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The Rescue of Jonathan

First Samuel 14: 36-46

The rescue of Jonathan DIG: Why do you suppose God refused to answer Sha'ul? Why did ADONAI single out Jonathan? What could YHVH be trying to tell Sha'ul through the Urim and Thummim? Why did Sha'ul make another oath? Where did the loyalty of Sha'ul's troops lie: With Sha'ul? Jonathan? ADONAI?

REFLECT: What position of authority do you presently find yourself in? How do you guard yourself from being bullied by abusive authority? How can you be more godly in defending yourself? In what ways are you impulsive and uncertain in your words? What lessons can be learned from Sha'ul's foolish behavior?

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

Earlier, we heard **Jonathan's** frustration with **his father's foolish oath** to act religious (**to see link click [Ch](#) - Sha'ul's Foolish Oath**). Now, it is another man closest to the king who expressed concern over the wisdom of **his** commands. Evening had already come, and that's why **Sha'ul's oath** was not long binding, and everyone had eaten. Now **the king** envisioned a renewed pursuit of **the Philistines** during the **night**.³¹⁴ **Sha'ul** said: **Let's attack the Philistines by night**. This would be a surprise attack because **armies** of that day didn't fight **at night**. **We'll plunder them until dawn**. Then **he** added: **We won't leave one of them alive** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy [Ag](#) - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**). **His** purpose would be to destroy **the Philistine** ability to continue waging war. **The soldiers** answered: **Do whatever seems good to you**. By that time **they** had eaten and **their** energy had returned.

The Urim and Thummim (14:36-37): But **Ahijah the high priest** said: **Let's inquire of God here**. This was a polite way of suggesting that **they** consult **the LORD** before acting on **Sha'ul's** plan. **Sha'ul**, perhaps deriving new hope from **his** most recent religious observance, agreed to seek a revelation from **YHVH** through **the Urim** and **the Thummim** of **the high priest** (see the commentary on **Exodus [Gb](#) - The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions**). So **Sha'ul** consulted God, asking: **Should I go down in**

pursuit of the Philistines? Will you hand them over to Isra'el? But the response of **the Urim and Thummim** was that **God didn't answer him that day**. **ADONAI** wouldn't answer either "yes" or "no." We can only imagine **Sha'ul's** frustration. Therefore, although **Sha'ul's oath** was a **foolish** one, it was still a binding oath made in **God's Name**, and the **sin** resulted in the silence of **Ha'Shem**.³¹⁵ Imagine the effect this failure must have had on **the troops**, standing by to renew the assault, only to witness the silence of **the LORD** toward **their king** and **high priest**. **God's** refusal to give an omen was an ominous omen in itself!

Sin in the camp (14:38-39): **ADONAI's** refusal to speak to **Sha'ul** or **Ahijah** subjected **the king's** religious observance to public ridicule. **The king** obviously felt it necessary to provide a reason for the failure, and remembering **Isra'el's** earlier lesson in which **Achan's sin** had hampered **the whole nation** (see the commentary on **Joshua Bd - The Sin of Achan**). Then, calling for **the Urim and Thummim** again, **Sha'ul** said: **Come here, all you who are leaders of the army. Think carefully: who has committed this sin today? Sha'ul** knew there was **sin** in the camp that caused the silence of **God**. But **he** didn't know what the **sin** was or who committed **it**. Then, not surprisingly, **Sha'ul** made another rash **oath**. **For, as sure as ADONAI is Isra'el's deliverer, even if it proves to be Jonathan my son, he must be put to death**. Just as **Jonathan** personified the triumphant faith of **Gideon** of old, **Sha'ul** personified **the foolishness** of **Jephthah (Judges 11:30-40)**. But even though there were those present who knew that **Jonathan** was the guilty party, **no one among all the people answered him**. They did not want to be responsible for **Jonathan's death**.



The identification of Jonathan (14:40-42): Then he said to all Isra'el, "You be on one side, and Jonathan my son and I will be on the other side." It is obvious that Sha'ul expected the guilty one to be among the people. The people replied to Sha'ul, "Do what seems good to you." Then Sha'ul prayed to ADONAI, the God of Isra'el, "Give me the perfect answer?" So, Ahijah the high priest inquired of the Urim and Thummim, and Jonathan and Sha'ul were chosen, and contrary to Sha'ul's expectations, the people were free from any guilt. It was not obvious why Sha'ul put himself and his son on one side and the rest of Isra'el on the other. Perhaps this reflected his guilty need to exonerate himself, and he added Jonathan in an attempt to bolster his case. Having exonerated himself, he could then safely play the role of Joshua in calling for a new Achan to emerge to face judgment. But this plan, too, was frustrated by the LORD. Then Sha'ul said to Ahijah, "Cast the Urim and Thummim once again between me and Jonathan, my son. And Jonathan was chosen." Ha'Shem did not pronounce the death sentence, He merely identified the one who had broken Sha'ul's oath made in God's Name.³¹⁶

The rescue of Jonathan (14:43-46): Then Sha'ul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you did." Jonathan confessed, "Yes, I tasted a little honey with the end of the staff in my hand. And he did not try to justify himself by saying he had not heard of the oath before doing so. He candidly admitted, and for that I must die." Jonathan recognized that he must pay the penalty for violating an oath made in God's Name. But Sha'ul, showing his true character and lack of leadership, said: May God do the same to me and more also if

you are not put to death, Jonathan (14:43-44)! Now the penalty for violating **an oath** was not **death**. However, **Sha'ul** had made another **oath** in **God's Name** to execute the guilty party; thus, for **Sha'ul** not to execute **his son**, put **Sha'ul** in violation of **his own oath!**³¹⁷

