⁵ One cliff stood to the north toward Micmash, the other to the south toward Geba.

⁶ Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few."

There's something really delightful about watching someone act in faith, isn't there? This is almost exactly like David with Goliath. "Why don't we just go right up to the detachment of soldiers? Sure there is a whole detachment of them and just two of us, but their uncircumcised Philistines - they don't have any covenant with God." Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant promises to Israel. Jonathan is operating on the basis of God's promises. His decision making process is governed not by the fact that it is two men against 3000 chariots and countless infantry. His decision making process is driven by God's great and precious promises. That is what it means to walk by faith – to have your decision making process be driven more by the great and precious promises of God than by what your physical eyes see and your human wisdom tells you. Examine your life and ask yourself: "Is it obvious from the kinds of decisions I make that I am

¹ Same word as "detachment" in 13:23.

operating off God's promises rather than what is seen? When I make a decision about whether to share my faith, what do to in a certain social context, how I serve in the Church, how I approach my devotions, they way I approach my work - are those decisions made on the basis of confidence in God's promises?

The armor bearer is just as faithful.

⁷ "Do all that you have in mind," his armor-bearer said. "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul." ⁸ Jonathan said, "Come, then; we will cross over toward the men and let them see us. ⁹ If they say to us, 'Wait there until we come to you,' we will stay where we are and not go up to them. ¹⁰ But if they say, 'Come up to us,' we will climb up, because that will be our sign that the LORD has given them into our hands."

God has promised to bless Israel, however there is no guarantee that this particular battle will go Israel's way. And Jonathan is not presumptuous. Presumption is when you trust in something God has not promised. For example, suppose a person applies for a new job and before he hears anything back he quits his old job. And he says, "I'm trusting God to give me this new job." That is not faith – it is foolish presumption, because God has not promised that particular job. God has promised to take care of you in general, but no verse in Scripture says you will get that particular job. And so saying you are trusting God to give it to you makes you guilty of putting words in God's mouth. Don't ever trust in a promise God never actually made.

And we see here that Jonathan is careful not to be presumptuous. It would be presumptuous for them to just start climbing up the cliff. It would be so easy for the Philistines to pick them off while they were climbing up, Jonathan needs to know if this is something God will bless.

So here is Jonathan's idea: they will show themselves to the Philistines. If the Philistines invite them up, allowing them safe passage into the camp, then the whole obstacle of the cliff is removed. If that happens Jonathan will take it as an indication that the Lord will bless this. If the Lord gives you a free pass to enter right inside the enemy's camp, that is a pretty good indication that He will empower you to do some damage in that camp.

And that is good news for most of you. I know there are a lot of you who through some shrewd maneuverings and the blessing of God have been able to actually penetrate right into the heart of the enemy's camp. Many of you are allowed to walk right into the middle of some of Satan's outposts and spend 40 hours a week in there. The whole time you are in there you can be working to undermine the enemy's work in the hearts of his people – and they even pay you to do it! Others of you are going to school – same thing. You have a free pass right into the middle of the enemy's camp. Be like Jonathan and start doing some damage – the Lord is with you.

The Philistines tell them to come on up, so up they go. And once they get up there, just Jonathan *unloads* on these Philistines. Rock climbing is extremely tiring. And yet even after climbing up a cliff carrying weapons they still have enough strength to just *wax* this whole detachment of soldiers.

13 ...The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer followed and killed behind him.

I don't know if this is some kind of arrangement where Jonathan said, "I will cut off their arms, then you finish them off." Or if they were just back to back just cutting down any Philistine that got close.

¹⁴ In that first attack Jonathan and his armor-bearer killed some twenty men in an area of about half an acre.

Imagine you are one of those soldiers - relaxed, minding your own business, reading a comic book, and all of the sudden there's some shouting and swords are drawn, and you hear those gruesome sounds of the impact of a sword against flesh that you know so well from past battles, and the whole place is in instant chaos, and there is shouting and chaos and dead bodies all over and severed arms and heads rolling by, and blood everywhere. And you look up and this wild-

eyed Hebrew maniac with his armor bearer are coming right at you with their swords going like a couple of lawnmower blades - and you are running before you even get a chance to grab your gear. And the more soldiers who start running the bigger the panic gets.

15 Then panic struck the whole army-- those in the camp and field, and those in the outposts and raiding parties-- and the ground shook. It was a panic sent by God.

Even the Philistines that are not even there – the ones in Micmash and the raiding parties - all of them freak out. For one thing there is the mass slaughter at the pass, for another thing the ground is now shaking, and on top of that is the fact that God just simply put them into a panic.

