



Community Group Discussion Guide

November 10, 2024

1 Samuel 14: 24-52 | The Oath

MOTIVATE

- ⇒ **Starter Question: Describe a hasty decision you made in a stressful moment that had unintended consequences.**

DISCUSS

1 Samuel 14:24-52 continues to contrast Saul and his son Jonathan. While Saul was given to panic and disobedience, Jonathan proved to be a man of action who sought God's direction. Previously in 1 Samuel 14, Saul had replaced Samuel with Ahijah, who was part of the rejected priestly family of Eli. In the face of a battle with the Philistines, Saul instructed Ahijah to bring the ark of the covenant in an attempt to discern from God what he had not bothered to seek in the first place. However, without waiting for divine guidance, Saul stopped Ahijah, and headed into battle. When Saul should have been acting, he was waiting, and when he should have been waiting, he was acting. As the battle continued and victory seemed imminent, more people joined forces with Saul. Yet again, Saul listened to his own inner voice rather than seeking direction from God. (See [1 Samuel Overview](#) for more information.)

Sometime before or during the next skirmish, Saul bound the people under an oath. This was the first of four oaths uttered on that day. The first three would show Saul's lack of compassion and selfish pride as the new king of Israel. The last oath spoken by the leaders of the army would redeem Saul's son Jonathan from death.

- ⇒ **What qualities do you think are most important in a godly leader when he or she is facing a difficult or challenging situation?**
- ⇒ **How have we replaced God's authority with other sources of authority?**

1 Samuel 14:24-26 *And 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. 25 Now when all the people came to the forest, behold, there was honey on the ground. 26 And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping, but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath.*

Israel's pursuit of the enemy involved an exhausting journey over steep hills that lasted for hours on end. Before going into battle, Saul was so determined to get the better of the Philistines that he imposed a ban on food for the day. The men were distressed and suffered from exhaustion, aggravated by their fasting.

As the Philistines attempted to evade the Israelites, the focus of the battle left the roads and entered the woods where the Israelite soldiers noticed honey on the ground. Ground bees were prevalent in this area. Their honey could have provided a much-needed and convenient source of energy. Yet, they were afraid to eat because of Saul's oath.

Saul's use of the term "cursed" signaled that any violation of the oath would be dealt with in a serious manner. The Torah did not require soldiers to refrain from eating during battle. This was a command conceived of by Saul, possibly to gain the Lord's favor. However, Saul's aim appears to have been personal and selfish as he stated, "I am avenged on my enemies."

Saul showed his self-centeredness by foolishly denying his soldiers the food they needed to be strong in battle. He also lacked the compassion required of a covenant leader. While his zeal may be understandable because victory could only be accomplished with the Lord's help, Saul's demand that

his soldiers deny themselves food at the very time when caloric needs were at their greatest was ill-conceived.

- ⇒ **What would have been a more logical approach for Saul?**
- ⇒ **What are some common fears that tempt us to compromise our values or act against what we know is right?**

1 Samuel 14:27-30 *But 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, and his eyes became bright. 28 Then one of the people said, “Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be the man who eats food this day.’” And the people were faint. 29 Then Jonathan said, “My father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. 30 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 has not been great.”*

Jonathan, not knowing about his father’s imposed fast, took advantage of the energy-giving food. The phrase “his eyes became bright” indicates that the honey immediately revived his strength and lifted his spirits. When Jonathan heard of his father’s oath and saw that the people were faint, he expressed open criticism, stating, “My father has troubled the land.” The Hebrew word for “troubled” (‘ākar) is bound up “with an attempt to deceive.” There was food which would have renewed the strength of all, so that they could have established their victory. Jonathan recognized that this oath meant trouble for the Israelites. Jonathan also realized that his father’s lack of compassion prevented an even greater slaughter of the Philistines.

- ⇒ **What do we continue to see in Jonathan’s leadership? How does this compare to Saul’s?**
- ⇒ **Have you ever made a rash decision that “troubled the land?”**

1 Samuel 14:31-35 *They struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. And the people were very faint. 32 The people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground. And the people ate them with the blood. 33 Then they told Saul, “Behold, the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood.” And he said, “You have dealt treacherously; roll a great stone to me here.” 34 And Saul said, “Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, ‘Let every man bring his ox or his sheep and slaughter them here and eat, and do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood.’” So every one of the people brought his ox with him that night and they slaughtered them there. 35 And Saul built an altar to the LORD; it was the first altar that he built to the LORD.*

Saul’s foolish oath had further devastating consequences. After chasing the Philistines nearly fifteen miles from Michmash to Aijalon, the Israelites were exhausted and hungry. Since the time of the oath had expired, the men pounced on the plunder and butchered whatever sheep, cattle, and oxen they could find. In their haste, they slaughtered the animals on the ground, allowing the blood to remain in the carcass. This act violated covenant kosher laws and caused the people to sin by eating meat which still contained blood (Deuteronomy 12:16, Leviticus 3:17; Leviticus 7:26–27).