But the people said to Sha'ul, "Must Jonathan die, he who has accomplished this great deliverance in Isra'el (see [Ce - Jonathan Attacks the Philistines](#))? The irony was that without Jonathan, there would have been no great victory to begin with! No! Now the people made their own oath! As ADONAI lives, not one hair of his head will fall to the ground; because he did this today with God's help!" In this way the people rescued (Hebrew: *vaiyifdu*, meaning *redeemed*) Jonathan, so that he didn't die. Then Sha'ul stopped pursuing the Philistines from a more decisive defeat, and the Philistines returned to their own land (14:45-46). Sha'ul's credibility was now completely shattered - a remarkable achievement for a king on a day when God had granted such a great victory over his enemies. Yet, because of Sha'ul's foolishness, the Philistine army lived to fight again, and ironically, this would eventually cost Sha'ul his own life (see [Dk - Sha'ul Takes His Own Life](#)).

What lessons should we learn from Sha'ul's foolish behavior? As Richard Phillips relates in his commentary on **1 Samuel**, **the first lesson** is that the recovery of **God's** favor requires those who have **sinned** to humble themselves before **ADONAI**, seeking **His** grace. The absence of such humble contrition, with a frank admission of **his sins** and failures, is the glaring omission from the many accounts of **Sha'ul's** reign.

The difference between **sinful Sha'ul** and **sinful David** is the same difference between the **sinful** apostate **Judas** and the **sinful** apostle **Peter**, both of whom betrayed **Yeshua** on the night of **His** arrest. The difference between **David** and **Peter**, on the one hand, and **Sha'ul** and **Judas**, on the other, is a humility that repents of **sin** and seeks **the Lord's mercy**. **David's** great prayer of repentance begins with both a fervent plea for **mercy** and a trusting faith in **God's** offer of forgiveness through the sacrificial blood: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin (Psalm 51:1-2).** **David's** faith was looking forward to the true **Lamb of God, Yeshua Messiah**, represented by the blood of lambs and goats and bulls, who takes away our **sin (John 1:29)**. There was nothing keeping **Sha'ul** from this same kind of sincere repentance and faith, with the result that he would have been restored to **ADONAI's** favor, except the hardness of **his** unbelieving heart. Here we see **Sha'ul's** ultimate **foolishness**: at every turn **he**

resorted to outward shows of religious observance, which served only to avoid the opening of **his** heart in humble repentance before **the LORD**.

This lesson applies to every **sinner** affected with the **foolishness** of his or her own **sin**. Do not think that **God** can be bought off with good works, religious observance, or cash payments. **Ha'Shem** calls on every **sinner** to confess his or her **sin** and appeal to the blood of **the Savior** whom **YHVH** has sent, **Yeshua Messiah**. **He** promises: **If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (First John 1:9)**. **Yeshua Himself** gives the verdict on **Sha'ul's** failed religion: **Everyone who lifts himself up will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be lifted up (Luke 18:14)**. Since **Sha'ul** was seeking to **lift himself up**, **his** proud progress was all downhill; whereas, if **he** had lowered **himself** in humility, **God** would have **lifted him up** in true spiritual progress and strength.

Second, **Sha'ul** shows the need for spiritual leaders to be sincerely motivated for **God's** will and the salvation of **God's people**, and not for mere self-interested gain. People who rely on their positional leadership, without an inspiring example of faith and a living ministry of **God's** grace, are as likely to harden their followers against **the Lord** as they are to lead them to salvation (see **Ezra-Nehemiah Ch - The Completion of the Walls Despite Opposition: ten fatal flaws that derail those who think they are in charge**). Consider the remarkable faithfulness exhibited by **Jonathan** and the faithful endurance of **Isra'el's soldiers**, who did **their** best to keep **Sha'ul's foolish oath**. Yet, in the end, the bitter effects of hard-hearted spiritual leadership can only alienate true-hearted followers, so the **foolish** leaders find their strongest opposition in the most faithful servants.

Third, **Sha'ul** reveals the destiny of even the best of us if we are not guided by **the Word of God**. Notice the absence of **the prophet Samuel** and the silence of **YHVH**! This reveals **Ha'Shem's** primary judgment on **Sha'ul's** unbelief. How tragic it is when we believers foolishly place ourselves in the same position by failing to pray and reflect daily on **God's Word**. It is a fearful thing to leave **ADONAI** and **His** ways only to give one's self up to the impulses of one's own heart? Fearful for even the humblest of us, let alone one with great resources and influence, with a whole nation under him! Let us fear, indeed, that such a disaster should happen to us, our families, or the congregations of **God**. Instead, let the wisdom of **the Psalms** speak to the desire of our hearts. **Make me know Your ways, ADONAI, teach me Your paths. Guide me in Your truth, and teach me; for You are the God who saves me, my hope is in You all day long. Remember Your compassion and grace, ADONAI; for these are ages old. O LORD, don't remember my youthful**



sins or transgressions; but remember me according to Your grace for the sake of Your goodness (Psalm 25:4-7).³¹⁸