**Jonathan Attacks the Philistines**

There is a story about a man who had worked from his youth as a custodian at a cathedral in England. He came from a working class family and like many in his family, did not progress beyond grade school. After working many years at his job, he was forced to leave when the bishop declared that each employee of the cathedral had to have a high school diploma. With few prospects for employment, the man opened a small tobacco shop. His store was successful and he soon opened another store and eventually established a chain of stores throughout London. He was so successful that a business magazine interviewed him. When the writer asked about his education, he said he quit after grade school. The writer asked what he thought he would have become if he had graduated from high school. He said I would probably still be the custodian at the cathedral. Psychologists have debated for years whether heredity or environment is more important for a person’s development. Heredity may dictate raw intelligence while environment may account for knowledge and ambition seems to sometimes spring up from within. It is puzzling how some people escape troubled upbringings to become successful while some raised in idyllic environments grow up to be troubled adults. In our study of chapter 14 of 1st Samuel, we see the contrast between Saul and Jonathan who were father and son.

The chapter begins with Jonathan and his armor bearer going to an outpost of Philistine soldiers near Micmash. As we learned in chapter 13, the Philistines had such control of Israel that the people had hidden in caves and had been stripped of their weapons. Jonathan did not tell his father that he was leaving the camp at Gibeah where Saul and his meager army of 600 men were located. In their company was a priest named Ahijah who was the nephew of Ichabod (see 4:21). Jonathan told his armor bearer that perhaps God would act on their behalf. He proposed that they show themselves to the Philistines and see how they reacted. If they challenged them to come up, they would go. The Philistines mocked them for crawling out of their hiding place and threatened them. Jonathan recognized that as a sign from God for them to attack so they climbed out of their hole and killed 20 Philistines.

God then sent a panic among the Philistines causing them to retreat in all directions. When Saul learned of the disorder in the Philistine ranks, he ordered the ark to be brought to him. He apparently instructed the priest to inquire of God, likely done using the Urim and Thummim. When he told the priest to withdraw his hand, that was probably because he recognized there was no need to consult God since he could se the tumult in the Philistine camp for himself. He ordered the Israelites into the battle although there was little need for that since the Philistines were killing one another. Many of his forces who had fled joined the fight and they pursued the Philistines.

Saul pushed his troops relentlessly, denying them food until he had avenged himself on his enemies. Meanwhile Jonathan who was tired from the battle that he had set in motion ate some honey that was abundant on the ground and he was revived. When some of the men told him that anyone who ate was under a curse, Jonathan said that Saul had brought trouble on the country by weakening the troops who could have won a greater victory if they had been allowed to eat.

At the end of the day, the Israelites finally sat down to eat from the plunder of livestock, not even pausing to drain the blood from the animals which was required under the law. In a rare display of obedience to God, Saul built an altar to God and had the men slaughter the animals in accordance with the law. Next Saul said that they should renew the fight against the Philistines but the priest suggested they first ask God. Getting no response, Saul determined that someone in the camp had sinned. Confident that neither he nor Jonathan was the guilty party, he had lots cast between them and the rest of the camp only to learn that Jonathan was to blame. When Saul asked he had done, Jonathan replied that he had merely tasted some honey and questioned why he should die. Saul maintained that Jonathan would die but the army rose up in his defense and saved him. This brought about an end to the fighting and the Philistines retreated to their own land. The chapter ends by noting that Saul was successful in fighting several nations then listing his family members including Abner who was the commander of the army.

The differences between Saul and Jonathan were stark but I wonder if Saul changed after he became king. He certainly seemed reluctant to take on the role at first but it seems that it later went to his head. It is telling that while Jonathan was on the front line of the battle, Saul was relaxed under a shade tree. Notice how he was obsessed with claiming a victory of the Philistines, not for God but for himself. He drove his army harshly without regard for their well being and was even willing to put his son to death for disobeying an order of which he was unaware. As we will see over the next few chapters, Jonathan was a remarkable man with equal parts humility and boldness. It is interesting to compare Jonathan to Gideon (see Judges chapter 6). God sought out a reluctant Gideon and had to convince him to lead Israel in battle and he put out a fleece to confirm God’s will before he committed. Jonathan, on the other hand, was committed to act but sought God’s confirmation before taking action. Jonathan’s character was a product of heredity and environment and proof that sons do not always follow in the footsteps of their fathers.