

Godly Common Sense And Stupid Religious Ideas

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn back to the passage that we just read, and we are continuing the study that we began two weeks ago on the life of Jonathan. And as I said, we're going to look at the second part of the chapter that we read, but we can begin by reading again at verse 28. Then one of the people said, your father, so they said this to Jonathan, your father strictly charged the people with an oath saying, cursed be the man who eats food this day. And the people were faint. Then Jonathan said, my father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found for now? The defeat among the Philistines has not been great. The title for our sermon tonight is maybe an unusual one, Godly common sense and stupid religious ideas. And I'll explain why that's our title as we go on. The title for our series is living by faith when life is unfair. And I want us, we're using the life of Jonathan to think that through in various contexts to think about how we keep on living by faith when life is unfair.

And we have to start by recognizing that one of the biggest, biggest sources of unfairness in the life in human history is the devastation caused by stupid religious ideas. And you can prove that if you look at history, you look back at the last 100 years in kind of European history, you can go back to the Middle Ages and you see the Crusades where all sorts of awful things happen. And it was all religiously motivated on both sides. You go to the 30 years war of the 1600s, which devastated Europe. Some historians reckon that the German nation lost half of its population during that conflict. Later that century, you had the English Civil War that extended to the rest of what we call Britain today. You had the killing times of the Covenanting period in Scotland. You come through to the present day and even in our lifetimes, you've got the troubles in Northern Ireland. You've got 9-11 in New York. You've got other examples of Islamic extremism arising again and again and again. People have used religion to justify the most awful things. And as a result, millions of people have suffered. Sometimes they've suffered because they've been forced to flee because of conflicts.

Other times people have suffered because they've been forced to defend themselves and take up arms in defence of their nation. Others, and this is perhaps the majority, is just normal people who are caught up in conflicts that they never wanted to be part of. But it doesn't just apply in terms of global conflict and war. It's also the case that in communities, in families, even in churches, many people have been hurt, sometimes even abused by people who use religious ideas to justify actions that are wrong. And even at a less controversial level, so often we all know that churches and individual Christians can get into all sorts of difficulties and divisions over issues that are based on people making up their own religious ideas. Sometimes these are forced on us from others. If you look at the Reformation, for example, you can see the period leading up to the Reformation, you had all sorts of really frankly bizarre religious ideas imposed on people's communities, religions, and much of it was very damaging. Sometimes though we make them up ourselves and we can convince ourselves of things that will shape our actions, that really have no scriptural basis at all. And that's the key point. The moment an idea distorts scripture or goes against scripture, that idea is going to lead us on a path that can cause great damage to ourselves, to others, and to the cause of Christ. And it's quite easy to prove this because if you speak to somebody who has an issue with the church or an issue with

Christianity, I have rarely found it to be the case that these people have an intellectual objection to an aspect of Christian theology. Sometimes that does happen, so sometimes occasionally it happens, but it's not very common. I've not met many people who have said to me, look I can't go to church because I can't accept the doctrine of the Trinity, or I can't accept the incarnation, or for me the existence of God is a metaphysical impossibility. I've not met many people who think like that,

and that's because the philosophical claims of the Bible are not actually that difficult to accept, they're actually very coherent.

The idea that, you know, like to look out there and to see what really is a work of art in terms of creation and to say, I think that's a creation and I think there's therefore a creator, that's not a difficult philosophical concept to accept at all. So the intellectual side of scripture is not really difficult to accept, and it's very rare that that's the problem. What you find much more frequently is that people are put off Christianity because they've experienced somebody in the church spouting nonsense. That's got nothing to do with the Gospel at all. And to give you an example, it's not that long ago that I met a woman whose child had been seriously unwell and she was told by professing Christians that the child's illness was because she didn't go to church. And needless to say, she still doesn't go to church. And there's no biblical basis for that kind of conclusion whatsoever.

[6 : 38] In fact, Jesus told the very opposite in John chapter 9, I think, maybe 8, I think 9, but you can check for yourselves. All of this is reminding us that huge damage has been caused by people misusing religion. And it's reminding us that in some ways religion is like an army, used wisely, it's liberating, used badly, and it can be devastating. And examples of this kind of misuse of religion are clear in history, their widespread in society, you've probably experienced them in our community. They are also found in the Bible. And a clear example is in the passage that we read. We're here in the second half of Samuel 14, first Samuel 14. As I said, the context is war. And it's the Israelites against the Philistines. The key people at this stage are Saul and Jonathan. Saul is Israel's first king who failed, Jonathan is his son. If you read the chapters before this, you discover that at this moment, the Philistines have got a lot of control over Israelite territory.