A peaceful, sound mind is God's doing. It is always a gracious gift from God – even for an unbeliever. And so if God lifts a little bit of that grace, then peace and sound thinking are gone, and your whole mind and spirit just come unglued. And that is exactly what happened. This is God's response to faith. God was just as powerful an hour earlier, and His promises were just as valid, but the Philistines were just fine. But as soon as a faithful man acts on faith God's power is unleashed.

So God puts the entire Philistine army into a panicked retreat. And the only one chasing them is Jonathan (and his buddy). It is like when Han Solo was chasing all the Storm Troopers in the Death Star all by himself. (Except in that scene, when the Storm Troopers finally turned around, he started running away and they chased him. But if any of these Philistines stopped and turned around – whack! – off went their head.)

You get the feeling from reading Samuel that it is really pretty easy to inflict serious harm on a retreating, panicking army. And so all the Jews come out of hiding and join in the chase. God is handing the Philistines to Saul on a platter here. Saul did not even have to do anything. Just because of the courage and faith of Jonathan, Saul gets a great victory wrapped up in a bow in spite of his disobedience to God. Now all he has to do is go take care of the mop up operation. Let's see how he manages with that, starting in verse 16.

Saul implodes, turns victory to defeat

Hesitation – loss of courage

16 Saul's lookouts at Gibeah in Benjamin saw the (Philistine) army melting away in all directions.

At this point Saul finally figures out that Jonathan is missing.

18 Saul said to Ahijah, "Bring the ark² of God." (At that time it was with the Israelites.)

Saul picks this moment to seek God's guidance. Almost everything Saul does in this whole section just makes you scratch your head. Of all the times to decide to seek God's guidance! Why was he not already doing that?

Sometimes when people are reluctant to obey God they camouflage their disobedience with prayer. The Bible is absolutely crystal clear on what should be done, and they say, "We need to pray for guidance" and they do nothing. Beware of prayer that is an excuse for laziness or disobedience. In this chapter Saul is always praying when he should be acting, and acting when he should be praying. He is always one step out of sync with whatever is going on.

So Ahijah begins the ceremony³ to seek God's guidance. He has his hand stretched out – probably inside the compartment of the ephod with the Urim and Thumim, and suddenly Saul decides he does not want to wait any longer, and so he interrupts!

² Possibly ephod

Disinterest – loss of love for God’s will

¹⁹ While Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the Philistine camp increased more and more. So Saul said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand."

He hears the noise, gets impatient, and cuts the process off right in the middle. What a contrast between this and what happened back in chapter seven. Remember? The people were all repenting and seeking God, and Samuel was praying and offering a sacrifice to express their repentance, and right then the Philistines were rushing them. But instead of running or hiding or trying to fight they just kept right on with their worship, and God delivered them. But Saul cannot wait, and so he just interrupts and says, "Let's go after them."

Saul used to be so patient. God anointed Him as king, crowned him publicly, promised him success at whatever he put his hand to, and still Saul was very strategic and patient and just plowed his fields and worked his farm until just the right time. Now he cannot even wait for this ceremony to get over. What happened to his calm, steady patience and keen sense of timing? Saul is like the Israelites in the wilderness:

Ps.106:12-13 they believed his promises and sang his praise. 13 But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel.

They did not wait – that is, they were not eager to hear God’s Word, and they started going after substitutes. That is exactly what has happened to Saul here. He is obviously not interested in God’s Word. And when a person’s heart stops loving God’s Word, that person becomes a fool.

Pr.18:2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

Pr.1:7 fools think little of wisdom and discipline.

A fool is someone who, instead of finding pleasure in the Word of God, thinks little of it.

This is what happens to a man who is committed to God but who does not love God’s will. What happened to Saul’s keen sense of timing? When his love for God’s Word cooled off, foolishness took over and wisdom and sound judgment were gone.

²⁰ Then Saul and all his men assembled and went to the battle. They found the Philistines in total confusion, striking each other with their swords.

All Saul has to do is chase them.

²³ So the LORD rescued Israel that day, and the battle moved on beyond Beth Aven.

Foolish oath – loss of wisdom

²⁴ Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, "Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!" So none of the troops tasted food.

³ Probably this involved the Urim and Thumim, which seems to have been like a heads or tails kind of process (except instead of heads and tails it may have been a white and black stone). Some speculate that they would shake the Urim and Thumim inside a compartment of the ephod, and then the priest would reach his hand in and randomly pick one without looking. They would ask God a yes or no question, and if the "yes" rock came out a bunch of times in a row, they would take that as a yes.

