

“Nothing Can Hinder the Lord from Saving,” 1 Samuel 13:23 – 14:15, 20-23 (October 4, 2015)

²³ And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash. One day Jonathan the son of Saul said to the young man who carried his armor, “Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side.” But he did not tell his father. ² Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave at Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men, ³ including Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod’s brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of the LORD in Shiloh, wearing an ephod. And the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. ⁴ 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. ⁵ The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba.

⁶ 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.” ⁷ 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.”

⁸ Then Jonathan said, “Behold, we will cross over to the men, and we will show ourselves to them. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ 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.” ¹² 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.” ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

²⁰ Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and went into the battle. And behold, every Philistine’s sword was against his fellow, and there was very great confusion. ²¹ Now the Hebrews who had been with the Philistines before that time and who had gone up with them into the camp, even they also turned to be with the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. ²² Likewise, when all the men of Israel who had hidden themselves in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too followed hard after them in the battle. ²³ So the LORD saved Israel that day. And the battle passed beyond Beth-aven.

PRAY

We are working our way through 1 Samuel this fall, and last week in our study on chapter eight we looked at the question of faith, and we spent most of the time looking at the question negatively: we looked what keeps us from a life of faith. We studied the question of faith from an almost passive point of view. To really live a life of faith we had to refuse to trust anything in this life and instead trust in God.

This week we will look at faith again, and ask the question differently. Is faith mainly just a negative duty: don't do certain things, and that will lead you to trust in God? Or is there more?

I hope to show you from our text this morning that there is indeed more to faith than that. And today we come to a great story from the Bible, though it may be completely unfamiliar to a lot of you. It is the time of King Saul, and the age-old enemy of Israel, the Philistines, have invaded the land. They are at this time in history a far more powerful nation than Israel, and they have extended their control into Israel far into the land – the events described in chapter 14 take place northeast of Jerusalem – so the Philistines have cut a corridor into Israel almost to the Jordan River, splitting the nation in half.

These are dark times for Israel – the Philistines are plundering the land and taking the women of the land as slaves, they are raping and pillaging, and the Israelites are literally hiding in caves to try and protect themselves and their families. Plus, Saul is not doing well. It's obvious that he's already falling away from the faith, he's been disobedient to God already early in his reign and it's going to get worse. Plus, the army he has to fight the Philistines has dwindled to a mere 600 men. There is almost a total lack of faith in God in Israel.

Except for one man: Jonathan, son of King Saul – he's about the only faithful man left. And he wants to do something; he's aching to strike some kind of blow against the hated Philistines and drive them out of his birthright. He doesn't have a plan, he doesn't have any resources to speak of – no army behind him – he really doesn't have any earthly chance to succeed, but Jonathan does have one thing: a burning conviction that nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few. Nothing! Jonathan has hardly anything except the most important thing, and he possesses it in abundance – he has faith! And through his faith that nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, this amazing victory over the enemies of God's people results.

What does this text mean for us today? Three things: first, the necessity of risk in faith. Second, the safety of "failure" in faith. Third, the certainty of ultimate victory in faith.

First, the necessity of risk in faith. Look back at the text – Jonathan took a tremendous risk that day at Micmash. He and one other guy, his loyal, faithful, armor-bearer (don't you want a friend like that, who says, "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul"?), they see the Philistine outpost far above where they are on the valley floor, the only way to get there is to climb up this almost sheer face of rock, and when they get up there they'll be winded from the climb but outnumbered at least ten-to-one. That's risky.

What are the odds they would survive it? Slim to none – the defenders had every advantage. Throughout the history of warfare it has been recognized that an uphill attack against an enemy ten times your size is tantamount to suicide.

But the very riskiness of Jonathan's attack is what makes it so noteworthy – the very riskiness of Jonathan's attack is what serves to display his faith in a God of whom it can be said, “Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” The riskiness of Jonathan's attack brings God glory.

Friends, faith in God is not really faith unless it involves risk. *Or, put it another way, if there is no risk in your life, there is no life in your faith.* Faith of necessity means risk.

