

“Scrambling after the Son”

Introduction: As we, from time to time, bring to mind the Big Story of God of which we are a part, we note four primary movements. We celebrate the gift of God’s good and beautiful *creation*; we mourn the *fall* into brokenness that results due to the entrance of sin into the world at the failure of those who God created to trust that his care and leadership was worthy of being followed instead of their own; we rejoice in the rescue and *redemption* from that sin that God has made possible through the life and death of his Son; and we anticipate the *new creation* that the Son will bring into being when he returns, not an existence of having to listen to long sermons and sing endlessly from a red hymnal (or sing praise songs which never seem to end), but an existence that is sin-free, abundant, creative, and lived intimately with God and his people.

As the Bible presents them, the first two movements of creation and fall happen within the first two and a half chapters, and new creation, though sprinkled throughout, is not really put into words until the final two chapters. Virtually all of the ink in the Bible goes to describing redemption, and already in Genesis 3 we can hear the beginning of this promise in God’s word to Satan, the serpent or deceiver: “From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Ge. 3:15, NLT). It’s God’s promise that one of the descendants of Eve will one day crush the snake and restore what Adam had lost.

So you might well imagine that over the years, decades, and even centuries, hopeful people kept their eye out for the one who would fulfill this promise. Who would the new Adam be? In 1 Samuel 11, it looks as if it could be Saul, Israel’s first king. There we read about his defeat of a commander named Nahash, the Ammonite. Since Nahash means “snake” or “serpent,” could Saul be the redeemer king? Well, as we learned last week in our look at chapter 15, Saul was definitely not the new Adam! In fact, in these intervening chapters, we see Saul repeating the behavior of the old Adam, trusting in himself, ignoring the Lord, and filled with denial and excuses.

However, there is a light in these chapters in the figure of Jonathan, the son of Saul. Because of Saul’s disobedience, we learn in ch. 13 that Jonathan would not inherit his father’s throne, nor would he be the ultimate King or new Adam. But, as we will see, Jonathan does point to the one, to the Son, who would be. Jesus, we can say, is the true and greater Jonathan, the one we need to go before us and the one who then calls us to scramble after him on the adventure that is life and mission.

I. Into the Jaws of Death

A. 1 Samuel 14 describes one of the many battles the Israelites had with a people group called the Philistines. As the narrator sets the scene for us, he describes the terrain in some detail. We hear that the respective armies were encamped on the tops of two steep hills, facing each other, with a deep gully (wadi) running between them. The names of the two cliffs are Bozez, which means “slippery,” and Seneh, which means “thorny.” Not, in other words, the best place to have to fight a battle! We also learn, in the previous chapter, that the Israelites were severely outnumbered and underequipped. To their six hundred men, the Philistines had three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as “numerous as the sand on the seashore” (13:5). To make matters worse, only Saul and his

son Jonathan had swords; the rest of the men had to make do with instruments they could find on their farms, from axes to sickles to components they salvaged from their plows (13:19-22).

B. And yet Jonathan was undeterred. Rather than cower in fear, he and his armor bearer begin by scoping things out in order to hatch a plan. Why Jonathan didn't include his father in any of this is not clear. A hint we have is that a man named Ahijah was the one who his dad had brought along as his spiritual advisor; he was the priest wearing the ephod, a device used in those days to discern the will of God. But we learn that Ahijah came from a fairly corrupt line of priests so it's likely Jonathan didn't trust his dad's ability to hear rightly from God. Jonathan knew that only if God acted, would his people have any hope. Jonathan's means of discernment was to put himself out in the open! He and his armor bearer would scramble down to the valley where they'd be exposed. As Jonathan explained it, when the Philistines see us, if they say, "we're coming down," we'll go no further. But if the Philistines say, "come up to us," we'll take it as a sign that God is with us and will lead us to victory.

C. To which the armor bearer must have said, "What, are you crazy man? Either way, that sounds like a horrible plan, not to mention the fact that I've also got to scramble around after you lugging all this blankety-blank armor! You go down; I'm staying right here." But that's not what happened. Instead, the armor-bearer, who had declared, "I am with you heart and soul," made good on that declaration. When Jonathan went down the cliff, the armor-bearer went down. When Jonathan began to scramble with hands and feet up the opposite cliff, the armor-bearer followed right behind him. Together, we see, the two were victorious. Their initial attack would lead to an incredible defeat of Israel's enemies.

D. The temptation, I think, is to look at this account and wonder how we can be faithful and bold, like Jonathan. To be sure, being faithful and bold are good things. But I think Jonathan here is more than an example; he is primarily a pointer to Jesus. To help see this, know that the word for "cliff" in v. 4, or "rocky crag" (ESV), is literally the word used for "tooth." So, if you can picture one "tooth" standing to the north, and one "tooth" to the south, what it suggests is a pair of jaws, and what can be pictured is Jonathan and his armor-bearer descending down one tooth, into the "jaws of death," and then emerging from that death grip in a kind of resurrection as they ascended to the other side, up the other tooth, where they begin defeating the enemies of God's people. Doesn't it sound just a little like the death and resurrection of Jesus?! Jesus descended to the cross, entered the jaws of death, and then rose, emerging to overcome our primary enemies of sin and death.

II. Right Behind the Son

A. If we can grasp that picture, what it points to is that the example for us to emulate is not Jonathan because Jesus is the one who eventually stood in those boots. Jesus became the true and greater Jonathan who goes ahead of us to fight our enemies. Jesus is the true Son, the new Adam, the ultimate king. He is the one who descended into death and rose into victory. Who, then, is our example? Our example is the armor-bearer, the one who stuck close to the son and could be brave and bold and successful precisely because he chose to scramble faithfully right behind the son. His job was not to be Jonathan; it was to stick close to him, trust him, and join him in his work.

B. Similarly, our job is not to be Jesus but to be with him and to stick close to him, the one who knows his way up the rocks of life and has the power to get us to the top safely. The struggle for us all is that often we think we know best. Just like we can struggle in coming to faith initially because it's hard

for us to admit we need a savior, so it can be hard for us, as we seek to live out our faith and participate in God's mission in the world, to admit that we can't do that on our own either. "I've got this, Jesus" we'd like to believe. "Send me out, Jesus," we proclaim. But such an attitude usually leads to frustration and burnout and failure. It's what got Paul so upset with the Galatian Christians (Gal. 3:3): "Are you so foolish?" he asked. "After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" What we can miss is that the kind of battle we're in cannot be fought in our own strength, without the Son. That's because, as Paul describes it for the Christians in Ephesus, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:12). Those Philistine swords only pointed toward a greater enemy that we face each and every day.

C. So we need, as Paul exhorts, to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. And we do that by sticking right behind him, putting on his armor: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:10-17). Under our own power, we cannot hope to stand. But the truly freeing good news is that as we scramble right behind the Son, and seek to live in his power, we can be victorious. Jesus is now risen and living within us, empowering us to live that new life by the power of his Spirit. As Paul put it to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

What an adventure that must have been scrambling up and down those rocks with Jonathan! What an adventure Jesus has in store for us as we follow where he leads, loving and caring and forgiving and healing and challenging. Like that armor-bearer, can we say, "Lord, I am with you heart and soul," trusting that if we are right behind him it's the very best place we can be? Let's recalibrate our bearings for this journey as we join him at the cross.