Ever have one of those days when every idea you have turns out to be dumb? For some reason it seems smart at the time, but when you look back on it you think, “What on earth was I thinking?” That is how this day is going for Saul. He gets the bright idea to call a fast right in the middle of a battle for no apparent reason. Maybe he thought he needed to do something religious to make up for interrupting the ceremony with the ark, and he wanted something he could do on the move. But whatever his reasoning, this is not a fitting time for a fast – they need their strength. A fast in preparation for a battle? - Probably a good idea. A fast *during* a battle? - Dumb. (Especially a fast with no purpose)

The wheels are starting to come off the wagon for Saul here. Foolishness is overtaking him. That is what happens to a man who loves his own wisdom more than God’s Word.

Pr.26:12 Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

If you read the book of Proverbs you know there is almost no hope for a fool. A fool is headed for unmitigated disaster. But a person who is more impressed with his own wisdom than with God’s Word – he is in for even worse disaster. That is what is happening to Saul.

Isa.48:18 If only you had inclined your ear to my commands, your SHALOM would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.

SHALOM refers to overall soundness and well-being, general welfare, wholeness, blessedness. You incline your ears to things you want to hear. If Saul had loved the Word of God and desired to hear it, he would have had SHALOM like a river. But Saul is experiencing the exact opposite of SHALOM.

And it just keeps getting worse all the way through the chapter. In verse 27 Jonathan, who does not know about the ban on eating, eats some honey, and regains his strength. So now Jonathan, through a perfectly innocent action, is now under Saul’s curse.

Meanwhile the soldiers are really getting weak. They had just chased the Philistines for 20 miles in rugged country, with no food.

³¹ That day, after the Israelites had struck down the Philistines from Micmash to Aijalon, they were exhausted.

Saul’s eating ban was until evening, so as soon as the sun goes down they can eat. So when the sun finally does go down the ravenous soldiers start devouring the food like animals there in Aijalon. (By the way, Aijalon is the place where the sun stood still for Joshua so he could finish his rout of the Amorites in Joshua ten. Anyway, they pounce on the food and wolf it down, and in doing so they violate God’s dietary laws. They were supposed to take the time to drain the blood out of the meat first, but they are so hungry they just killed and ate. This gets pointed out to Saul, and he rebukes them and sets up a mechanism for proper preparation of the meat according to the law. (Remember, Saul is very committed to God and His Law. He just does not love it.)

Reckless action – loss of mercy and grace

Once everyone has eaten, Saul decides he wants to go after the Philistines again. But the priest suggests maybe they should inquire of the Lord and see if it is what God wants them to do. So they do, and God does not answer right away. And Saul immediately assumes someone must have sinned.⁴ (It doesn’t seem to occur to Saul that it might be himself! Saul’s first impulse is always to point his finger at someone else instead of himself.)

⁴ This is an interesting showdown between Saul and Jonathan. Both considered the other a kind of an Achen. When Jonathan said that his father had “made trouble” for the country in v.28 he used the Hebrew word AKAR (“trouble”). That was the same word used to describe Achen’s actions in Josh.7:26.

So Saul vows that whoever's fault this is will die. When it finally comes out that Jonathan ate some honey, Saul utters these unbelievable words:

44 Saul said, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan."

He will not back off of his foolish vow, and ends up painting himself into a corner so that he has to actually kill his own son in order to save face. And so he is ready to kill Jonathan. This is what happens in the life of someone who does not love the will of God.

Pr.14:16 a fool is hotheaded and reckless.

As you move away from the will of God the calmness and wisdom that enables good decisions just evaporates. And instead you start making rash, reckless moves that cause all kinds of unintended problems.

And not only do wisdom and patience go, but so do other virtues – like forgiveness and mercy. Remember what Saul was like back in chapter 11, shortly after God changed his heart and made him a new man? They were going to put to death the treasonous traitors who did not want him to be king and spoke out against him right on his very coronation day. And Saul said,

"No one shall be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel." (11:13)

Now the LORD had given them an even greater victory, and he is ready to put his own son to death for eating honey. What happened to Saul's ability to overlook an offense?

Pr.12:16 A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.

These are the kinds of things that happen to you when you become a fool.

We are watching the disintegration of Saul. It is an account of a battle with the Philistines, but after the opening verses the Philistines are not even seen. They are not seen because the battle started with them running away! It is pretty bad when the tide turns and the battle starts going against you - and your opponent is not even there! Reading this chapter is like watching Don Knotts shooting himself in the foot.

Mutiny - Loss of respect and authority

And just when you think it cannot get any worse for Saul, it does in verse 45. Back in chapter 11 the men wanted to kill the traitors and Saul said no, now Saul wants to put someone to death and the men say no.

