

# 1 SAMUEL—WEEK 9

## FOOLISH PANIC



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 picks a fight with the Philistines and quickly finds himself out of his depth. Then he panics and breaks the rules about sacrifices to try to save the situation. This foolish mistake is fatal to his dynasty.

But Jonathan, who has real faith, saves the day for Israel by seeking and getting the LORD's favor.

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! Samuel, Week 9 — Foolish Panic  
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1 1 Samuel 13:1–7

*Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, Saul chose for himself three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in the mountains of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent away, every man to his tent.*

*And Jonathan attacked the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, “Let the Hebrews hear!” Now all Israel heard it said that Saul had attacked a garrison of the Philistines, and that Israel had also become an abomination to the Philistines. And the people were called together to Saul at Gilgal.*

*Then the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. And they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.*

*As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.*

All of a sudden, Saul thinks that he’s Alexander the Great or something, and he starts another conflict with the Philistines. That isn’t necessarily wrong, but notice that there’s no mention of him seeking the LORD’s will in this.

So, not surprisingly, things don’t go very well. The Philistines amass an enormous army, and the Hebrews fear being overwhelmed in battle.

Saul’s arrogance will be his undoing. Saul’s victory over the Ammonites has gone to his head. With the LORD’s help, he won a battle of necessity.

Now he’s picking fights.

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Sometimes success is the worst thing that can happen to someone.

One of the great ironies of life in Christ is the importance of trials and even failures. Ego is the enemy of sanctification, and our sinful nature can convert any good thing into pride.

*“According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God State of mind.” — C.S. Lewis*

Failure doesn’t exterminate pride, but it helps. Even being depressed over a failure doesn’t exterminate pride. Good Biblical doctrine doesn’t exterminate pride, but it helps too (and it helps with the depression).

We’re all like Saul. Pride is a lifelong enemy. Never stop fighting it.

2 1 Samuel 13:8–14

*Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So Saul said, “Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me.” And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him.*

*And Samuel said, “What have you done?”*

*Saul said, “When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash, then I said, ‘The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the LORD.’ Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering.”*

*And Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”*

Samuel did say (in 1 Samuel 10:8) that he’d arrive in seven days, but his being a bit late shouldn’t be a big deal. It wasn’t deadline. Even in today’s “track packages” world, something or someone arriving one day later than predicted isn’t surprising. Back then it was nothing.

But Saul panics and does the one thing he must not do. What’s the rush? This is so ridiculous that it’s like saying, “The doctor was late so I decided to start the surgery anyway.”

So, Samuel’s reaction to this is basically, “Are you crazy?” The Hebrew translated as, “*You have done foolishly*” (נִסְכַּלְתָּ, nis-kal-tah) means he acted both stupidly and immorally. The rule he broke was not unclear. Its importance was not unclear. By breaking it, Saul showed that he doesn’t take God seriously.

That kind of attitude is telling.

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We should be careful to understand Saul’s mistake here. This is not something we’re immune to.

Saul’s basic problem was not trusting God. He was thinking of God; that’s why he made a sacrifice. It wasn’t a sacrifice to Baal; it was a sacrifice to the LORD. Yet he wasn’t actually trusting God as God.

Deep inside his heart, his faith wasn’t in the LORD; it was in the sacrifice. He was functionally a believer, but intellectually he wasn’t. He saw some things work and he believed in them, but that’s it.

He believed emotionally—the same way some people believe in superstitions—but he had no logical foundation to his beliefs. It was all feelings.

That’s not faith.

3 1 Samuel 13:15–14:3

*Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people present with him, about six hundred men.*

*Saul, Jonathan his son, and the people present with them remained in Gibeah of Benjamin. But the Philistines encamped in Michmash. Then raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies. One company turned onto the road to Ophrah, to the land of Shual, another company turned to the road to Beth Horon, and another company turned to the road of the border that overlooks the Valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness.*

*Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, “Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears.” But all the Israelites would go down to the Philistines to sharpen each man’s plowshare, his mattock, his ax, and his sickle; and the charge for a sharpening was a pim for the plowshares, the mattocks, the forks, and the axes, and to set the points of the goads. So it came about, on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan. But they were found with Saul and Jonathan his son.*

*And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash. Now it happened one day that Jonathan the son of Saul said to the young man who bore his armor, “Come, let us go over to the Philistines’ garrison that is on the other side.” But he did not tell his father. And Saul was sitting in the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree which is in Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men. Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod’s brother, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, the LORD’s priest in Shiloh, was wearing an ephod. But the people did not know that Jonathan had gone.*

The Philistines had a technological advantage over the Israelites; they knew how to work iron. The significance of this cannot be overstated. In the Stone Age, man had no metals, and the only sharp tools were chipped rocks, like Indian arrowheads. In Bronze Age tools, we see copper and bronze axe heads. That’s better, but those metals are too soft to stay sharp. Iron Age tools are better still because they stay sharp longer. You can cut down multiple trees with the same axe without resharpening it.

The Philistines were living in the Iron Age, while the Israelites were stuck in the Bronze Age. However, the Philistines were selling a limited range of iron tools to the Israelites, and (for a fee) sharpening them. For obvious reasons, they avoided selling them weapons, though Saul and Jonathon had some. Since weapons get captured in battle, and the Philistines had lost some battles, this isn’t surprising.

