

Faith, Courage & The Power of "Perhaps"

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[0 : 00] Well, this evening we're going to begin a short new series in our evening services.

It'll last about six weeks or so, and we're going to be looking at six different passages in 1 Samuel, all of which focus on the life of Jonathan.

Now, 1 and 2 Samuel are fascinating books. They're divided in our Bibles, but really originally they would have been one big book. And they tell the story of Israel's transition from being ruled by judges to becoming a monarchy ruled by a king.

So this transition has been made, judges were individuals who were raised up by God to lead the people, to rescue the people, and to guide them. But they weren't a kind of hereditary monarchy like what was the case in the countries surrounding Israel.

And 1 and 2 Samuel tells the story of how the nation of Israel moved from being governed by judges to being ruled by a king.

[1 : 07] There's three main people in these two books. Samuel, who was the last of the judges, Saul, who was Israel's first king but who failed, and David, the shepherd boy who became king.

And even though he also made big mistakes in his life, ultimately he was faithful to God. Or as 1 Samuel chapter 13 says, he was a man after God's own heart.

So these two books, 1 and 2 Samuel, are taking us on a fascinating journey as Israel becomes a monarchy, as the worship of God becomes centered on Jerusalem, as Israel's loyalty is tested, and as it becomes clear just what sort of king God wants his people to have.

But ultimately that perfect king isn't Saul. It isn't David. It isn't anybody in the Old Testament.

Ultimately God's true king is one that's still to come, which is why these two books are pointing us forward to the coming of Jesus Christ.

So that's the kind of main direction that the books of 1 and 2 Samuel are taking us in. But within that big picture, we also have many fascinating stories.

[2 : 28] And one of the most remarkable is the life of Jonathan. Jonathan was Saul's son, and he was David's best friend.

And that sounds straightforward enough, but in reality it was incredibly complicated. As Saul's son, Jonathan was Prince heir to the throne.

And yet as it becomes clear that it's David who is God's choice to be king instead of Saul, Jonathan sees that the crown that he was due to receive is actually going to go to his best friend.

The tension that arises between Saul and David is a huge theme in 1 Samuel. Jonathan's caught in the middle of all of that.

And his conduct in the midst of those circumstances is absolutely fascinating. And one of the things that makes it so fascinating is that there are many ways in which Jonathan is caught up in circumstances that seem so unfair.

[3 : 44] And yet in it all, his faith was amazing. And that's what our study is going to focus on over the next few evenings.

Our title is Jonathan, Living by Faith When Life is Unfair. Now, I hope that that instantly helps us to see how relevant all of this is to us, because so often life is unfair.

For every single one of us, for every single person on planet Earth, there are so many ways in which life is unfair. Personally we see war, exploitation, corruption, inequality and disaster which devastates people's lives and it's not fair.

Locally, we can see people suffering awful illnesses. We see people's lives ravaged by addiction.

We see people getting hurt or betrayed by others.

And it's not fair. And even personally, at times in our lives we face pain, physical or emotional, we face sorrow, disappointment, regret and heartbreak.

[5 : 05] And it's not fair. And the crucial thing that we need to recognise is that the conviction that life is unfair is a thoroughly biblical doctrine.

In other words, when we see something and we say that's not fair, we're not undermining the Bible, we're actually confirming everything that the Bible teaches.

And in particular, there's two massive theological truths that underpin this. One is the nature of sin. So often we can find ourselves thinking that sin is just kind of being a little bit naughty.

It's kind of, you know, having a bit of fun even though it's not totally right. It's almost like a treat that we know isn't good but it's kind of a little bit fun to indulge in. It's so easy to think that that's what sin is like and yet that is a hopelessly inadequate understanding of sin.

It's totally inaccurate. Sin is a vicious, merciless, poisonous enemy.

[6 : 15] Sin has one objective, to destroy humanity and destroy you. Sin wants to wreck God's creation and to wreck people's lives and in doing so, sin has got absolutely no interest whatsoever in being fair.