45 But the men said to Saul, "Should Jonathan die-- he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never! As surely as the LORD lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he did this today with God's help." So the men redeemed Jonathan, and he was not put to death.⁵

Saul's authority is crumbling now. For this to happen to a king is absolutely devastating. His declaration about Jonathan's death sentence was as strongly worded as it could be. "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if Jonathan doesn't die." And the soldiers just mutiny.

Never! As surely as the LORD lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground,

⁵ This is an important passage on the limitations of the kingship. When the Lord curses someone he is cursed indeed (Gn.12:3), but when someone falls under Saul's curse, it may or may not happen.

Nobody is afraid of Saul anymore. They used to fear and respect and honor him – but that is slipping away.

Pr.26:1 Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool.

He used to be revered. When Saul gave a command back in chapter 11 (verse 7)

the terror of the LORD fell on the people.

They really took him seriously then. Now he is a joke. This is what happens to a guy who thinks little of God's Word.

Destruction of God's gift – loss of success

Well that really demoralized Saul. When his men do that, Saul just drops his whole idea about continuing after the Philistines altogether. He lets them go and just turns around and heads home.

⁴⁶ Then Saul stopped pursuing the Philistines, and they withdrew to their own land.

God gives him the easiest victory imaginable – served up on a platter, and Saul manages to turn it into a draw. He takes this wonderful gift from God and destroys it.

Pr.14:1 The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.

That is what happens to a man or woman who does not delight in the will of God – he tears apart the very blessings God gives him. As you drift toward foolishness you find yourself destroying your own family, your friends, your church – everything you touch.

I said a moment ago this chapter is about the *disintegration* of Saul. That is what happens as you move away from the heart of God – dis-integration. Integration is when all the parts are put together. *Disintegration* is when it all falls apart. Saul is disintegrating.

His mind is going. His judgment is terrible. His efforts all end in disaster – even when he tries to do something good. Virtues like patience and mercy and forgiveness and understanding and wisdom and faith have evaporated. He used to be marked by those things, now he is just the opposite. He went from being a godly, wise, successful leader to being a foolish, bumbling, sinful, pathetic stumble bum. Before, everything he put his hand to was a success. Now everything he touches falls apart. He lost his courage. He lost wisdom and sound judgment. He lost his mercy and grace. He lost authority the people's respect. He no longer enjoyed success at what he put his hand to. And ultimately he lost the whole kingdom and the favor of God.

Our Beautiful, integrating God

This is a painful and ugly thing to watch happen to Saul, but it points us to something that is really quite beautiful and encouraging. If this kind of disintegration is what happens when someone moves away from God, what do you suppose happens to you as you move nearer to God? Integration! Everything starts to come together. Your thinking clears, your efforts find success, wisdom increases, virtues start coming together. You find yourself like Saul in chapter 11, it is easy to be patient, easy to be magnanimous, easy to be gracious, easy to be humble. (Or if we want to use a more biblical term, instead of integration - SHALOM? That word describes the same thing – overall soundness, welfare, safety, strength, wholeness, security, well-being.)

Ps.119:165 Those who love Your law have great SHALOM, And nothing causes them to stumble.

What an amazing being God is! He is so good that as you move nearer and nearer to Him the spiritual entropy of life is reversed. As Saul moves away from God the spiritual Second Law of Thermodynamics pulls him apart. And so if you move nearer to God it works the other way. Nearness to God brings about the re-ordering and re-structuring and re-constitution of life – godliness, wisdom, clear thinking, success (in spiritual things), wellbeing, wholeness – it all comes together. God is so good that all it takes is simply nearness to His presence. Just as any nearness to the sun will turn even the coldest thing hot, and the darkest thing bright; so nearness to God fills the soul with SHALOM.

This should be a source of great joy in our lives. Any time you experience frustration in your life because of fragmentation and spiritual entropy – important work not getting done, loose ends all over the place, forgetfulness, poor decisions, foiled efforts, lousy judgment, wasted days – your life just kind of spinning out of control (or sliding off into the ditch); let that feeling of frustration just stoke and intensify your desire to draw nearer to God.

Think about it: The reason you are exasperated or frustrated is because you have a desire that is not being met – a desire for SHALOM – general, overall wellbeing and blessing and a life that is coming together instead of falling apart. The reason you are frustrated is because you desire that and you are not experiencing it. When you realize that, and you also realize that SHALOM happens as a result of drawing near to God, think of the desire for God that will generate in your heart. Think of how much easier it will be for you to really appreciate what it is that is so wonderful about this SHALOM-producing attribute of God.

