

The One Who Does Not Disappoint
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Thomas Sowell says, “It is almost inevitable that politicians will lie, because that is what we – the voters – want them to do.”

His point is that we almost always vote for candidates who make promises we like, but which are really impossible to keep. So, whether we are a Republican, Democrat or Independent, we will often be disappointed by our favorite politicians. Even if we like much of what they are trying to do, our political leaders will almost always disappoint us. That, friends, is our experience in 21st century America, and it was the experience of the nation of Israel a thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

As we talked about last Sunday, Israel now has a king. The people are very excited about this, but it doesn’t take long before there is disappointment with the new king.

Friends, our journey through the book of 1 Samuel takes us through chapters 13 and 14. (Let’s pause and pray that God will enable us to hear His Word this morning.)

1 Samuel 13:1 – Saul was 30 years old when he became king, and he reigned 42 years over Israel.

The most significant enemies Israel has during this time are the Philistines, a people living in what is now the southwest part of Israel. Samuel had led Israel to victory over the Philistines back in chapter 7, but now they are once again a threat.

1 Samuel 13:2a – Saul chose 3,000 men from Israel for himself.

Two thousand go with Saul, and the other one thousand follow Jonathan. It is not until verse 16 that we are told that Jonathan is Saul’s son.

1 Samuel 13:3a – Jonathan attacked the Philistine garrison that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard about it.

They gather an army to fight against Israel which includes:

1 Samuel 13:5b – 3,000 chariots, 6,000

horsemen, and troops as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

This huge force terrifies the Israelite army. Jonathan’s troops...

1 Samuel 13:6b – ...hid in caves, thickets, among rocks, and in holes and cisterns.

Some even fled across the Jordan River.

1 Samuel 13:7 – Saul, however, was still at Gilgal, (a city whose location we are not certain, thought to be about 30 miles NW of Jerusalem) and all his troops were (also) gripped with fear.

Saul apparently had arranged for Samuel to come and offer sacrifices and bless his army, but Samuel doesn’t arrive on schedule. Saul becomes very anxious as he sees more and more of his soldiers deserting him. In desperation, Saul decides he cannot wait for Samuel and (verse 9) offers a sacrifice himself. This is not a good choice. Only a priest was qualified to make a sacrifice to the Lord. But desperate for God’s blessing, Saul does what only a priest is allowed to do.

1 Samuel 13:10a-11 – Just as Saul finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel arrived, and asked, “What have you done?”

Saul explains his rationale, noting that Samuel’s late arrival was part of the problem. But...

1 Samuel 13:13a – Samuel said to Saul, “You have been foolish. You have not kept the command which the LORD your God gave you.”

And the consequences of Saul’s action are huge. Samuel says...

1 Samuel 13:13b-14 – “It was at this time that the LORD would have permanently established your reign over Israel, but now your reign will not endure. The LORD has found a man loyal to Him, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not done what the LORD commanded.”

Now, it may seem to us that this is a rather harsh punishment. After all, Saul was just trying to

procure God's blessing. Yet, the bottom line is that by offering the sacrifice, Saul had...

1 Samuel 13:14b – “not done what the LORD commanded.”

He was not a man who really trusted the Lord. He was willing to disobey God's clear instructions in an effort to relieve his own anxiety. He compounds his sin by refusing to take responsibility for his action and trying to point the blame finger at Samuel.

Samuel leaves without giving a blessing to Saul and his army. Saul counts his troops and learns that his army of 2,000 men is now just 600 because so many have deserted. Things look grim. The Philistines begin to send out raiding parties, and Saul's army is very under-equipped. The Philistines had prevented any blacksmiths from doing business in Israel...

1 Samuel 13:22 – So on the day of battle not a sword or spear could be found in the hand of any of the troops, who were with Saul and Jonathan; only Saul and his son, Jonathan had weapons.

Yes, Saul is the king the people had desired. They believed he would be the one to lead Israel to victory over all their enemies, including the Philistines. But Saul has let them down. He not only is failing to lead them to military victory but has failed to be the godly king which Israel so very much needed. How can Israel expect to enjoy the Lord's blessings when their king is ignoring basic instructions of the Old Testament law? Saul is not what many people had hoped for in a king.

Now, one lesson for us is the point I made in the introduction of this sermon. Political leaders tend to disappoint their followers. Part of the reason for that, as Tom Sowell said, is that we tend to want leaders who over-promise and cannot possibly keep all their promises.

Even more significant is our tendency to forget that political leaders – kings or congressmen or county commissioners – are human beings and are just as capable of making mistakes and bad decisions as anyone else. That is why Psalm 146:3 warns us:

Psalm 146:3 – Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save.

Princes, Presidents and other politicians will always disappoint.