The second big theological truth that underpins this is the fact that we are made in the image of God. This is crucial as well. Sin has broken the world, it's broken humanity, it's left us in rebellion against God but at the same time we're still God's creation.

We're still made in His image and He is a God of truth, of goodness, of justice. So when we experience things that instinctively make us cry, that's not fair.

The reason we feel like that is because we've been made in His image, in the image of God, of a God who is absolutely uncompromising in His commitment to justice and fairness.

So often life is unfair. Some people think that when life feels unfair, you've just got to accept it, it's fate.

[7 : 35] Some people think that when life feels unfair, you actually deserve it, it's karma. Some people think that when life feels unfair, you should just try and ignore it, get over it, take your mind off it.

The Bible teaches us that when life feels unfair, it's because it is unfair. And the whole reason we have the Gospel is because when God looks at the damage that sin has caused, He says, that's wrong and I am going to do something about it.

And the reality of life being unfair is something that we see very clearly in the life of Jonathan. And over the next six weeks or so, we're going to look at several moments in Jonathan's life.

Tonight we're starting in the passage that we read in 1 Samuel 14 and the title for our service this evening is Faith, Courage and the Power of Perhaps. And we can read again at verse six.

Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the Lord will work for us, for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.

[8 : 52] Now the context for these verses is war. Still were under pressure on both sides from the Ammonites in the east and especially from the Philistines in the west.

And if you read through chapters 10 to 13 of 1 Samuel, you'll see that the Ammonites had besieged a city called Jabesh Gilead and they'd offered to make a peace treaty.

But they said, but on one condition, we want to gouge out the right eye of all the men in the city.

And the Philistines, they had so much control over the Israelites that they ensured that there was no blacksmith in the whole of Israel so that nobody could make any weapons.

So much so that if a farmer wanted to sharpen his sickle, he had to pay the Philistines to do it. Now that conflict with the Philistines was long standing and fighting frequently took place.

If we'd read chapter 13, just the one before it, we'd see that Jonathan had led a successful attack against some Philistines. But that victory provoked a renewed statement of aggression from the Philistines.

[9 : 59] And we picked up the narrative in chapter 14 where you've got a vast Philistine army gathered at Michmash and Saul, Jonathan and the Israelites at Gibiah.

Now I put up a couple of maps because I know that all these names mean very little to us. So I'll just point out roughly where we are. You'll see, no worries, you can't read the place names.

The Ammonites had been attacking over here. This is Jabesh Gilead where they besieged the city.

The Philistines are attacking from this direction and Michmash and Gibiah is all around here.

So the next slide zooms it in a wee bit. You can see that the Philistines are here at Michmash and the Israelites are here at Gibiah.

And the blue line follows the line of invasion that the Philistines had pursued. If we zoom in a wee bit more on this area, you'll see that Saul and the Israelites are here.

[11:00] The Philistines are here. And we're told that there's two rocky passes. Now this map indicates that those rocky passes are about here and here. And so Jonathan has followed this route here.

And he's gone through one of these rocky passes in order to confront the Philistines there at Michmash. And I don't worry if you can't remember all of that, it just gives you a rough idea of where they are and what's going on.

I want us to do two things in particular this evening. I want to take a wee moment just to talk about the reality of war. And then I want us to look together at the faith and courage of Jonathan.

As we said a moment ago, this whole passage is in the context of war. And so much of Old Testament history is the same. And it forces us to think through the reality of war.

War has been a constant reality and the experience of humanity. And today the horror of war is all too evident in the news, whether that's Ukraine, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia or many other places where there's unrest.

[12:11] And perhaps more than anything else, war shows us just how unfair life can be.

You can see that the decisions of individual leaders can utterly ruin the lives of millions of people. And that can be on one side of the conflict or on both sides of the conflict.

We look at war, we see families torn apart. You see bombs being dropped on hospitals. You see young men barely out of school, boys, and they're killing and being killed.

And the whole thing is just horrendous. But it's important that we have a framework for understanding war, whether that's in regard to what we read in the Bible or whether it's in regard to what we read in the newspaper tomorrow.