If you use frustration to remind yourself of this then your frustration can serve to actually fuel the fire of your desire for God. Your biggest frustration can actually be harnessed to serve to increase your desire, and hunger and thirst for God. That is how you use the pain and irritation and agitation of life to increase your delight in God and your joy in Him. However frustrated you are when you lack this kind of SHALOM in your life - however unhappy that makes you – that is how important SHALOM is to you, which means that is how delightful it would be to experience God's presence in your life.

Saul did not understand that. But the man after God's own heart did. Listen to David in Psalm 18 – he knew where SHALOM came from:

Ps.18:32-36 It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. ³³ He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights. ³⁴ He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze... ³⁶ You broaden the path beneath me, so that my ankles do not turn.

Sometimes we are weak and sometimes we are strong – the difference is God's grace. Sometimes your way is messed up, blocked, circuitous, a maze of dead ends, muddy, sandy, rough; other times it is smooth and wide and easy to find – the difference is nearness to God.

And the point of that is not that the closer you are to God the easier your life gets. That is the opposite of the truth. The closer you are to God the harder your life gets in many ways. When David says that God made his way perfect he certainly was not saying God made his life easy. He spent his whole life literally dodging the spears and arrows of people trying to kill him, including his own king – the Lord's anointed! David's life was incredibly hard and painful – so hard and so painful it often brought this mighty man of valor to tears. And yet he says "You make my way perfect."

Perfect does not mean easy or painless. Perfect in this context means successful. The closer you get to God the more successful your life gets in your efforts to walk in God's way. Not necessarily successful in earthly things, but in spiritual things. As you try to walk on the path of righteousness and holiness and wisdom, you get traction. As you attempt to fulfill your calling, your feet get traction.

Sometimes when we try to serve the Lord and walk in his way our feet are like a drunk, or a toddler learning to walk; other times they are like a mountain goat on the rocks. The difference is

nearness to God. As David ran across the rugged country in battle the difference between his foot slipping and falling and him getting killed, or his foot not slipping and David standing firm might be one centimeter. He does not have time to look down as he is fighting, but if his foot “just happens” to land on a loose pebble rather than a centimeter away where there is a course firm surface it could be the difference between enough or not enough traction to stand. The “luck” of placing his foot in one spot or a centimeter over could mean life or death.

Sometimes your foot slips. You try to say something to someone and you end up stepping on a pebble and slipping – the words that come out just are not quite right and you bumble your way into hurting them or creating a costly misunderstanding. Other times your thoughts are clear. You can easily think of the right words, and the ones you pick “just happen” to be the right combination for that particular person at that particular moment. The difference is God’s grace.

Sometimes the path seems too narrow beneath you feet, so that you keep stumbling and falling. Every few steps your foot steps off into selfishness or anger or lust or worry or pride. Other times the path widens under you and your efforts to walk in the right way are successful. The difference is grace.

You and I are in a war that makes the ancient Israelite battles look like a thumb wrestling match. We have to do battle with unseen, cosmic powers of evil in the heavenly realms. Sometimes we seem to suffer only defeat after defeat – our feet slip everywhere we step. Other times you are strong - your arms can bend a bow of bronze. The difference is all God’s special grace.

Therefore: Seek grace!

What do you do when you start to come down with a case of Saul-itus? How do you solve the problem of foolishness overtaking your life? Many Christians, when they start to get a case of Saul-itus (their life starts falling apart, dumb decisions, virtues decreasing, spiritual stumbling, spiritual entropy just destroying their life), they run to human wisdom to solve the problem! They run to psychology or secular self-help books, or Christian books full of human, worldly wisdom, or philosophy, or yoga – human wisdom. Human wisdom is not the solution to the problem – human wisdom is the *cause* of the problem! It all happened to Saul because he started preferring his own human wisdom to God’s Word.

The practical implications of this for the way you live your life are profound. We are not naturally inclined to seek more after God when our life starts spinning out of control. Most of us are inclined in the opposite direction. If my life starts spinning out of control I am prone to decrease my time spent seeking God so I can focus on getting everything back on track. Instead of seeking hard after God I work longer hours and spend more time trying to fix this problem and that problem, and none of it works because without SHALOM from God my foot just keeps slipping.