I learned that lesson a long time ago. I started following politics when I was in grade school, and my first political hero was – Richard Nixon. In November 1968, I stayed up all night watching the election returns. Yes, at age 11, I was a bit of a nerd. When Nixon was declared the winner over Minnesota's Humbert H. Humphrey at about 9:00 on Wednesday morning, I was ecstatic. Over the next few years, however, I found myself disappointed many times. I began to learn the wisdom of “don't put your trust in princes.” Yet, our current political climate seems to encourage us to do that.

There are actually people who refer to President Obama as the messiah, or even their lord and savior. And there are clearly people who treat President Trump as if that is who he is.

Oh friends, don't put your trust in princes. If you do, you will always be disappointed. Keep your expectations low as to how much good a political leader can actually do, and you will be a happier person.

Yet, our text is really a warning, not just against political idolatry, trusting in Princes or Presidents instead of the Lord, but is a warning against idolatry of any kind.

If you think the key to life - what will really bring happiness - is making a ton of money, or getting a great job, or being considered physically attractive by everyone else, or finding the right person to marry, or building that dream house for retirement - you are mistaken.

Now, there is nothing wrong with being wealthy, successful, good looking, or having a nice spouse or home. But if any of these are a higher priority for you than trusting and following the Lord, it really has become an idol for you. And all of these things are going to eventually leave you empty and disappointed if they are the primary focus in your life.

Yet, whenever we think about idols, it is important to remember, as Tim Keller says: “Good things make the best idols.”

For example, as Christians, we should realize that relationships with our spouse, children and other family members are extremely important. Yet, if you treat these as more important than your relationship with God, it is idolatry.

And when we put any of these people on a pedestal where they don't belong, whenever you have unrealistic expectations of how a spouse, child, or other family member is going to make you happy, you will be disappointed. These relationships are very important, but even the best people will sometimes let you down.

My friend Joe and his wife Sue have been having some tension in their marriage lately. That is kind of a surprise because for 20 years they have seemed to get along well. In fact, Sue really adores Joe. And that's actually the problem. She pretty much relies on him to meet all of her emotional needs. She has allowed her other friendships to slide. She has neglected her relationship with God. She really needs Joe. Needs him too much. She has turned Joe into her idol. Not on purpose, maybe, but that is what has happened. Her expectations of Joe are unrealistic, so Joe has not been able to meet them, which means Sue is disappointed. And that just feeds the tension. Friends, if our ultimate trust is in anyone or anything other than the Lord, we will be disappointed.

The people of Israel, who were putting a lot of faith in Saul, learned that the hard way. Many of us have learned the same lesson, often in the same way.

OK, back to our text. Saul is a disappointment, but our story does have a hero.

1 Samuel 14:1 – That same day Saul's son Jonathan said to the attendant who carried his weapons, “Come on, let's cross over to (attack) the Philistine garrison on the other side.” However, he did not tell his father.

And his father at the time is pretty much paralyzed by fear. He and his 600 troops are not going anywhere. Jonathan, however, acts with a boldness which comes from his faith in the Lord. And that is

a major theme of our text – Jonathan's faith in contrast to Saul's fear. To reach the Philistine garrison, Jonathan has to go down one cliff and up another whose names literally mean “slippery” and “thorny.” There is nothing easy about this mission. Yet, Jonathan's faith is strong.

1 Samuel 14:6 – Jonathan said to the attendant who carried his weapons, “Come on, let's cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised men...”

Jonathan sees this as a battle between God's people, Israel, and people who have no use for God, the Philistines.

Perhaps the LORD will help us...

The perhaps is a recognition that the Sovereign God acts however He pleases. The Lord is not taking orders from Jonathan. This man has plenty of faith. He says:

Nothing can keep the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.”

And his companion, the arms-bearer, seems to share that faith.

1 Samuel 14:7 – “Do what is in your heart. You choose. I'm right here with you whatever you decide.”

In verses 8-10, Jonathan comes up with a little test to determine how the Lord intends to help them. This is not always a wise thing to do, but that is a topic for another day. Jonathan says if the Philistines invite us into their fortress, that will be a sign the Lord is going to give us victory over them. And sure enough, the men in the garrison see Jonathan and his assistant down at the bottom of the cliff and call out.

1 Samuel 14:12b – “Come on up, Hebrews, and we'll teach you a lesson!”

Two men could not possibly be a threat to a whole garrison, right? Yet, this is the sign from the Lord for which Jonathan was waiting.

1 Samuel 14:12c – “Follow me,” Jonathan told his armor-bearer, “for the LORD has handed them over to Israel.”

The author doesn't give us a lot of details about the battle that follows. Jonathan and his companion climb up to the garrison and attack, killing about twenty men in their initial assault. And that changes everything.

1 Samuel 14:15 – Terror spread through the Philistine camp and the open fields to all the troops. Even the garrison and the raiding parties were terrified. The earth shook, and terror spread from God.

This is the Lord's victory over the Philistines. When Saul sees what is happening, he begins to regain his courage. He has the priest Ahijah and the Ark of God brought to him to inquire what his next step should be. Yet, when he sees the panic among the Philistines...