And there's three things I just want to highlight that I think are helpful for us to bear in mind when we think about war. First of all, is that war is a direct consequence of sin.

[13:17] One of the key things that sin, that the sin coming into humanity's experience did was that it removed peace. It removed peace between God and humanity. It removed peace between humanity and the creation.

It removed peace within ourselves as individuals. And it also removed peace between people. And it meant that humanity became confrontational towards one another.

And it didn't take long for that to manifest itself in war. And so it's a direct consequence of sin. And humanity was created to be one united family, loving one another, benefiting one another, helping one another.

Sin is looking to do the opposite of that, to divide humanity, to put humanity on a path of self-destruction. And so it can all be traced back to sin.

So it's a consequence of sin. But war is also a breeding ground for sin. Because you see that despite all the efforts to make war as unawful as possible, trying to bring in conventions and things like that, that try to minimize the pain as much as possible, those things are so powerless ultimately to stop just awful things happening.

[14:37] People doing horrific things. And you see that in conflicts, you see that in all sides. It's just, you know, that's one of the things that's most unbelievable about war, just what people are actually capable of doing in that moment, in that conflict.

And sin just, it just, it's just as a field day in the midst of those kind of circumstances. So war is a direct consequence of sin. War is a breeding ground for sin, where all sorts of things can happen. But also, war is a reaction against sin. And that's really important to think about as well, because ultimately, war happened because humanity knows that there's a difference between right and wrong.

And that's true, because if you think about it, you know, if we didn't have any concern for morality, if we just didn't care about anything, then every aggressor would just be allowed to do whatever they want. The fact that aggressors are stopped and that confrontations begin is because people see something that they believe is wrong and they stand up to fight against it.

Now, at one level, that's reminding us of the God-given sense of morality that we all have, and that's a good thing. In war, people defend themselves and defend their loved ones against an aggressor that's hostile and dangerous.

[15 : 54] And that's one of the most noble things that a person can ever do. That's why we have Remembrance Day every November. That's why we have War Memorials in all of our villages, because what people did in the generations before us to protect us was incredible.

But the problem is that so often humanity's judgement is skewed, and it can be the case that even the most aggressive and hostile attackers are convinced that they're the ones who are in the right. And I think that's one of the awful things about war, which is that you see something that seems so pointless and awful, and yet the people who are initiating it think that they're right, because their judgement is so skewed, even though their motives are twisted and evil, they think that they are right.

And the consequence of that is that people start fighting because they jumped to a conclusion that's desperately wrong. So that means that in war we see that there's a difference between right and wrong.

We see people fighting against what they perceive as evil, and there's this tragic mix of hostile, brutal aggression alongside courageous defence.

[17 : 14] And that's why if you look into the past in order to find history's most wicked people and history's greatest heroes, chances are you'll find them both on the battlefield.

So all of that means that when we look at war and we see an aggressor, we are right to say that's wrong. When we see a heroic defender, we are right to say that's good.

And when we see the awful mess that war brings, we are right to say that is unfair. War is a consequence of sin, it's a breeding ground for sin, it's a reaction against sin.

But the most important point of all is that it's a battle that we can't win on our own. And that's why when we see the outcome of war, we are right to say that ultimately this hasn't fixed humanity, because if all war is a consequence of sin, it's only by dealing with sin that the problem of war and conflict and hostility will be solved.

And that's maybe the greatest mistake of war, the idea that on our own we can fix everything ourselves. But if war finds its source in sin, the only person who can deal with the reality of war is the person who can deal with the reality of sin, and there's only one person who can do that.

[18 : 50] And his name is Jesus Christ. That's why war simultaneously points us to the horrific reality of sin, to the reality of right and wrong, and to our desperate need for an almighty Savior.

And the incredible message of the Gospel is that that Savior has come, and that that victory was achieved through his death and resurrection.

And through that victory that Jesus won, the Philistines and the Ammonites stopped being targets in a battlefield of conflict, and they become targets in a mission field of good news and great joy.