We can see examples of the willingness to risk everything for the cause of faith in Christ most clearly in missionary stories – William Carry to India (buried children), Adoniram Judson to Burma (Judson buried three wives and many children), Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian to the Auca (OW-ca) Indians in Peru (martyred for their faith).

Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, risked everything he could possibly risk for the cause of faith. He endured fourteen years (14 years!) of imprisonment and torture in his homeland of Romania between 1948 and 1964. He was a leader in the underground church there, and this is what he wrote: “What shall we do about ... [being tortured for Christ]? Will we be able to bear [it]? If I do not bear them I put in prison another fifty or sixty men whom I know, because that is what the Communists wish from me, to betray those around me...”

“I remember my last Confirmation class before I left Romania. I took a group of ten to fifteen boys and girls on a Sunday morning, not to a church, but to the zoo. Before the cage of lions I told them, 'Your forefathers in faith were thrown before such wild beasts for their faith. Know that you also will have to suffer. You will not be thrown before lions, but you will have to do with men who would be much worse than lions. Decide here and now if you wish to pledge allegiance to Christ.' They had tears in their eyes when they said yes.”

Faith always means risk, but I realize maybe you're thinking this: I see how missionaries risk for faith, but how can I, in the church in 21st century America, risk for faith? I don't feel called to the mission field, and, thank God, no one is trying to kill me for my faith.

I can give you one example for sure. Look to the early church – Acts 2:47: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Friends, what was a big reason why the early church had so much success in winning the lost, why so many people came to faith in Christ? Acts 2:44-45: “⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

The members of the early church *risked their financial safety for one another* – they sold their possessions and goods. And the people around them saw it, and God used their faith in his goodness and his ability to provide to draw men to Himself.

Friends, *no one ever wanted to place their faith in God because you or I commit ourselves to our personal, financial well-being.* We have a choice – we can take all the money that comes into our households and use it for our financial well-being and security, or we can take some significant portion of that money and place our financial security at risk by giving it away. Piper, in his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*, makes it clear we must be about risk for the cause of Christ: “God is calling us to be conduits of his grace, not cul-de-sacs. Our great danger today is thinking that the conduit should be lined with gold. It shouldn't. Copper will do. No matter how grateful we are, gold will not make the world think that our God is good; it will make people think that our god is gold.” (Piper, 102).

Faith means risk – we must have some element of risk in our faith. Before we move on, one last thing – maybe some of you are thinking, “Jonathan didn't really risk anything – he had a sign! See verses 9-10: “⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.” See, J.D., I haven't gotten a sign to risk like that – I haven't gotten a sign to take a risk.

Well, yes, you do have a sign. “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Luke 12:33-34. You have a sign in a direct command from the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures. That's the best sign you can get.

Jonathan didn't have a sign, at least not the way you mean it – there is no indication in the text that God told Jonathan “this will be your sign.” No, Jonathan just said, “If such-and-such happens, then we'll go up,” but not because God told him that. **Jonathan came up with his own sign!**

I remember at one point when I was a kid, I had two great interests: basketball and girls. And I remember one time in particular I mixed basketball, girls, and God. How? One day I was outside shooting basketball and on that particular day I really liked this one girl at school, and so I prayed, and I said, “God, if I make this next shot, I'll take it as a sign from you that you want me to ask this girl out.” So, I took the shot, I made it, and now Mimi and I are married – it's been wonderful.

No, it wasn't Mimi, and I don't even remember if I made the shot, but the point is there is no indication in the Bible that Jonathan had any warrant to assume his sign was from God than I had to assume my “sign” was from God. But there was one difference: J.D. Shaw thought “nothing could hinder my happiness if this girl would go out with me,” while Jonathan thought “nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.”

