

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 14

TESTING



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

Saul's bizarre behavior creates a test for Jonathan. He doesn't want to believe terrible things about his father, but he goes along with David's plan to sound out Saul's intentions.

To his credit, Jonathan does the right thing.

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1 1 Samuel 18:30–19:7

Then the princes of the Philistines went out to war. And so it was, whenever they went out, that David behaved more wisely than all the servants of Saul, so that his name became highly esteemed.

Now Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David; but Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted greatly in David. So Jonathan told David, saying, "My father Saul seeks to kill you. Therefore please be on your guard until morning, and stay in a secret place and hide. And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak with my father about you. Then what I observe, I will tell you."

Thus Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, "Let not the king sin against his servant, against David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his works have been very good toward you. For he took his life in his hands and killed the Philistine, and the LORD brought about a great deliverance for all Israel. You saw it and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood, to kill David without a cause?"

So Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan, and Saul swore, "As the LORD lives, he shall not be killed." Then Jonathan called David, and Jonathan told him all these things. So Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as in times past.

David's performance in all things is impressive. So Jonathan has a lot of "ammo" for his argument that Saul should spare David.

But first he has to warn David. Of course, David had already twice evaded a spear thrown by Saul back in 1 Samuel 18:11. But that was while Saul was being tormented by an evil spirit, so maybe he wasn't in his right mind.

This time Saul seems to be in his right mind and is giving orders to all his subordinates *that they should kill David*. This is particularly distressing to Jonathan because: a) it's nuts, b) David is his soul friend, and c) he's aware of God's plan for David.

So he jumps into action, first with David and then with his dad.

It almost surprising that this time logic wins. Saul actually listens to Jonathan.

There's an interesting lesson in what this is not. Notice the contrast between what Jonathan is doing and what Abraham and Sarah were doing when they cooked up their madcap scheme to "help" God fulfill his promise of an heir for Abraham.

There, Abraham and Sarah "do the wrong thing" to try to help God. This showed a lack of faith (yes, lack of faith) in God's ability to keep His promise.

Here, Jonathan is just doing the right thing.

2 1 Samuel 19:8–17

And there was war again; and David went out and fought with the Philistines, and struck them with a mighty blow, and they fled from him.

Now the distressing spirit from the LORD came upon Saul as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing music with his hand. Then Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he slipped away from Saul's presence; and he drove the spear into the wall. So David fled and escaped that night.

Saul also sent messengers to David's house to watch him and to kill him in the morning. And Michal, David's wife, told him, saying, "If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed." So Michal let David down through a window. And he went and fled and escaped. And Michal took an image and laid it in the bed, put a cover of goats' hair for his head, and covered it with clothes. So when Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, "He is sick."

Then Saul sent the messengers back to see David, saying, "Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him." And when the messengers had come in, there was the image in the bed, with a cover of goats' hair for his head. Then Saul said to Michal, "Why have you deceived me like this, and sent my enemy away, so that he has escaped?"

And Michal answered Saul, "He said to me, 'Let me go! Why should I kill you?'"

Gee, what happened to, "*As the LORD lives, he shall not be killed*"? Saul seemed sincere when he said that. How can this happen?

There are two possibilities. Either Saul wasn't sincere, or he was and something changed. His choice of words back in verse 6 is very strong. Insincerely swearing an oath with the words, "*As the LORD lives*," is almost unimaginable. That would be like calling down a curse on yourself. Thus, Saul seems to have been sincere. But then, what changed Saul?

The distressing spirit from the LORD is the prime suspect.

Poor Saul. His mind is so scrambled that he's trying to kill the only one who can relieve his torment.

Saul's condition is understandable, but what about his "messengers"? They're not driven mad by an evil spirit. How can they be party to this madness?

While sin can explain almost anything, and sin combined with power explains even more, this may have a more pedestrian explanation. Saul only needs some of his messengers to agree with his scheme to form a team to send out.

There will always be people who are so star-struck by a celebrity that they'll do anything.

3 1 Samuel 19:18–24

So David fled and escaped, and went to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went and stayed in Naioth. Now it was told Saul, saying, “Take note, David is at Naioth in Ramah!” Then Saul sent messengers to take David. And when they saw the group of prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as leader over them, the Spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied. And when Saul was told, he sent other messengers, and they prophesied likewise. Then Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they prophesied also. Then he also went to Ramah, and came to the great well that is at Sechu. So he asked, and said, “Where are Samuel and David?”

And someone said, “Indeed they are at Naioth in Ramah.” So he went there to Naioth in Ramah. Then the Spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on and prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah. And he also stripped off his clothes and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Therefore they say, “Is Saul also among the prophets?”

The text doesn't say what any of the prophecies were. All these messengers, and then Saul, say amazing things—things that everyone recognizes as supernatural prophecy.

But no one cares about what they prophesy. The point is to display God's power vs. Saul's lack thereof. First Saul's messengers are turned into prophesying robots. Then the same bizarre fate befalls Saul, except he strips himself naked to boot. Now it's obvious to everyone that Saul has gone around the bend.