And from that moment of the cross, Jesus is putting things right, calling people into his kingdom, turning us away, turning us back to him and away from all the damage that sin has caused.

The wars that we read about in the Old Testament are showing us that the world is broken, that we can't fix ourselves, and that we desperately need a Savior.

[20 : 08] Wars that happen today are telling us the very same thing. Yet it's a lesson that we struggle to learn, and the result is that for so many people they're caught up in conflicts and circumstances that are so unfair.

And perhaps the most important thing that we need to recognize is that that craving for fairness, for justice, for peace, for healing, that craving that we all have, that craving is exactly the need that Jesus has come to meet.

Be long for peace in a broken and unfair world. Jesus has come, died and risen again so that we can have exactly that. So that we can have peace with him and with each other forever in his new creation.

That's what Jesus has come to do. That's the problems that Jesus has come to solve. But right now in a world that's so unfair, how do we keep living by faith?

How can we keep going? Well what I want us to see is that Jonathan gives us an outstanding example. And I hope we're going to see that over the next few weeks, but tonight I want us to just see the fact that in the midst of all the unfairness of life, Jonathan showed faith, courage and he knew and understood the power of perhaps.

[21 : 40] Now what on earth do I mean by all of that? Well let's just unpack it together very briefly. Throughout the chapters in this kind of middle bit of first Samuel, there's a kind of subplot going on that you can see arising here and there, which basically sets a contrast between Saul and

Jonathan.

And repeatedly that contrast highlights Jonathan's successes and Saul's mistakes. So if you look for example in chapter 13, we read about 3,000 men being chosen in Israel, 2,000 of them are with Saul and 1,000 are with Jonathan, but it's Jonathan who defeats the Philistines.

And so even though he's got less, Jonathan's the one who actually has the success. Here in chapter 14 in the passage that we read, we can see that Saul is waiting. So he's got a priest with him and he's hoping that this priest is going to guide him as to what to do.

He wants to have the ark, which was the special container for the Ten Commandments. He wants to have that ark with him. And it seems as though he's kind of wanting to have everything in place. He's waiting for everything to be clear and ready and certain before he does anything.

Meanwhile Jonathan turns to his armor bearer and he says, let's go for it. And as we'll see in a couple of weeks time, in the rest of this chapter, more of this contrast is shown between Saul getting it wrong and Jonathan getting it right.

[23 : 06] And the big difference here in the passage that we read is that while Saul is looking for clarity, Jonathan is looking for opportunity.

And it summed up so well in verse 6. He says, come, let's go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the Lord will work for us for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.

Now that little phrase, it may be that you've got there, that can be translated perhaps as well. That's what it means. And so that's where our title comes from.

Jonathan has a clear faith that God might help him. But the key point we need to recognise is that the perhaps of this part of the sentence is grounded on the theological truth that's expressed in the second part of the sentence.

And I hope you can see that the first part is talking about, well, perhaps. And the reason for that perhaps, that because, is the theological truth that nothing can hinder God.

[24 : 07] And it doesn't matter if there's two of them or 2,000 of them. In other words, Jonathan's courage is fuelled by truth.

His certainty about what God can do gave him the courage to go out and see what God might just do. And that perhaps that we have here turned into an amazing victory.

You can see that in verses 13 and 15. Jonathan and his armour bearer were able to defeat the soldiers that he met. The rest of the army went into a panic. God then intervened sending an earthquake and the panic became even greater and it resulted in this vast Philistine army fleeing and Saul and the Israelites were able to chase them.

So while Saul was waiting, while he stood wondering, Jonathan went out armed with the truth of God and the power of perhaps and God did the rest.

Now you might be asking, well, how is all of this relevant to us? What are we going to take from this into the week ahead? How does this help us live by faith when life is unfair?

[25 : 20] So I want to just conclude with three things that I'd like us all to think about in the week ahead and that I hope might be helpful. Let me bring them up one by one.

First of all, we need to keep action and answers in the right order. Saul wanted answers before he would step into action.