And the Israelites really are quite oppressed. But we read and you can see on the map here, I hope it's maybe clear, we went through this map together. There's a battle. It's taking place kind of around here, this area. So I can zoom in on that a little bit. You've got the Philistines are gathered at Mi'khmash. Saul and his troops are around here. If I zoom in a little bit more, sorry too far, if I zoom in a little bit more, you can see that especially that here is their lights. Philistines here, Jonathan and his armor bearer snuck up. Well, I've just ruined that. I've just ruined that map because the arrow was already there. Follow the green arrow, not my bad red arrow. And they climbed up one of these rock faces here. They encountered a Philistine garrison probably somewhere around here. They defeated them and the Philistines panicked and they began to flee this way.

Saul and his troops observed what's happening. And so they were able to begin a pursuit, which led them heading off this way. And we'll see where they go in a wee minute. The key point that's been highlighted here and in the rest of the kind of teens chapters in 1 Samuel is a contrast between Saul's failure and Jonathan's success. In that whole incident in the first half of the chapter, Saul's the king, but Jonathan is really the one who leads the people to victory. But when we come to the second half of the chapter, the passage that we read, Jonathan, who is the hero, is sentenced to death by his own father. And he's very nearly executed. And it's all because Saul comes up with a stupid religious identity.

And I want us to look at that in a little bit more detail because it's fascinating and it's immensely relevant to us all. You know, one of the questions we often face is, you know, people will often say, well, I don't want to go to church because religion is a cause for so many problems. I've heard someone in this community say that to me. They said, you know, religion causes so many problems in the world. And he's right. Historically, religion has led to so many conflicts and difficulties. So we've got to be able to think through how to answer that and how to respond to that and what it's all about. So we need to look at it both in terms of how we understand the history of the church that we can observe in the past, but it's also important in terms of the history of the church that you and I are creating today. So let's dig into this in a little more detail. The whole thing arises from an oath that Paul, that's all made in verse 24. He says, cursed be the man who eats food until its evening and I'm avenged on my enemies. So none of the people had tasted food. So it's all about an oath. Now, in and of itself, an oath is a good thing. Scripture has many examples of oaths, vows, and it's the same in history. You see oaths used wisely and well. Vows are the same. And if you want to learn a little bit more about oaths and vows in terms of the context of Christianity, there's a really good chapter in the Westminster

Confession of Faith, chapter 22, which talks about oaths and vows. And you can get it on your phone. It's easy to find it on an app. And it's a really interesting little chapter.

[11:15] Never ever be scared. This is a completely aside, but never be scared of reading the Westminster Confession of Faith. It's short. Chapters are short, divided into paragraphs, and it's all fantastic. It's really helpful. And if anything doesn't make sense, just ask me. I'd be more than happy to help explain it to you. An oath then is something perfectly good when it's used wisely. But like many things, it's so easy to take something good and use it to do something foolish. And that's exactly what happens here with Saul. Now, I'm sure he probably had good intentions. In Scripture, fasting is associated with a time of crisis. Eating is associated with celebration. And so you can see why Saul would maybe think, well, this is a time of crisis. It's not a time to celebrate. People shouldn't eat. And maybe he thought that that would reinforce how serious the situation was. Maybe he thought it would motivate the troops to fight harder. Maybe he even thought that it would impress God as well. But whatever the intentions were, in amongst all of that, were some serious mistakes, which is a really important reminder that foolish religious ideas like these are almost always a combination of divine truth and human stupidity, when something good from God is taken by us and misapplied to do something silly. Two big problems arise in the narrative. The first is for the people. So they are chasing the

Philistines. And if we go back to our map, we're told in verse 13, I think it is, not 13. We are told in verse 31, sorry, that they chased them from Mekh Mash to Aijalon. So you can see the distance there. The scale is not on the map, but I was working it out and it's about just over 15 miles, it looks like it. So you think that's doable in a day, but that's hard going. And so you think of doing that journey. And they're pursuing the Philistines.