When Saul discovered what the men were doing, he ordered a large stone to be rolled to him at once. This elevated stone permitted for butchering the animal in a way that allowed the blood to drain properly. As an added precaution, Saul built an altar to the Lord. This was the first time Saul had done so. The narrator was possibly condemning Saul here for taking the time to build an altar. Saul may have been afraid that the Lord would punish Israel for their sin in eating blood. He may have built the altar as a precautionary measure to try to avoid the wrath of God.¹

- ⇒ **Do Saul’s actions demonstrate he was aware of God’s laws? Why is this important to note given his previous choices?**
- ⇒ **What other possible reasons might have led Saul to build an altar? Does the building of this altar show spiritual sensitivity?**

¹ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 97). Holman Reference.

1 Samuel 14:36-39 Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them." And they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." But the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here." **37** And Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?" But he did not answer him that day. **38** And Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today. **39** For as the LORD lives who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die." But there was not a man among all the people who answered him.

Soon after the Israelites were refreshed and fed, Saul suggested a night raid against the Philistines. The people were willing, but the priest recommended that Saul inquire of God. Saul agreed and wanted to know two things: Should he attack the Philistines that night? Would God deliver them into Israel's hand? Saul received no answer that day.

- ⇒ **What should Saul have done in response to not receiving an answer from God?**
- ⇒ **Can you describe a time when you felt as if God was not giving you any direction? How did you handle this?**

Saul concluded that God was silent because He was displeased with someone's actions. Without hesitation, Saul began an investigation to uncover the sin. At first glance, we might think that God was angry with Jonathan for breaking the oath, but in reality, it was Saul's selfish actions that displeased God. Saul called the leaders of the army together to determine what sin had been committed. Saul swore a second oath, implying that the offender would be executed even if it was Jonathan. The men of the army said nothing.

- ⇒ **How does the men's lack of response indicate their probable concerns over Saul's leadership?**
- ⇒ **How do we continue to see Saul's rash behavior be unsuitable for a covenant leader?**

1 Samuel 14:40-44 Then he said to all Israel, "You shall be on one side, and I and Jonathan my son will be on the other side." And the people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you." **41** Therefore Saul said, "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." And Jonathan and Saul were taken, but the people escaped. **42** Then Saul said, "Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan." And Jonathan was taken. **43** Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done." And Jonathan told him, "I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die." **44** And Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan."

At the beginning of his search for the culprit, Saul and Jonathan were set against each other and the people were agreeable to what was occurring. Saul questioned God's lack of response, then prayed, "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."

- ⇒ **Why did God not answer Saul?**
- ⇒ **Why does Saul seem so convinced that he is not at fault? What does this indicate about his spiritual sensitivity?**
- ⇒ **Are you prone to blame others first before evaluating your own responsibility for a negative outcome?**

Urim and Thummim were a pair of objects used by the high priest of Israel to determine God's will or to receive a divine answer to a question. Many scholars believe them to be two sticks or possibly precious stones that God used in a miraculous way to reveal His will at critical moments when His guidance was needed. One object gave one answer, the other gave another answer. They were thrown or cast to determine an answer which is what was meant by "cast the lot." The Urim and Thummim were not, however, automatic or mechanical. God could still refuse to answer.

⇒ **Can you think of another time in the Bible when casting lots were used? How did God respond?**

The lot was cast and indicated that the sin lay with Saul or Jonathan. When Saul forced the issue, Jonathan was chosen. Saul responded by commanding Jonathan to explain what he had done. Jonathan readily admitted that he violated the food ban and obediently accepted the consequences. The reputation of Saul's kingship was at stake. He had spoken two oaths. Unbelievably, Saul uttered a third oath: Jonathan must die.