1 Samuel 14:19 – Saul said to the priest, “Stop what you're doing.”

In other words, I don't need to hear anything more from God. I will just go into battle. Some of his troops who had deserted to the Philistines decide to rejoin Saul's army, along with those who had been hiding. This revitalized army joins the battle, and the Philistines are defeated. The author's summary is:

1 Samuel 14:23 – So the LORD saved Israel that day.

And then we have an extended post-script to the story. While Jonathan recognized the battle as the Lord defeating His enemies, Saul sees it as an opportunity for personal revenge.

1 Samuel 14:24 – Saul placed (his) troops under an oath: “The man who eats food before evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies is cursed.”

As a result, these soldiers become hungry and weak. They find honey in the forest...

1 Samuel 14:26b – ...but none of them ate any of it because they feared the oath.

Jonathan, however, had not taken that oath so...

1 Samuel 14:27b – When he ate the honey, he had renewed energy.

He then tells the soldiers that his father had made them take a foolish vow. They were hungry. They should not only have been eating honey, but all the other food the Philistines had left behind. And Saul's rash vow does indeed have negative consequences. The Israelite troops capture and slaughter sheep and cattle from the Philistines. Because they are so hungry, they violate God's law and eat the meat without first draining the blood from it. That was clearly wrong for them to do.

This bothers Saul, who like so many folks, is much better at recognizing the sins of others than he is his own. He orders his men to make sacrifices to the Lord, and then he wants them to continue to pursue the Philistine army.

His troops, however, want confirmation that this is what the Lord wants them to do. So Saul inquires of the Lord, but this time he receives no answer. He becomes frustrated, feels that God has abandoned him because of sin committed by someone in his army. He decided that whoever broke the oath against eating food should be killed as a punishment. He eventually learns that it was Jonathan who ate the honey. Yet, he is ready to execute his own son.

1 Samuel 14:45 – But the people said to Saul, “Must Jonathan die, who accomplished such a great deliverance for Israel? No, as the LORD lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he worked with God's help today.”

The people's loyalty is no longer really to their king, Saul. Jonathan is now the one for whom they are willing to risk their lives.

The next verses describe some highlights of Saul's reign. But in reality, his 40 years as king were a disappointment, both to the Lord and Israel. Oh, people had thought that having a king like all the other nations would mean the end of their problems, but that was not the case. And choosing to put their confidence in Jonathan instead of Saul really was not the answer either. Because of his father's sin, Jonathan would never become king. Yet, if he would have, he too would have disappointed those who thought he would be the answer to all their problems.

No human leader, no human effort, no human idea

or human invention can do that. Only the Lord can truly solve our problems. And He promises to do that, in His way and in His time, if we place our trust in Him.

And friends, that is really the main lesson the Lord has for us today. When the challenges of life come, which they inevitably will, you will be disappointed if you place your trust in anyone or anything other than the Lord.

Now, that doesn't mean God doesn't use other people and other things in our lives. I am very grateful for family members and friends, including many in this room, who have supported and encouraged me in many different ways over the years.

But, by God's grace, I need to make sure that no one or no thing ever causes me to forget that the Lord is to be the object of my trust, my confidence, and my worship.

Warning against idolatry is a main theme of both the Bible and my sermons. The main problem with idolatry is that it puts someone or something else ahead of God and dishonors Him. It diverts the worship that rightly belongs to the Lord toward someone or something else. That is not good.

Yet, our text today highlights a second argument against idolatry. Idols always ultimately disappoint those who make them the object of their trust, allegiance or focus.

As one successful actress said, "I learned that money can buy happiness...for a few hours."

John White, a psychologist who used to teach at the University of Manitoba, said that he knew numerous wealthy people who were happy, but none of those folks had made becoming rich their goal in life. It was not their idol. He said, however, that any wealthy person whose goal in life had been

to get a lot of money, was never really satisfied, never really happy. If wealth is an idol, it will always disappoint, as will any other idol, no matter whatever or whoever it is.

"But, Pastor Dan, maybe the problem is that we get disappointed because our expectations are too high. Maybe we need to learn to be content with whatever satisfaction we find in life." No, I don't think so. The problem is not that we want too much out of life, but that we try to fulfill desires in the wrong way, through the wrong things.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

"It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Friends, the reality, as Pascal said, is that there is a God-shaped vacuum inside every human being. We need to make sure we don't try to fill this God-shaped vacuum with anyone or anything other than God. If we do, we will be disappointed.

But when, by God's grace, we allow Him to fill it, we can be sure we will ultimately experience eternal joy. Yes, we will have to be patient. This joy will never be fully experienced while we are on this earth.

Yet, if we are trusting in the Lord Jesus, we will find that all along our journey there are many temporal joys which He gives us. These are tokens of His love, reminders of His promises, and tastes of the joy that will one day be ours, reminding us that those who trust in the true God, not in false gods, will never be disappointed.