They're tired and hungry. They reach a forest and all around them is honey dripping from honeycomb. And just imagine, just imagine walking into the hills today. I've got no idea what time of year it was, but imagine it was today. You went for a really long walk in the hills, or you spent the day at the peats, or you were at the sheep all day or whatever. Just imagine how much you would crave sugar. A biscuit or a chocolate or something after working all day or jogging all day or whatever it may be. These people had what they needed right in front of them, but they're not allowed to eat it and they're getting more and more faint. So it's a big problem for the people. The second problem is for Jonathan because he had not heard his father make this oath. And so you'll remember that that makes sense because he had already snuck off. I don't know what the right word is, he had just gone off with his arm of air and he hadn't heard the oath that his father made. And so he sees the honey. He's like, oh, fantastic. That's just what I need. No doubt it was thankful to God for the provision that he'd made. Put his staff in it, ate some and felt much better. But the people stayed away telling him, you've just violated the king's oath. And one of the key things we need to recognize is that both of these problems are totally unnecessary. The oath was unnecessary and it created unnecessary problems. It was crazy to ban a running army from eating. And it was ridiculous that Jonathan, who was the hero of the whole thing, was now guilty of being an oath breaker and his life was in danger. It's all so unnecessary and the knock on effects are huge. You read about that, sorry, read about that in verses 31 to 35. The people, when they finally kind of caught up with the Philistines, they were so hungry that they pounced on the sheep and oxen, killed them straight away and ate them without draining the blood, which was a sin. That was something that they're not meant to do. And what that basically means is that because they were so scared to disobey Saul, they actually ended up disobeying God. And Saul is horrified by the whole thing, but yet it's all a result of his foolish actions. And there's a really solemn lesson for all of us today, especially those in leadership. It's so easy for us as a leader to fall into the trap of behaving as though obeying us is more important than obeying God. And the end result is sin. So for the people, they tried to obey Saul, they ended up so desperate, they ended up disobeying God. For Jonathan, though, the consequences are massive as well. I'll just put the verses up there. I won't read them, but just so you can see where we are in the narrative. The priest tells Saul to seek God's guidance.

You remember we read about that? Saul is like, okay, let's pursue them into the night and defeat them. But the priest says, wait, wait, wait, let's, let's see what God says. But there's no answer from God. And they determined that this, this lack of answer must be because there's something wrong. Something's happened. Something's going on. So they cast lots to see who's guilty. Verse 41 mentions Urim and Thumim. Now we don't know exactly what those were, but they're mentioned several times in the Old Testament. There's some means by which, you know, lots are cast or something like that in order to just determine a yes or a no answer to a question. And so this is used

to show who the guilt lies. Is it with the people or is it with Jonathan and Saul? Turns out it's with Jonathan and Saul. And so then they're split into, is it Saul? Is it Jonathan? It's Jonathan. He is identified as the one who broke Saul's oath, which of course the people knew all along, which is probably why they didn't say a word in verse 39. Saul then pronounces a death sentence on his own son. And that leaves us this utterly crazy situation where an unnecessary and foolish oath has become the law under which Saul is about to kill his own son. It's all totally unnecessary and totally unfair. But thankfully, both Jonathan and the people responded to

[18:01] Saul's foolishness with godly common sense. Jonathan, when he ate the honey, was like saying, that's a crazy oath. Why did my father say that? Look how much better this honey's made me feel. It's what we need. And the people prevented Saul from killing Jonathan. The people said to Saul, shall Jonathan die, whose work this great salvation in Israel, far from it, as the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day. So the people ransomed Jonathan so that he did not die.

The potential damage of Saul's foolish religious idea was minimized by the godly common sense of Jonathan and the people. Now, what does all of this have to do with you and me? What's it got to do with us? What do we learn from it? Well, there's loads we could say. What I want us just to recognize is that this raises two hugely important questions and it teaches us something amazing about the gospel. And I'll just go through these in the time that's coming. So two crucial questions. The first one is this. Have you been hurt by a stupid religious idea? Both the people and Jonathan were put in danger by Saul's foolishness.

And it's reminding us that this kind of behavior hurts people. There's another clear example in the New Testament with Jesus when he interacts with the Pharisees and scribes and he rebukes them because they've said, you know, yes, God commands that I honor my father and mother, but actually I'm not going to do that because anything that I'm going to give to my father and mother is actually carbon. It's actually devoted to God. So that means that I don't actually need to do anything for my father and mother, which was just an excuse to neglect them. And the result was that elderly people were being hurt because these people had created their own religious idea that sounded good, but was actually disobeying God's command.

In 1st Timothy, we've been reading about teachers forbidding marriage, demanding abstinence from certain foods, adding all sorts of rules to the gospel. Throughout history, you can see people who've used religion to justify slavery, racism, war. And in our own context, maybe in our lifetimes, we've come across people who've insisted that, you know, you've got to wear certain clothes if you come to church or you can't go for a walk on a Sunday no matter how nice the weather is. You can't go to the beach. You mustn't do that. Or that because we're saved by faith, it doesn't actually matter if you go to church. You know, it's just you and Jesus. You don't need to go to church. That's not important. It's just you and Jesus is all that matters. Or that because God is in control, you know, we don't need to go out with the gospel because he's going to save who he's going to save anyway. And I'm sure you can think of many, many more examples of this kind of thing that we see all the time. They're all examples of taking something good. And maybe even unintentionally manipulating that into a religious idea that either makes a sin that the Bible never makes or it ignores a real sin that the Bible clearly commands us to avoid. Going back to that chapter that I mentioned in the Westminster Confession of Faith, it gives a really good example of this. It talks about oaths and vows, but it says an oath or a vow for celibacy is not helpful because it's actually superstitious. It's not something that the Bible commands.