But if I really believe this principle then the more out of control my life gets the more passionately I will seek after God. For example, when I am especially busy and behind in my work and I am really feeling the pressure, my natural inclination is to cut short my time alone with the Lord. And even if I do not cut it short, it is not as fruitful as other times because I am distracted with thoughts about how much work I have to get done. So in my flesh I want to rush out of God’s presence so I can get busy serving Him. But if the principle of chapter 14 is really true, then my only chance of getting my work done on time will be if I have SHALOM – if I have strength, and clarity of thought, and circumstances fall into place the right way, and I have discipline and stamina, and I do not get a lot of unexpected interruptions, and my brain does not start going off on one distraction after another. And every one of those things can be obtained only through special acts of God’s grace. And I will receive that in abundance when I seek hard after God. For me to get my work done the path is going to have to be widened and smoothed, and I am going to have to be strengthened and enabled. And the main way that will happen is through nearness to God. As we approach closer to His presence all of those things come together. When we feel we need to cut short our seeking after God so we can get our work done

we reveal a heart that thinks the source of success in our work is us, not Him. God forgive us for that blasphemy

SHALOM is something that seems too good to be true. Having the spiritual 2nd Law of Thermodynamics reversed would be so amazing, it just seems too good to be true. And yet it happens. And what does it take to bring about such a massive upheaval of the natural order of things? What huge, awesome, cataclysmic, power is required? Just nearness to God! We serve a God who is that good! He is so good, nearness to Him is all it takes! Try to spend the next seven days of your life desiring, craving, hungering and thirsting for, seeking, and then enjoying and delighting in God's SHALOM-giving presence.

Benediction: 2 Thes.3:16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

The Disintegration of Saul:

1 Samuel 14 Day 1

As Saul moved away from the Lord his whole life came apart at the seams.

2 With Saul were about six hundred men, ³ among whom was Ahijah ... a son of Ichabod's brother Ahitub son of Phinehas, the son of Eli

Saul's lookouts at Gibeah in Benjamin saw the army melting away in all directions. ... ¹⁸ Saul said to Ahijah, "Bring the ark of God." ... the tumult in the Philistine camp increased more and more. So Saul said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand." ²⁰ Then Saul and all his men assembled and went to the battle.

²⁴ Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, "Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!"

²⁹ Jonathan said, "My father has made trouble for the country.

³⁶ Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them till dawn, and let us not leave one of them alive." ... But God did not answer him that day.

⁴⁴ Saul said, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan." ⁴⁵ But the men ... ⁴⁵ ... rescued Jonathan, and he was not put to death.

⁴⁶ Then Saul stopped pursuing the Philistines, and they withdrew to their own land

The more Saul moved away from the Lord the more his whole life fell apart. He went from having wise, keen judgment to bumbling and stumbling from one poor decision to another. He went from enjoying success in whatever he put his hand to, to having everything he touched turn into a disaster – even when he tried to do something good. He went from having virtue flow out of him seemingly naturally, to greatly lacking those very same virtues (patience, courage, faith, humility, forgiveness, understanding, wisdom, obedience, etc.).

Good morning dear Father, Source of all light and goodness and virtue and understanding. If movement away from You means the disintegration of life, then movement toward You must have the opposite effect – the re-ordering and re-structuring and re-constitution of life – godliness, wisdom, clear thinking, success, wellbeing, wholeness. You are so good that all it takes to transform a wicked, worthless worm of a man like me into something that resembles the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (!) is simply nearness to You. Just as any nearness to the sun will turn even the coldest thing hot, and the darkest thing bright; so nearness to You makes the soul become like Christ. Oh dear Lord, let me be close to You! I want to be near You. I want to know You and see Your glory and love You with all that I am. It grieves me, dear God, that almost every time I consider some truth about You like this one, it is such a massive effort to come to the place where it really thrills my heart. Oh, that I could crucify this dead, blind flesh and be instantly and fully delighted by that which ought to instantly and fully delight me! My sin is such an anchor – dulling my whole being to You. Cleanse me dear God. Wash me and make me clean and free from all that would hinder my vision of You. It should make me happy beyond words – happy enough to shout and dance, to know that You are a God like this – a God so good that any approaching of Your presence causes virtue and soundness of mind and spirit to come together and increase and flourish.

I want nearness to You, that I might tell of all Your wonderful works. I want it not because my main goal is the “integration” of life and the blessing that results from drawing close to You, but just because I want to be as close as possible to a God like that. Lord, let me know You with a knowledge more intimate and profound than I’ve ever had before of You. Draw me close. Burn away all that hinders me from approaching You.

Any time I experience frustration because of fragmentation and spiritual entropy in my life – important work not getting done, loose ends all over the place, forgetfulness, poor decisions, foiled efforts, wasted days – let that frustration just stoke and intensify my desire to be nearer to You.

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: You are the God who is so good that mere nearness to you brings all the chaos of life into order and goodness

Promise to trust: You will allow me to approach close to You if I do so earnestly

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Greater love and desire for God (and all those He loves), Peace, wisdom, success

The Faith of Jonathan

1 Samuel 14 Day 2

This chapter contrasts Jonathan with Saul. Jonathan acted in faith. He delighted in God’s promises to deliver Israel. Saul preferred his own wisdom. Jeremiah was another man who loved God’s Words.