J.D. Shaw's faith was in girls to make him happy, so he might have been willing to take risks in order to get girls – *but that doesn't glorify God*. Jonathan's faith was in God, so he was willing to take risks for the sake of the name of the Lord (he was willing even to make up his own sign so that he could exercise his faith), *and that does glorify God*. Faith necessitates risk.

Second, the safety of “failure” in faith.

What if Jonathan had failed that day? What if he'd have climbed up the rock at Micmash and been killed? What if he had “failed” in his faith?

Friends, let's be clear: *there is no promise that when you take risks in the name of faith you will accomplish all that you hope you will*. There's no promise that people who risk their lives to take the gospel to unreached people groups won't ultimately lose them. There's not promise that people who don't risk their financial security in order to feed the poor won't eventually go hungry themselves. Look all you want – those promises aren't in the Bible.

So can people fail? The biblical answer is, from the world's perspective, yes! If the world values life on earth above all, then in exercising your faith you may fail miserably *because you may lose your life*. If the world values physical comfort on earth then, yes, you may fail miserably as you exercise your faith in God, *because you may lose your comfort*.

But not all “failure” is failure in God's sight. What did Jesus say? “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” Luke 9:23-24.

But maybe you think: why? Why would God allow his people to take great risks for his name's sake and then “fail”? My favorite illustration of this comes from my favorite pastor, Tim Keller. In 1988 he felt God's call to plant a church in Manhattan, and people would ask him all the time, “This is a big risk – are you sure God has called you to do this?” And he'd always answer, “No, I'm not sure – I'm sure I'm not supposed to commit adultery, it's in the Bible. I'm sure I'm not supposed to lie – it's in the Bible. But I can't be sure about this.”

Of course, he did plant the church and it's been a huge success, beyond anyone's wildest dreams. 6000 people attend weekly, five services, planted dozens of churches – now he's got maybe a dozen books out that have sold millions, his recorded sermons have had a huge impact all over the world, including a tremendous impact in my life – but the interesting question is: what if it hadn't been a success? Most church plants fail within five years. What if it hadn't been a success? Keller: “God was trying to teach me something, and the only way I was ever going to learn it was through this failure.” But don't you see? If God is control over even the failures, you're ultimately safe with him.

You see, over your years as a Christian, you will do many things, and many of them will not turn out anything like you thought they would. You thought college would turn out this way, but it didn't. You thought you would marry this person, but you married that person. You thought the toughest thing about being a parent would be this, but it turned out to be that. You thought you'd get a job and stay there forever, but instead you didn't and wound up at this other job.

But over the years, even though things didn't turn out the way you thought they would, God was working. *He was working on you, he was working through you, he was working in history because of you.* In an almost infinite number of ways, God is at work in you and in the world around you, but you'll never be aware of even one percent of them. God, not man, is sovereign, and so the results are up to Him. Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." So even in the failures, because we trust in the absolute sovereignty of God, the providence of God, we are safe. We are called to act in faith, but the results, even the failures, are ultimately up to God.

But then that begs the question: can we then risk anything for the glory of God? Does there every come a point where we've passed trusting God and started being presumptuous of God? Matthew Henry thought Jonathan had to have had a "divine impulse" to attack Micmash or it would have been presumptuous. Is a risk for the sake of the Lord ever so great so as to be foolish?

Full confession: I actually preached this sermon for the first time five years ago. So I've had a long time to reflect on this question. Here's my answer: no – *because nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.* Over and over again in history we see men who thought no risk was too great in their effort to live out their faith in God and we can see how God mightily used them.

Just one more missionary example: John Paton was a missionary from Scotland to the New Hebrides islands in the south Pacific in the nineteenth century, which at the time was populated by cannibalistic tribes.

But, before he departed, because other missionaries had died in the South Seas – more on that in a second – and because Paton had a very successful ministry in Glasgow – he had a church in the poor, urban section of Glasgow and hundreds of unchurched people were attending the worship services and classes – everyone told Paton not to go. All the other ministers in the area, his presbytery. Everyone thought it was too risky, too foolish – he was giving up too much. And one aging Christian told him, "If you go, you will be eaten by cannibals."

