

## **Saul and Jonathan**

During the early period of Saul's kingship Saul realizes the need for a standing army.

Up until now, Israel has depended on a militia that is called up in case of an emergency. Now Saul creates a core of three thousand men, two thousand of which are under his command and the other thousand under Jonathan's command.

Relief of Jabesh-gilead is accomplished by Saul dividing his militia into three divisions. Jonathan, no doubt commands one of the divisions at Jabesh-gilead.

Jonathan's first battle after the relief effort is the battle of Geba where he defeats a Philistine garrison.

Scripture is silent about the engagement. However, the Philistines respond by a massive attack on Israelite territory. Using thousands of chariots, cavalry, and infantry, the Philistines gain control of Michmash, which is just east of Bethaven.

The Philistine army is composed of both Philistines and foreign mercenaries, including some who are Israelites. Faced with this tremendous army, Israel shrinks into nearby caves and flee across the Jordan eastward.

Saul is camped at Gilgal waiting for Samuel to offer a burnt offering to the Lord on behalf of Israel. Saul, terrified by the defection of all but 600 men and needing the Lord's approval, offers the sacrifice himself. Samuel tells Saul that because of his disobedience his kingdom will not be established, and that the Lord has already chosen a replacement for him. (I Samuel 13:14)

Saul and Jonathan now join forces with about 600 men. The Philistines push in and encamp around Michmash.

Jonathan is the type of hero that stirs the imagination. Few equal his fearlessness in battle. Jonathan is the first-born son of King Saul and is about 30 years old when he and David first meet. His story is an inspiration to all who dream of being courageous.

The Philistines have stripped Israel of all of its iron weapons. So a battle is about to take place and Israel only possesses weapons mostly made of the softer metal, bronze, making them much inferior to the Philistine weaponry.

A small outpost of twenty Philistines occupies a rocky crag in front of the main garrison at Michmash. Jonathan, with his armor bearer, observes the outpost and decides with the Lord's help they can overcome the outpost.

The outpost is on a high v-shaped ledge wedged between two narrow gorges on the south in front of Geba. Jonathan and his armor bearer go to the side of the gorge out of sight of the Philistines and climb up on their hands and knees. Pictures of the location reveal many rocks and boulders, making it difficult to traverse.

As they arrive at the top the battle begins, and twenty Philistines fall. How, one may inquire, can two overcome twenty? Jonathan and his armor bearer use a method of combat, which is rare but highly effective. Normally in hand-to-hand combat, a combatant must be both offensive and defensive, attacking and defending the enemy at the same time.

It is difficult to divide attention in this manner. Jonathan overcomes this dilemma with a form of combat that allows him to be offensive and the armor bearer defensive.

To be effective the two must function as one. This form of combat takes considerable practice and trust. However, it is almost unbeatable in close-quarter fighting. In the space of about a half acre of ground, twenty Philistines are killed. The Philistine garrison, observing the

battle, is terrified. Apparently, the Lord sends an earthquake, which intensifies the fear, and everyone starts running in all directions.

Saul, seeing the panic among the Philistines, tries to determine what is happening and what he should do. He discovers Jonathan gone, the tumult increasing and the Philistines starting to flee—so he attacks. Saul is joined by many of those who had deserted, along with some Hebrew mercenaries among the Philistines. The Philistines are cut down as they flee the battlefield.

However, King Saul makes some costly mistakes. First, he wastes time trying to determine what is going on and who is responsible. He is indecisive about what to do and makes impulsive decisions.

He does not allow his men to eat because he wants them to pursue the enemy, even making it a criminal offense worthy of death if they eat anything. The army needs food to fight. As a result, Saul's army, weary from fighting without nourishment, eventually stops pursuing the enemy to plunder food.

Two brave, courageous, god-fearing men start this major battle, and it results in a major defeat for the enemy. Two men induce 30,000 of the enemy to flee. There is a lesson for us in this battle. Fearlessness in the face of the enemy, combined with a companion who knows us well, can achieve success, even the impossible, with God's help.

We meet Jonathan again before his death. Saul and his spies are chasing David constantly.

The biblical text says: Jonathan, mindful of David's emotional state, comes to encourage David. Jonathan renews again his covenant with David expressing a desire of his heart, which can never be. Jonathan hopes one day to rule side by side with David.

A postscript to Jonathan's life appears at the end of 1 Samuel 31:1-6

Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines followed hard on Saul and on his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Malchishua, the sons of Saul. The battle went hard against Saul, and the archers overtook him; and he was greatly distressed by reason of the archers. Then Saul said to his armor bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me!" But his armor bearer would not; for he was terrified. Therefore Saul took his sword, and fell on it. When his armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, he likewise fell on his sword, and died with him. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor bearer, and all his men, that same day together.

It is a sad end. Jonathan, being highly intelligent, must have known that Saul was choosing a poor place to do battle by gathering at Mt. Gilboa. Jonathan probably tried to warn Saul, but to no avail.

The Philistines had chosen to go north before entering Israel territory. This approach forced the Philistines to enter through the Carmel gorges, which are ideal places for ambushes. In these gorges, the Philistines would be defensive, unable to mount offensive attacks because they would have been in a long line with no room to maneuver.

Saul made no effort to stop the intrusion. Saul would have been able to see the gathering Philistine force from Gilboa. The sight filled him with terror.

In the ensuing battle Saul's forces, encountered chariot attacks and retreat until they find themselves at the top of Mt. Gilboa. The Philistines, with mounted archers, decimate Israel.

No doubt attacking from three sides along shallow mountain cliffs, the battle was lost. Chariots with archers would have been able to fire about ten arrows per chariot in the time it took to make a ten minute wide loop. One hundred chariots would easily blanket the top of Mt. Gilboa with a thousand arrows per minute. The Philistines had over 900 of these armed chariots.

There is an important lesson for the warrior in this story. God gives specific directions, and it is important to follow the directions. For four hundred years, the Lord has warned His

people not to use the tactics of the enemy. One does not fight armor on an open battlefield with lightly armed troops. One does not consult the devil if one wishes to talk to the Lord. Saul had murdered God's priest—now there was none to consult. Saul had made himself an enemy of God, and herein lies the lesson: continual disobedience makes one an enemy of God.

A word on Jonathan's covenant with David. David swore to Jonathan that he would not destroy the name of Jonathan or his offspring after David would ascend the throne. (1 Samuel 20:15ff)

Seven years after David is made king, some fifteen years after the promise is given, and David finally remembers his promise to Jonathan. David sends for Mephibosheth, who comes before David in abject terror, fearing for his life.

David puts him at ease and brings him to Jerusalem to be cared for at David's expense. Later when David must turn over the sons of Saul to be put to death for Saul's criminal acts, he withholds Mephibosheth because of his oath to Jonathan.

Promises are important. God expects us to make them in righteousness and keep them in all earnest.