Jer.15:16 Your words were found, and I ate them. Your words became a delight to me and the joy of my heart

A couple verses later he describes the seemingly unbearable pain that those words caused him. God's Word brought suffering to his life, but he loved them nonetheless. He thought of them like delicious food that he couldn't wait to gobble up. And the man who loves, trusts, and acts of God's Word finds God's power working mightily through him.

6 Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few."

Oh, what a delightful, refreshing thing it is, dear God, to see someone act in faith! We love to read stories like this or David and Goliath. After chapters and chapters of people who turn from You or follow You half-heartedly, doubting, hesitating, trusting in themselves – it is a breath of fresh air when we get to a chapter like this. Let my life be a breath of fresh air amid the smog of indifference and unbelief all around me dear God. Make me a man of faith. Give me great faith. Teach my heart to love Your Word – not just to love learning new, interesting insights, but loving the fact that it reveals Your heart and is the doorway into intimacy with You. Teach me to love that. Teach me to love not just the information I get from Scripture, but also the sound of Your voice – the fact that it is coming from Your heart.

Father You are indeed a God who cannot be hindered from saving, whether by many or by few. You do not need many. It sure seems to me like many are needed though. It seems like we need many in our youth group in order for the students to be able to have good Christian fellowship with someone their own age. It seems like we need many singles for single people to find a spouse. It seems like we need many skilled musicians and many voices to have rapturous praise that assists our emotions in delighting in You. And normally it seems that's how You work. Most of the time You use more than just 2 men to defeat an army more numerous than the sand on the seashore. But if You so desire You can do the work with any number.

Dear Father, I ask You for more youth and young adults and singles and children and leaders and musicians and people with the gifts of mercy and compassion and teaching and giving and discernment – people who can write and organize and sing and govern and lead and comfort and admonish. Please grant us more of Your grace dispensed through Your people dear God. But if not, or if not for now, then for now please grant us more of Your grace some other way. Nothing can stop You from glorifying Your name by filling us up with great joy and satisfaction in You and drowning us in Your grace and with Your river of delights – nothing can hinder You from doing that whether by many or by few. Dear Father, help us to keep our focus set on gaining more of Your grace, nothing else. And make us men and women of great faith. I pray that anyone who would read about the way we acted at Agape Bible Church in 2007 would be as delighted as we are when we read about Jonathan in 1 Sam.14.

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: You are the God who cannot be hindered in doing Your work, whether by many or by few.

Promise to trust: You will work mightily if I love Your Word enough to act in faith

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Courage, boldness, zeal, motivation

The Disintegration of Saul

1 Samuel 14 Day 3

God anointed Saul as king, crowned him publicly, promised him success at whatever he put his hand to, and still Saul was very strategic and patient and just plowed his fields and worked his farm until just the right time. But in chapter 14 he cannot even wait for the ceremony of inquiring of the LORD to get

over. He interrupts it to act on his own wisdom. What happened to his calm, steady patience and keen sense of timing? Saul had become like the Israelites in the wilderness:

Ps.106:12-13 they believed his promises and sang his praise. 13 But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his counsel.

Isa.48:18 If only you had inclined your ear to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.

We incline our ears to things we want to hear. If Saul had loved the Word of God and desired to hear it, he would have had peace like a river. But when a person's heart stops loving God's Word, that person becomes a fool.

Pr.18:2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

Pr.1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools think little of wisdom and discipline.

A fool is someone who, instead of finding pleasure in the Word of God, thinks little of it. This is what happens to a man who is committed to God but who doesn't love God's will. What happened to Saul's keen sense of timing? When his love for God's Word cooled off, foolishness crept in.

Oh Holy One in Heaven, please protect me from doing what Saul and the Israelites in the wilderness did. They believed Your promises and sang Your praise, but then soon forgot what You had done and did not wait for Your counsel. I am believing Your promises and singing Your praises now, and I know how prone I am to forget about You. What they did in the desert I do most every day. I come before You in the morning and worship You and fix my thoughts on You and seek Your presence, and to the degree I find it I take delight in it. But sometimes just a half hour later my mind is so wrapped up in earthly things that whatever attribute was thrilling my heart in my prayer time is the farthest thing from my mind. When I'm finally reminded to seek You sometimes it takes a few moments for me to even remember what that attribute is. And then when I do, it seems that I'm getting so that I run in through my head in kind of a perfunctory procedure that isn't anything close to real communion with You.