Paton's response: "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."

As it turned out, John Paton was not eaten by cannibals – he landed there with his family in 1858 on the island of Tanna. But he lost his wife four months later, and two weeks later he lost his newborn son – he had to dig their graves with his own hands. Was it too risky? Was it too much? Well, what happened?

Paton moved a few years later to the island of Aniwa, another island in the same chain, and by 1881 the entire island came to Christ. To this day, Vanuatu, the nation which is formed by all the islands, is 85% Christian. Was it too risky?

It might be tempting to say “no, of course not, look at all those people who were saved!” but listen to this – the first missionaries to these islands were John Williams and James Harris from the London Missionary Society. They landed in 1839. Both of these missionaries were killed and eaten by cannibals on the island of Erromanga on November 20 of that year, only minutes after going ashore.

Do you think their families thought it was worth it when they got the news? Of course not, but friends, we can't say no, we can't say no – so long as the deed is committed to the Lord we can never say any act of faith is too risky, even if it looks for now like a complete failure, because nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few, whether it takes ten minutes or ten centuries.

Be clear: *I do not want this sermon to be a guilt trip for anyone.* “Oh, J.D.’s saying that if I don't give my money away or if I'm not a missionary I must not love God.” Not at all. Not everyone is called to be a missionary, especially not to cannibals. And each of those men and women I've listed had an intense, burning desire to follow the specific callings God has given them. As we've seen, Matthew Henry said Jonathan had a “divine impulse”. If you don't have that – a burning desire, divine impulse, you're probably not called.

But I also want to be clear: if God has given you that desire, that burning desire, to risk something or even everything for the fame of God's name, then *don't let me or anyone else tell you the risk is too great.* There is no biblical warrant for it. I'm not saying don't seek wise counsel, I'm not saying don't listen to your church's advice, but I am saying that if Paton had listened to his counsel, he wouldn't have gone, and that would have been a mistake. If Jonathan had held a council of war with his generals before the attack at Michmash, they would have told him not to attack, and they would have been wrong.

If you don't have a burning desire to risk something for the Lord, let me ask you this: are you asking the Lord regularly (and if you are married, are you asking your spouse and children) this question: “Father, what are some things we can risk to bring glory to your name?” Am I asking him? And are you expecting him to answer? What if you got to the end of your life and you realized that you never risked anything for the fame of God's name. That would be a tragedy.

Now, finally, why can we be sure the risk for the sake of faith can never be too great?

Third, the certainty of ultimate victory in faith. Friends, why can we be certain of the ultimate victory of our faith, even when in the short term everything looks like it's a disaster? Why can we be sure?

Because we know the ultimate victory has been won for us. Friends, who has taken the greatest risk in the course of human history? The only way to answer that is to know the answer to this question: who over the course of human history had the most to lose?

We know the answer to that question, because only one man left the throne room of heaven for the glory of God. And he didn't just risk the throne room of heaven, but he risked his life – more than that, he gave his life for sinful men – this goes beyond risk, he *knew* that he would fail from the world's perspective.

Jonathan climbed Micmash assured that God would deliver him, yet Jesus climbed Mt. Calvary certain that God would forsake him.

No one risked more than Jesus, no one lost more than Jesus, yet what did he gain? Salvation for us and glory for God.

We can be sure that no matter what risks we take, in the end, victory will be ours because Jesus has already won the victory for us. Friends, if you know you are a sinner, and that you deserve nothing but judgment from God, and if you have trusted Jesus Christ, by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven to reconcile you to God, then your names are already written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Jesus is already in heaven preparing a place for us to live and dwell with him forever.

The question, therefore, is not: should we take risks? We must take risks, or we have no faith. The question is not: how big should the risks be? Because they cannot be too big.

The only question is this: *how much joy will we receive knowing that we have had a part in displaying the glory of God in the universe through our faithful risk-taking? How much joy do we want, friends?*

And that's the only question, because nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few. PRAY