He wanted answers first, then action. Jonathan's the other way round. As we said, while Saul was looking for clarity, Jonathan was looking for opportunity and he goes out on the basis of a perhaps. In other words, he steps into action long before he had all the answers. And we can so easily make the same mistake.

So often we want answers before we will take action. And that can happen in lots of ways. It can happen in terms of decisions that we have to make in life about our job, about where we're going to live, about who we might go out with.

[26 : 28] We want God to clarify every detail before we take a step. In terms of our mission as a church, we can fall into the same mistake. We want everything in place before we take action, whether that's finances or personnel or resources.

We want to make sure that everything's in place. And perhaps most of all, for anyone who's maybe not yet a Christian, so many people are sitting waiting for the bolt of lightning to give them answers before they'll take any action.

So many people are waiting for this kind of big moment that they seem to think that they need before they will commit to following Jesus. And sometimes when these answers don't come, what do we say to God?

We say, that's unfair. You're not telling me what I should do. You're not doing what I want you to do. You're not giving me the answers that I need. We think that God is being unfair by not revealing these things to us.

We want answers before action. And we've got to realize that God works the other way around.

[27 : 36] God works the other way around. And that makes perfect sense, because what's the one thing that God wants from us? He wants faith. And the key to taking action before you have all the answers is to have faith.

And that's because at the end of the day, the demand for answers and a lack of faith are really just two sides of the same coin. What we've got to realize is that it should be kept in this order.

And the crucial thing is that faith prompts action, and then it's the actions that actually give the answers. Jonathan's faith prompted his action.

It was that action that provided the answers. Saul thought, perhaps God will help us. I'll sit here until I find out. Jonathan thought, perhaps God will help us.

Let's go and find out. And Jonathan was the one who got the answers. In other words, that perhaps is never clarified by sitting still.

[28 : 38] It's only clarified by taking action. And that's the same. That principle is true for us in so many ways in our life as a church. We're hoping to renovate our building.

Are we going to be able to afford it? Well, we're only going to find out by trying. Will the person that you know start coming to church? Well, you're only going to get the answer by asking them.

Will people come to faith in Carlyway in the second half of 2022? In our congregation, the Church of Scotland next door, we're only going to get the answer by praying and by telling people about Jesus.

And will Jesus save you for anyone who's not yet a Christian? How are you going to answer that question? You're only going to find the answer by calling out to him and following him.

It's so easy to wait for answers before we take any action. Jonathan is a wonderful reminder that the life of faith is the other way around.

[29 : 38] Second lesson I want us to think about is that we need to keep theology and trouble in the right order. Now, you might be thinking, what on earth do you mean by that? Well, what I mean is the fact that it's so easy for us to allow trouble to shape our theology.

In other words, our experience of pain or sorrow or disappointment or frustration or of unfairness, that shapes our view of God.

And so we can so often think that, well, God hasn't done this, he hasn't done that. And we conclude that he's not kind or that he's not interested or he's not going to help us or whatever it may be. And we take our trouble and we use that to build our theology.

But again, the truth is the other way around. We need our view of God to shape our experience of trouble.

That's exactly what Jonathan did. We saw that in the verse. His what he knew of God, the fact that nothing can hinder God, that shaped his view of the trouble that they were currently experiencing.

[30 : 43] It's what Jonathan did, it's what we need to do as well. And this is where we learn a crucial lesson about assurance. And it's a really important thing for us all to think about, for Christians, we lack assurance, we need assurance, whether in terms of going on in the Christian life, serving in mission, going out with the good news to the people around us.

And people who aren't yet Christians or who are seeking the Lord, who are not sure where you stand, people also need assurance as well. We long for assurance. But the big mistake that we make is that we look for assurance in our experiences.

And so when something positive happens or something remarkable happens in our lives, our faith feels strong. But when something unfair happens, our faith is shaken.

But the key point is that experience is not the place to go if you want to find assurance. The place where you find assurance is in theological truth.

In the reality of who God is, of what He has done and of everything that He's promised us, that is where we find assurance. So I want you to imagine that you're in your living room.