And it gives one or two other examples, taking something good, using and applying it in the wrong way. It's so easy to do. I have done it in my life many times. The result so often is that people get hurt. And maybe you've experienced that. Maybe you've been unfairly criticised by a Christian. Maybe you felt judged or rejected by people in the church.

[22:14] Maybe you've been felt pressured into doing certain things. Or maybe you got tangled up in a sin that somebody had said to you, oh, that's not that big a deal. Many people get hurt because of stupid religious ideas. It isn't right. It isn't fair. But it happens a lot. It happened to Jonathan and it almost resulted in his death. It also happened to Jesus. And it did result in his death. This is where we need to remember that when the Jews begged Pilate to crucify Jesus, what were they motivated by? They were motivated by their religious ideas. But those religious ideas were a million miles away from what

God was actually doing and from what God actually wanted. And this is a crucial lesson for anyone who has been hurt by religion or who's seen someone else getting hurt or who tends to think religion causes so many problems. If that happens to you or if that happens to someone that you're talking to, the answer is not to reject Jesus. The answer is to run to him because he knows exactly what that's like. In fact, he knows far better than anyone what it's like. And for anybody here tonight or watching at home who's not yet a Christian and who's like, you know, look, this is not for me. You've always got to ask yourself, are you rejecting the gospel? Are you rejecting the accurate gospel? Or are you rejecting some nonsense that somebody has added to it that God rejects even more than you do? And that's a huge danger, perhaps especially for young people. It's a big danger for young people. People have rejected the gospel because they've encountered someone like Saul. And then they've used that as a reason to reject Jesus. Please don't ever make that mistake. One of the greatest tragedies we can see is when somebody rejects the gospel because of something that has got nothing to do with the gospel. It can so easily happen. It's a tragic mistake. If anyone here has been hurt by either their own thinking, the thinking of others, the behavior of others, you know, that could be anyone that could be a book you've read, it could be from somebody a million miles from here, it could be anything. If you've been hurt by that, never, ever, ever think that that's reason to stay away from Jesus. It's reason to run to him because he experienced exactly the same thing. So that's the first question, have you been hurt by a stupid religious idea? The second key question is have you ever been influenced by a stupid religious idea? And this is a question that we all have to ask ourselves. And it's just another way of asking the question, is our theology biblical? Is what we believe biblical? And that's a crucial question because if I look at myself in this passage, there's two key characters in this passage. There's Jonathan and there's Saul. Which one am I most likely to be like? Am I most likely to be like Jonathan who gets hurt by the foolish ideas of somebody else? That's possible. Or am I at greater risk of being a Saul? Of thinking that I know best? Of taking matters into my own hands? Of having a religion that's more shaped by my agenda than by God's? That's the bigger danger. I look at myself and I'm far more likely to be one of them than I am to be a Jonathan. And oath as we've been saying is a good thing. But Saul contaminated it with his own daft idea. And throughout the Bible, throughout history, people have contaminated the gospel with their own ideas and additions. And often we can think that the greatest danger to Christianity is opposition from outside. And maybe that's true, but equally dangerous, maybe even more dangerous is when people take the gospel and contaminate it with their own stupidity. Mistakes are not usually made by people wanting to conjure up a bad religion.

Mistakes are usually made when we take the good message of the Bible and we mix it up with our own nonsense. Now I'm talking to myself when I say that. I think of so many conclusions I've jumped to. I think of so many situations I've misjudged. I think of so many ideas that I thought were right. Some of them are just so daft. And I think I can think of ways in which that's hurt other people along the way as I thought that I knew far better than everybody else. It's a danger that we can all fall. So I'm talking to myself before I talk to anybody else when I mention this. It's a long history of this in the church.

[28 : 12] It's continuing right up into the present day. We've seen it just in the last couple of weeks, in more widely in the Scottish church. We've seen, we've just seen humans thinking that they know best and reshaping the Bible and their theology to suit it. We can observe it in others every time we do. We should lament. But we've also got to look at ourselves and we've got to ask ourselves if we are in danger of doing the same. Now I'm not saying that we are. I'm saying we just have to ask ourselves if we are. We've got to be careful about this. And so we've got to ask ourselves some difficult questions. Have we made church look like a middle class club? That's only for people whose lives are sorted and steady. Have we done that? Have we made baptism a kind of cultural habit that everybody expects but that nobody really understands and nobody really takes seriously? Have we made the Lord's Supper so complicated that godly brothers and sisters in Jesus have gone through their whole lives and thought,

I can't do that? And they've missed out on the blessing and nourishment that Jesus wants to give them. Have we made people feel unwelcome or that they don't belong here or that they don't fit in? Have we made the good news a message of negativity and doom and gloom? Have we allowed certain sins to become acceptable? Are we theologically liberal? In other words, do we stand over the Bible and just pick the bits that we want to listen to and ignore the bits we

don't like? Have we forgotten that the two things God wants from us more than anything else is that we love him and love one another? These are hard questions. They're hard questions for me. They're hard questions for us all. And one of the key points that this teaches us is that all of this, taking matters into our own hands, thinking that we know best, taking something that's in God's word but kind of just adding our own bit to it, all of that is the opposite of living by faith because it's taking things into our own hands and it's thinking that we know better than God that we want to listen to ourselves instead of to him. That's the opposite of living by faith. Living by faith is listening to God, trusting him, following him. Saul placed outrageous expectations on the people and on Jonathan and the results were damaging, almost devastating. Many others have done the same and it all arises from a failure to live by faith, to trust God, to listen to God, to follow him. And the key point is that if we just do that, if we just trust God, it's so much better. And that's what brings us to our last point, the fact that this passage teaches us something utterly amazing about the Gospel. And I want to close with this.

It's reminding us that the Gospel is full of outrageous requirements. Now you might be thinking, eh, you've just contradicted everything that you've said. Saul placed outrageous requirements on the people and we're saying that that was wrong. That was wrong. But it's still true that the Gospel is full of outrageous requirements. It's full of them. The key point is that none of them are placed on you. They are placed on Jesus. The incarnation, God the Son going into Mary's womb and becoming a baby is outrageous. That God would be expected to do that. To be born in total obscurity and to experience all the suffering and misery that sin has brought into this world. The crucifixion, God the Son dying on a cross, that is outrageous. He should be nowhere near a cross, nowhere near that kind of suffering.

[34 : 00] And the resurrection, Jesus Christ being raised from the dead, that is outrageous. These expectations are outrageously big and Jesus fulfills them all. Jesus fulfills them all. And that's why trying to impress God with some daft idea of our own making is totally unnecessary and totally crazy. Because the Gospel is all about Jesus doing everything. And that everything is outrageously big but He does it all so that you don't have to. And all He asks of us in return is to trust Him, to listen to Him and to follow Him. We cannot do any of the saving that the Gospel talks about. It's only God who can do it. And all we need to do is trust Him. That's why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is simultaneously magnificently simple and mind-blowingly incredible. I don't know about you but I'm generally better at making a mess of things in my life than I am at succeeding things. And I'm sure every one of us when we look at ourselves will come to the same conclusion that when it comes to doing things in life, I don't think any of us can look back at our lives and think, you know, ah yeah, I did that exactly how I wanted to do it. We look back at our lives and we think, oh man, I stuffed up here and I stuffed up there and I wish I'd done that differently. So often we are not capable of doing things the way that we want to do or the way that we expect it to. I'm better at making a hash of things than I am at making a success of things. And imagine if our salvation depended on ourselves. We'd just be a long line of people. It would be in the, I've made a hash of it queue before Christ's judgment seat. The beauty of the Gospel is that there's no expectation on you at all. In fact, it's just a great recognition that Jesus knows that we'll make a hash of it. That's why he's coming to save us. That's why all we have to do is come to him with empty hands and to trust in him. And if you ever, ever, ever think in your head or hear with your ears a Gospel that's different to that, don't listen to it because it's a stupid religious idea and it'll do nothing but damage. The Gospel is the free, full, magnificent salvation offered to you by Jesus, fully accomplished by him, given to all who come to him by grace.

That's why the Gospel is so amazing. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we acknowledge that we are so prone to thinking that we know better. And we pray that you'd help us just to think and act and live in a way that's shaped by your word. We're so sorry for the times that we have placed our own conclusions ahead of your teaching. And we pray, Father, that instead your word would just be written on our hearts and that we'd help each other just to follow you in obedience, that we would live by faith and that we would be able to communicate your amazing Gospel in every part of our lives. Thank you so much that everything that was needing to be done has been done by Jesus. We thank you for that so, so much. Amen.