⇒ **Why was Saul so foolish in regard to Jonathan?**

⇒ **Between Saul and Jonathan, who was acting the most like a covenant leader?**

1 Samuel 14:45-46 *Then the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Far from it! As the LORD lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day." So the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die. 46 Then Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place.*

Fortunately, the leaders of the army recognized the heroic action of Jonathan in battle that day. They uttered the fourth and last oath: Jonathan will not die! The Hebrew word for "ransom" (*kopher*) literally means "redeemed." The people's oath appealed to God and by it they rescued Jonathan.

⇒ **What continues to be the contrast between Jonathan and his father Saul? Who seems more fit to be king?**

After Saul was virtually given a vote of "no confidence," he ended the battle and let the remaining Philistines get away. Though Israel had won a victory on that day, Saul—and consequently kingship—had suffered a humbling defeat. The outcome did nothing to reassure Saul. He was left in doubt as to his relationship with the Lord, and therefore his confidence in his ability to rule was further undermined.

⇒ **What steps of repentance and surrender should Saul have taken?**

⇒ **What should a godly leader do when it appears he or she has lost the confidence of those being led? Have you experienced a situation like this?**

1 Samuel 14:47-52 *When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. Wherever he turned he routed them. 48 And he did valiantly and struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them. 49 Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, Ishvi, and Malchi-shua. And the names of his two daughters were these: the name of the firstborn was Merab, and the name of the younger Michal. 50 And the name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam the daughter of Ahimaaz. And the name of the commander of his army was Abner the son of Ner, Saul's uncle. 51 Kish was the father of Saul, and Ner the father of Abner was the son of Abiel. 52 There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul. And when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he attached him to himself.*

1 Samuel 14 ends with a summary of Saul's achievements and his family line. The presence of a career summary at this point in the Saul narrative is a bit puzzling. It probably is best explained by the fact that in the very next episode Saul lost his status as the Lord's anointed leader for Israel. From the narrator's perspective Saul was no longer Israel's true king, though he would function as head of state for years to come. Saul may have been a successful military leader, but he was a failure as a covenant leader.

⇒ **Why is just being a successful military leader not enough to please God? What does God truly desire from His appointed leaders?**

⇒ **If you've been called to lead, why is it vital you remember this?**

A short note provides information regarding Saul's family and military administration. Three of Saul's four sons are mentioned: "Jonathan, Ishvi (Is-Bosheth) and Malchi-shua. Saul's two daughters, Merab

and Michal, mentioned here for the first time, will play important roles in the dynastic politics of later narratives. As was the custom in Near Eastern Semitic societies, family members were appointed to key governmental positions. Abner, a cousin to Saul from his father's side of the family, was made commander of the army.

Though Saul fought limited battles against many foreign nations, the Philistines posed the most persistent threat to Israel. Not surprisingly, therefore, "there was hard fighting against the Philistines" throughout Saul's reign. To keep Israel's military in a state of readiness against this continuing threat, Saul instituted a system of conscription, thus fulfilling Samuel's ominous prophecy in 1 Samuel 8:11.

- ⇒ **What might the Israelites be considering about this whole concept of kingship?**
- ⇒ **How does this narrative of Saul and Jonathan make way for Jesus as King?**

TRANSFORM

1. Make personal application: When you consider the life of Jonathan, it is both remarkable yet tragic. He had all the qualities to be a king, yet never would be as the kingdom would pass to David. Jonathan trusted God deeply. He was willing to give himself for the glory of God and His Kingdom.

- ⇒ **What principles for godly leadership are you discovering in the story of Saul and Jonathan?**
- ⇒ **How does this passage demonstrate the importance of seeking God's guidance before making decisions?**
- ⇒ **How can you commit your ways to God and then trust Him for the outcome?**

2. Pray: Thank God for His faithfulness and for guiding us even as we face challenges. Pray for courage to act boldly in His Name and to seek His wisdom in every decision, avoiding rash choices that could harm ourselves or others. Praise Him that when we do falter or make mistakes, His grace is sufficient, and He can still bring about His purposes. Pray for wisdom for our national, state, and local leaders to have wisdom and humility and to remember that victory comes from Him alone.

STUDY

Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel (Vol. 6, pp. 95–98; 101-104; 106-107)*. Holman Reference.
- Bergen, R. D. (1996). *1, 2 Samuel (Vol. 7, pp. 158–162)*. Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- Klein, R. W. (1983). *1 Samuel (Vol. 10, pp. 138–143)*. Word, Incorporated.
- *The NIV Application Commentary, 1 and 2 Samuel*, pages 199-215.
- *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, pages 1623-1624.