[31 : 55] And so often we think that assurance is going to be found at the fireplace. In other words, you're going to get assurance at the place that feels warm and cosy and comfortable.

And we tend to think, you know, that's where we're going to feel good. And that's where we'll find assurance, that assurance is kind of by the fireplace of the Christian life where everything is warm and cosy and nice. But of course, what's going to happen to that fire in a few hours?

It's going to go out. And that's the experience that every Christian is going to have. You have moments of joy and moments where things feel great, where everything's warm and encouraging and cosy and brilliant.

But it never lasts. And the Bible never promises that it's going to last. These highs always fade. That's why the fireplace is not the place to find assurance.

The place where you find real assurance in your living room is in the walls. In those walls that have stood for decades, that those walls that have been strong no matter what gale the Atlantic Ocean has thrown at them, the fact that those walls have not moved in a lifetime.

[33 : 08] That's what makes your living room the living room. That's what makes it the place where you can go and be comfortable and warm and secure. And that's what theology is like.

It's immovable truth that cannot be shaken. That's where we find courage and strength and assurance. And that's why it's so important for us to listen to what God is saying in His word and to pray that His word will be written more and more in our hearts.

And that's why when you face trouble, when life is unfair, when we face struggles, when things are really hard, the key question in the Christian life is not, are you courageous?

The key question is, are you listening? Are we listening to everything that God is saying in His word?

God doesn't expect you to feel super strong and confident and courageous at every moment, but He does expect you to listen when He promises to always be with you.

[34 : 16] So we need to keep action and answers in the right order. We need to keep theology and trouble in the right order. And last of all, we need the courage to embrace the word perhaps.

Now maybe this is a Scottish thing. See this is an island thing, but we can often find ourselves focusing on all the ways in which things are bad.

So we often say things like, isn't it awful? Or it's not what it used to be, or it's a day of small things, or it's a worry, or it's not fair.

Now I've used all those phrases in my life at various times. And I'm sure there's lots of circumstances when that's all true. And we tend to focus on the word is, and it tends to lead us down a negative path.

It's not good, it's not great, it's a worry, it's difficult, it's this, it's that, it's the next thing. But maybe, maybe we need to exchange that mindset for one that is far more shaped by the word perhaps.

[35 : 25] So let me ask you, what is your dream perhaps? What's your dream perhaps?

Is it for somebody who you love so much to come to faith? Is it to serve God in your job, or in mission work, or even in ministry?

Is it to be a godly husband, or wife, or parent? Is it to see this church, or our two churches thrive?

Is it to be able to tell other people about Jesus with more confidence and clarity, and to see people come to faith? Or for the world more widely, is your dream perhaps to see every injustice called to account, to see war end forever, to see sin and death defeated?

Or maybe for you as an individual, is it to be free of pain, to be free of loneliness, to be free of guilt, free of fear?

[36 : 30] What is your dream perhaps? And now ask yourself, do you think God can do it?

Of course he can. And ultimately this is what makes following Jesus so brilliant, because in terms of your salvation, in terms of rescuing you from all the unfairness and cruelty of life, in terms of giving you hope for life and death and for eternity, Jesus can meet every perhaps that we can have.

In fact, in terms of salvation, in terms of healing and restoration, in terms of putting right everything that's wrong with the world, in terms of making sure that you are safe for all eternity.

Jesus takes our greatest, our biggest, our most optimistic, hopeful perhaps, and he turns it into an irrevocable certainty.

You think to yourself, maybe God will remember me, like the thief on the cross, remember me when you come into your kingdom, you think perhaps God might remember me?

[37 : 50] Jesus takes that perhaps and he makes it such a certainty, like I'm going to prepare a place for you.

And one day I'll take you home to be with me forever. And he accomplished all of that by dying for you. That's what Jesus does.

That's what the gospel offers. And ultimately that's the reality that means that no matter how unfair or rubbish or horrible life might be, we can go on this week and for the rest of our lives, living by faith in him.

That's the difference it makes to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus. And that's what is offering you again tonight.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen.