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Sha'ul's Foolish Oath

First Samuel 14: 24-35

Sha'ul's foolish oath DIG: What was Sha'ul's reasoning behind making that oath? What were the two possible reasons for Sha'ul's giving his foolish vow? Why did Sha'ul start to become more "religious?" Why did Jonathan eat the honey if there was a curse against it? Why did the soldiers eat meat with blood in it?

REFLECT: Have you ever committed yourself to something foolish? What can believers do to make sure that we aren't committed to doing something foolish? When have you become exhausted following someone else's wayward plans? What blueprint for living should you be following? Who can you pray for?

The Bible's commentary on Sha'ul's foolish oath, is given by means of an incident involving his son Jonathan.

The spiritual conditions of our hearts are revealed not only by the actions we perform but also by the words we speak. **For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Mt 12:34).** When you read **King Sha'ul's** words recorded in Scripture, they often reveal a heart controlled by pride, foolishness, and deceit. **He** would say foolish things just to impress people with **his** "spirituality," when in reality **he** was walking far from **God**.³⁰⁶

The reasons for Sha'ul's oath (14:24-27): The effect of **Sha'ul's** foolishness can be seen in the transition between the first half of **Chapter 14** and the second half: **So ADONAI delivered Isra'el that day . . . Now Isra'el's soldiers had been driven to physical exhaustion and hunger that day (14:23a-24).** The first statement refers to the results of **Jonathan's** bold assault (**to see link click Cf - Isra'el Routs the Philistines**), which received **God's** blessing. The second part resulted from **Sha'ul's** leadership. The king's effort served to almost snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, and by his foolishness **the Philistines** were able to survive their stunning defeat, and fight another day.

Jonathan's heroic assault drove **the Philistines** from the battlefield in panic and confusion. Now a relentless pursuit was necessary to utterly destroy **their** forces once-and-for-all. To that end, **Sha'ul**, who had seemingly awoken from a daze of fear, **issued this**

warning to them, saying: A curse on any man who eats any food until evening, when I will have finished taking vengeance on my enemies. So none of the troops tasted any food (14:24). To break it meant the death penalty. **Sha'ul's** heart was not right with **ADONAI** and **he** foolishly forced **his army** to agree to a vow of fasting **until evening**. **He** didn't impose the fast because it was the will of **YHVH** but because **he** wanted **his soldiers** to think **he** was a man wholly dedicated to **the LORD**. But this command was only more evidence of **Sha'ul's** confused and irrational faith. **He** thought that **their** fasting would impress **Ha'Shem** and **He** would give them victory. But no sensible commander would deprive his troops of food for energy while they were fighting the enemy.³⁰⁷ The Bible doesn't inform us of **Sha'ul's** precise reasoning in making **the oath**, but **two possibilities** seem most likely.

First, the king may have had a legitimate concern that the pursuit of the Philistines would lag behind if Isra'el's soldiers were preoccupied with looting the enemy camp for food and other valuables. Ancient soldiers had to provide their own food, so the temptation of being preoccupied from the fight to gain the spoils of victory was real. Instead of this, **Sha'ul** wanted every soldier to press the fight unceasingly and destroy the enemy completely. If that was **Sha'ul's** intent, then his oath was foolishly harsh, both in forbidding **the soldiers** from **eating** and in binding **them** to **his oath**. As a result, **Isra'el's soldiers had been driven to physical exhaustion** and hunger **that day (14:24)**.

Second, the reason for **the oath** becomes more likely when we consider the context of **his** recent experiences. **Sha'ul** was becoming more "religious" since **his** rejection by **Samuel** for the **sin** of improperly sacrificing **a burnt offering** (see the commentary of **Leviticus** [Ai - The Burnt Offering: Accepted by God](#)) at **Gilgal (13:8-9)**. After **Sha'ul's** initial battle that began this war with **the Philistines**, **Samuel** had directed **the king** to go to the ancestral meeting place and wait for **seven days** for **the prophet** to arrive and make the sacrifice that would bring **God's** favor. As the period drew to its end without **Samuel** having arrived, and as **his** military situation got worse by the minute, **Sha'ul** had rashly offered the sacrifice **himself**, in violation of **God's** commands. For this, **Samuel** rebuked **Sha'ul** and informed **him** that **the LORD** had rejected **his** kingship (**13:8-14**). In the aftermath of this rebuke, **Sha'ul** seems to have devoted **himself** to religious observance at the same time that **his** heart grew more reckless and harder. One example is the way in which **Sha'ul** first sought divine guidance after **Jonathan** had attacked and then impatiently interrupted **the high priest** when **YHVH** refused to answer (**14:18-19**). As a further example of this renewed commitment to religious observance, as seen above (**14:24**), **Sha'ul** ordered **the Israelite soldiers** to fast during **their** battle, perhaps as a foolish attempt to appease **ADONAI**, who was silent to **him**.³⁰⁸



The Bible's commentary on **Sha'ul's foolish oath** is given by means of an incident involving **his son Jonathan**, the hero of this chapter. When **Jonathan** and **his armor-bearer** joined the Israelite army in their pursuit of the Philistines the entire army came to a forest where there was some honey on the ground. When they had entered the forest, they saw the honeycomb with honey dripping out; but no one put his hand to his mouth, because they feared the oath. But Jonathan hadn't heard his father charging the people with the oath, so unwittingly, he put out the end of the staff in his hand, dipped it in the honeycomb, raised it to his mouth, and his eyes lit up, implying renewal of strength (14:25-27).

The results of Sha'ul's oath (14:28-35): But one of Jonathan's fellow soldiers saw him and warned: Your father strictly charged the army with an oath, "A curse on any man who eats any food today," even though the soldiers are fainting with hunger." But Jonathan wasn't too worried, and he even dared to admit that his father's leadership had brought trouble to the land, by imposing an unnecessary hardship on his soldiers (14:28).³⁰⁹ Jonathan knew that militarily, it was a foolish decision. This was a provocative

statement because it is the same terminology used previously in the Bible for an individual whose **sin** caused **Isra'el** to lose **God's** blessing. In the book of **Joshua**, **Achan brought trouble on Isra'el** by **his sins** of stealing dedicated items from the ruin of **Jericho** (see the commentary on **Joshua Bf - The Execution of Achan**). **Jonathan**, who surely knew **his father's** heart and motives well, plainly stated that **his father's sin** and foolishness were hindering **Isra'el** from enjoying **God's** full blessing in battle. This was the practical effect of **Sha'ul's oath**, for **the soldiers** were **fainting with hunger**. **Jonathan** exclaimed sadly: **Just look how my eyes have lit up because I tasted a little of this honey. How much greater would the slaughter of the Philistines have been today if the soldiers had been able to eat freely of the spoil they found among their enemies (14:29-30)!³¹⁰**

Sha'ul's foolish **oath** not only weakened **the soldiers** physically and hindered **their** ability to pursue **the enemy**, but it also created in **the men** an abnormal craving for food. **That day they had attacked the Philistines from Micmash to Aijalon**, the border of **the Philistine** plain, about twenty miles away. **But the soldiers were very hungry (14:31)**. When the sun set and ushered in a new day, **the oath** was no longer in force, and **the soldiers** acted like animals as **they rushed at the spoil, seizing sheep, cows and calves, slaughtering them on the ground, and eating the flesh with the blood**. However, because **blood** was a symbol of life (**Leviticus 17:1-16**), **the Israelites** were not permitted to **eat meats** that had not yet been **drained of blood** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Cu - Do Not Eat the Blood**). A truly spiritual **oath** always brings out the best in people, but **Sha'ul's oath** brought out the worst.³¹¹

Once again, **Sha'ul** was anxious to make an impression by **his** outward show of "religion." Accordingly, when **someone** informed **him** that **the men are sinning against ADONAI, eating with the blood,** he responded with zeal. Scolding **the "treacherous" soldiers**, he said arrogantly: **You have sinned!** Immediately, **the king** took charge, **he** ordered: **Roll a large stone to me immediately (14:32-33)!** That **large stone** was a place where **the blood** could be immediately **drained**. It would also serve as an altar where **the blood** could be sprinkled; and in that way, **it** did become a high place. This would serve the same purpose as another **large stone** did earlier in **Beth-Shemesh** (see **Bk - The Ark at Beth-Shemesh**). Consequently, the killing and draining of **the blood** would not require a **priest**.³¹²

Then Sha'ul sent messengers to all **the soldiers**, saying, **"Each of you is to bring his cow and his sheep and slaughter them here. Then eat. Don't sin against ADONAI by eating with the blood."** So each man brought his animal with him that evening and killed it there (14:34). Flush with this external religious observance, **Sha'ul** built an

altar on top of **the large stone to ADONAI**. The text adds the suggestive note: **it was the first time he had done that (14:35)**. **Sha'ul**, who was distancing **himself** from **ADONAI**, now began to **build altars**, being most zealous (as many are) for the form of godliness when **he** was denying the power of it. In all **his** actions, **Sha'ul** showed no sign of repentance toward **YHVH**, grieving over **sin**, or a real zeal in honoring **the LORD**. **He** only felt that **his** own interests as **king** were being threatened (see the commentary on **Ezra-Nehemiah Ch - The Completion of the Walls Despite Opposition: ten fatal flaws that derail those who think they are in charge**). It was that selfish motive that made him determined to be even more "religious."³¹³

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being so wonderful! I can hardly imagine how amazing life will be living with **You** in heaven for all eternity! It is incredible that **Messiah** is preparing a place in heaven for those who love **Him**. **Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be (John 14:1-3).***

*Thank **You** that **Messiah** will return to take **His Bride** home to heaven (**Revelation 19:6-9**). For if we believe that **Yeshua** died and rose again, so with **Him** God will also bring those who have fallen asleep in **Yeshua**. For this we tell you, by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord shall in no way precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the blast of God's shofar, and the dead in **Messiah** shall rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left behind, will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air - and so we shall always be with the Lord (**1 Thessalonians 4:14-17**).*

*Fame and fortune will mean nothing when we leave this earth for our heavenly dwelling. All that matters is to live for **You** while we have the wonderful opportunity to love **You** with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (**Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27**). It is a joy and a privilege to do everything for **Your** approval, seeking to please **You** in our thinking, in our planning, in all we do. What peace it brings to give **You** first place in my life by praising **You** when I go to sleep and also praising **You** first thing when I rise. You are worthy! **With a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12b-c)**. In the name of **Messiah Yeshua** and thru the power of **His** resurrection. Amen*