If Jonathan and his armor-bearer can conceal the nature of their weapons when they go over to the Philistines’ garrison at Michmash, they won’t be seen as a threat. After all, they’re only two guys.

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Jonathan keeping this secret from Saul reflects a great gap in their faith. He distrusts his father with the information.

That speaks volumes.

4 1 Samuel 14:4–15 (ESV)

*Within the passes, by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistine garrison, there was a rocky crag on the one side and a rocky crag on the other side. The name of the one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh. The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba.*

*Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few.” And his armor-bearer said to him, “Do all that is in your heart. Do as you wish. Behold, I am with you heart and soul.” Then Jonathan said, “Behold, we will cross over to the men, and we will show ourselves to them. If they say to us, ‘Wait until we come to you,’ then we will stand still in our place, and we will not go up to them. But if they say, ‘Come up to us,’ then we will go up, for the LORD has given them into our hand. And this shall be the sign to us.” So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines. And the Philistines said, “Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves.” And the men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armor-bearer and said, “Come up to us, and we will show you a thing.” And Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, “Come up after me, for the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel.” Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, and his armor-bearer after him. And they fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer killed them after him. And that first strike, which Jonathan and his armor-bearer made, killed about twenty men within as it were half a furrow’s length in an acre of land. And there was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and even the raiders trembled, the earth quaked, and it became a very great panic.*

Jonathan is counting on the LORD to give him victory. He even sets up a test to “read” God’s will in this.

And the Lord confirms Jonathan’s plan and blesses it greatly. The end of today’s passage, which the ESV translates as, “*and it became a very great panic,*” in Hebrew is literally, “and it was a terror of God.”

That’s how a raid by two guys turned the tide for the entire battlefield.

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This is a beautiful example of faith growing through practice. Jonathan’s heart’s desire is to smack the Philistines, but he knows that’s only going to happen with immense blessing from the LORD.

So he jumps into action. He doesn’t sit on his hands, like his dad is doing.

And notice how he isn’t reckless. He has a plan, but he doesn’t know if his bright idea conforms to the LORD’s will. Emotions can mislead, and this is a time of very high emotions for Jonathan. So, he sets up a test; what the Philistines say will determine whether he has a green light to attack.

The result is impressive, and Jonathan is sure to be impressed—more so than everyone else. He saw it all.

Nothing strengthens faith like seeing God in action.

5 1 Samuel 14:16–23

*Now the watchmen of Saul in Gibeah of Benjamin looked, and there was the multitude, melting away; and they went here and there. Then Saul said to the people who were with him, “Now call the roll and see who has gone from us.” And when they had called the roll, surprisingly, Jonathan and his armorbearer were not there. And Saul said to Ahijah, “Bring the ark of God here” (for at that time the ark of God was with the children of Israel). Now it happened, while Saul talked to the priest, that the noise which was in the camp of the Philistines continued to increase; so Saul said to the priest, “Withdraw your hand.” Then Saul and all the people who were with him assembled, and they went to the battle; and indeed every man’s sword was against his neighbor, and there was very great confusion. Moreover the Hebrews who were with the Philistines before that time, who went up with them into the camp from the surrounding country, they also joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. Likewise all the men of Israel who had hidden in the mountains of Ephraim, when they heard that the Philistines fled, they also followed hard after them in the battle. So the LORD saved Israel that day, and the battle shifted to Beth Aven.*

Suddenly, the battle turns. This causes the less zealous Israelites—those who hid in the mountains, and even those who *were with the Philistines*—to join in. It’s a rout.

There is a discrepancy between the Hebrew text and the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) on what Saul asked Abijah to bring. The Hebrew (which the NKJV follows) says, “*Bring the ark,*” but the Septuagint says, “*Bring the ephod.*” The ephod is useful for deciding whether to go to battle. The ark is useful for winning it (or so they think). However, when Saul says to the priest, “*Withdraw your hand,*” that refers to his use of the ephod. Touching the ark is prohibited.

And that’s significant. Saul’s confidence in victory inspired him to stop inquiring of the LORD.

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So, while Jonathan’s faith is being strengthened, Saul is being weakened. In today’s passage, Saul stops inquiring of the LORD and wins the battle anyway.

Thus, Jonathan sees how the LORD confirms his plans and then blesses them. Saul sees just the opposite—without confirmation, he still does okay.

That’s a problem—one that affects all of us. Sometimes people get away with things we might think they shouldn’t get away with. Sometimes I get away with things I shouldn’t get away with. And sometimes the converse happens; doing the right thing seems to be very “unblessed.”

These puzzling, seemingly unjust outcomes can challenge one’s faith. In fact, many, many people lose their faith when it feels like God isn’t there. They pray fervently for a trial to end, and it doesn’t end. Or they pray their brains out for God to heal a loved one, and the loved one takes a turn for the worst.

Then, well-meaning friends utter platitudes that don’t really answer the hard questions. Ouch.

The cold truth is that sometimes we’re just not going to know (or understand) what God is up to.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. How's your battle with pride going?
2. Where is your trust in God weakest?
3. When should you avoid giving "too much information"?
4. What has strengthened your faith?
5. What has challenged your faith?

*Items for prayer:*