It is so hard, dear God. My puny little brain seems so unable to handle the tasks of the day while still paying conscious attention to You. Oh help me! Teach me! Give me experiences of Your presence so wonderful that my mind wants to keep reverting back to thinking about it. Please, dear Father. For the sake of Your great name do this. Show Yourself beautiful and desirable in my affections. Let everyone see how marvelous and satisfying You are by my love for You.

And teach me what it means to wait for Your counsel – to eagerly desire and anticipate it, and to refuse any substitutes.

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: You are the God whose counsel is so good it is to be eagerly desired and anticipated and preferred over any substitute.

Promise to trust: You will give it to me if I wait in this way

What will result if I experience this attribute today: I will be given insight by His counsel

The Disintegration of Saul:

1 Samuel 14 Day 4

Saul makes a foolish vow that ends up putting his own son under his curse, and then instead of admitting his own foolishness Saul says, “**May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan.**”

Pr.14:16 a fool is hotheaded and reckless.

Pr.12:16 A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.

Pr.26:12 Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

These are the kinds of things that happen to you when you become a fool. Before Saul was able to overlook an offense and be magnanimous and forgive. He gave amnesty to those who had committed treason and saves them from death. Now he can't even overlook an inadvertent violation of a stupid vow, and rather than admit his own foolishness he is ready (and seemingly eager) to kill his own son!

These are the kinds of things I'm inviting upon myself when I move away from You, dear God. Each time I prefer something to Your presence, each time I neglect prayer because I would rather do something else, each time I turn the means of seeking You into empty routines because my soul is too lazy to really seek You – whenever I do any of that I am moving toward foolishness.

The picture You have painted of the lot of the fool is so horrible. Dear God, open my eyes to the horror of it so I will have still more motivation to seek hard after You. I want to be able to overlook an insult. I don't want to be reckless and foolish, so that my rash decisions result in disaster like Saul's. I want to have clear thinking and for my decisions to have good results. And I know that kind of soundness of mind comes only from nearness to You. The ability to overlook offenses comes only through nearness to You.

Dear Lord, I want to have a beautiful disposition – like Saul's was after Your changed his heart and made Him a new man. I don't want an ugly spirit like Saul's became when his love for Your will began to wane. And I know the heart beauty comes only through nearness to Your presence. Oh Lord, teach me how to remain in Your presence all day long. Teach me the joyful shout of Ps.89:15,16 that, if I learn it, will result in me walking in the light of Your presence, rejoicing in Your name all day long, and exulting in Your righteousness. That's what I want dear Father. Oh how I want that. Please, teach me!

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: You are the God who is so good that mere nearness to you brings virtues like patience and forgiveness, and soundness of mind.

Promise to trust: You will give me those things if I love Your will

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Peace, soundness of mind, ability to forgive

The Disintegration of Saul:

1 Samuel 14 Day 5

⁴⁶ Then Saul stopped pursuing the Philistines, and they withdrew to their own land.

God gave Saul the easiest victory imaginable – served up on a platter, and Saul managed to turn it into a draw. He takes this wonderful gift and destroys it.

Pr.14:1 The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.

Save Your servant, Oh God, from tearing down the very gifts You have given me. How often have I done what the foolish woman does in quite literal terms – through harsh or unloving words, or by neglect I have torn down my own household. Instead of building my kids and my wife up, I have torn them down. I've acted like an child who takes pleasure in knocking down the structure of blocks someone else is trying to build.

And not just my household. I've destroyed so many of Your marvelous gifts to me! Oh dear God, forgive me! I have so often sinned and provoked You to chastise me, inviting ruin upon that which You meant to be a delightful gesture of Your love to bring joy to my heart. You have given me wonderful days, days of health and life and time and strength, surrounded by beauty and all kinds of resources; and I've torn those gifts to pieces by using it all for worthless or sinful ends. You hand me victory on a platter and I manage to turn it into a draw, or even defeat.

Oh dear Father in heaven, save me from that today. This day is so beautiful thus far. Nothing has touched it to ruin it. It is so full of potential for me to walk with You. So full of potential for me to enjoy Your grace and love flowing through me to others. So full of potential for me to make progress in delighting in the experience of Your attributes. So full of potential for me to prefer Your presence over the pleasures of sin. So full of potential for me to speak about You and the wonderful things You have done. So full of potential for me to walk in integrity and righteousness before You. So full of potential for me to have the honor of joyfully working at a task assigned by You. Oh dear God, hold back my hand when I take this amazing gift of this day and start to tear it down. Hold back my hand. Let me not defile this holy and sacred day, the day in which I met in the morning with my God.

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: You are the God who gives good gifts

Promise to trust: You will grant me enjoyment of these gifts if I do not tear them down.

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Joy and pleasure!