And it's obvious that this is the LORD's doing.

This passage highlights the primacy of God's glory. He will not be mocked. The consequences of opposing God are often totally embarrassing.

“and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king: They shall drive you from men, your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make you eat grass like oxen. They shall wet you with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.” — Daniel 4:24b–25

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. — Romans 1:24–25

These examples are not unlike things that we can see going on all around us today. Some amazingly embarrassing things have become common. The people who openly oppose God have clearly been driven mad and are flaunting their madness.

And laughing at these things in public would bring down their wrath upon you.

To God be the glory; to His enemies be the opposite.

4 1 Samuel 20:1–8

Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and went and said to Jonathan, “What have I done? What is my iniquity, and what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?”

So Jonathan said to him, “By no means! You shall not die! Indeed, my father will do nothing either great or small without first telling me. And why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!”

Then David took an oath again, and said, “Your father certainly knows that I have found favor in your eyes, and he has said, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.’ But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.”

So Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you yourself desire, I will do it for you.”

And David said to Jonathan, “Indeed tomorrow is the New Moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king to eat. But let me go, that I may hide in the field until the third day at evening. If your father misses me at all, then say, ‘David earnestly asked permission of me that he might run over to Bethlehem, his city, for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family.’ If he says thus: ‘It is well,’ your servant will be safe. But if he is very angry, be sure that evil is determined by him. Therefore you shall deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you. Nevertheless, if there is iniquity in me, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father?”

David flees to Jonathan and asks for help figuring out why Saul is trying to kill him. But Jonathan knows even less than he does and denies that it’s even true. *“It is not so!”*

But it is true, and David takes an oath about it. Then he explains that Saul would keep this a secret from Jonathan because he knows of their friendship. Jonathan, undoubtedly in shock, is no help trying to solve the puzzle of what’s up with his dad. So, he just caves and says, *“Whatever you yourself desire, I will do it for you.”*

Then David devises a scheme to discern Saul’s heart. He will miss the new moon feast and Jonathan will give an excuse to Saul as to why David’s not at the dinner table.

Saul’s reaction will tell Jonathan everything he needs to know.

The plan is for Jonathan to lie to his father. Is that okay?

Well, there are two more cases that raise the same issue: the Hebrew midwives lying about their failure to kill the male Hebrew newborns (in Exodus 1:15–21) and Rahab lying to the messengers from the king of Jericho (in Joshua 2:3–7).

Notice that all three cases involve life or death issues. The Hebrew midwives lied so they could keep the sixth commandment. Jonathan is keeping Saul from breaking it. The spies were following God’s orders.

It seems that, in the rare cases when they conflict, the sixth commandment takes priority over the ninth.

5 1 Samuel 20:9–17

But Jonathan said, “Far be it from you! For if I knew certainly that evil was determined by my father to come upon you, then would I not tell you?”

Then David said to Jonathan, “Who will tell me, or what if your father answers you roughly?”

And Jonathan said to David, “Come, let us go out into the field.” So both of them went out into the field. Then Jonathan said to David: “The LORD God of Israel is witness! When I have sounded out my father sometime tomorrow, or the third day, and indeed there is good toward David, and I do not send to you and tell you, may the LORD do so and much more to Jonathan. But if it pleases my father to do you evil, then I will report it to you and send you away, that you may go in safety. And the LORD be with you as He has been with my father. And you shall not only show me the kindness of the LORD while I still live, that I may not die; but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever, no, not when the LORD has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.” So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “Let the LORD require it at the hand of David’s enemies.”

Now Jonathan again caused David to vow, because he loved him; for he loved him as he loved his own soul.

Jonathan, still reeling from the news of his father’s insane hatred of David, joins in the scheme to sound out his father. He doesn’t know how this will turn out—and presumably fervently hopes David is wrong—but he pledges to pursue the plan, come what may.

Jonathan even raises this to the level of *a covenant with the house of David*, saying, “Let the LORD require it at the hand of David’s enemies.”

He’s not happy about it, but he does the right thing.

Doing the right thing matters most when the forces against it are the greatest. Big trials often include big temptation. We must be strong in the face of such trials. Remember Paul’s encouragement about this:

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. — 1 Corinthians 10:13

There used to be a frequent announcement on the radio that began with the words, “This is a test. This is only a test. Had this been an actual emergency ...” It was part of something called the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) and it was to be used in the event of war. The EBS was replaced by the Emergency Alert System (EAS) in 1997 and the test announcements ceased virtually everywhere. The old system is obsolete.

But its words are not. Tests still happen, and it is good to see them as such. When things get crazy and your courage is challenged, remember the words—“This is a test. This is only a test.”

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Has someone ever surprised you by listening to reason?
2. What's the silliest "star-struck" behavior you've seen?
3. What's the most embarrassing thing you've seen someone do?
4. What situations pit commandments against each other?
5. What gives you strength in a test?

Items for prayer: