

What are the Odds?

1Samuel 13:16-14:23

What are the odds of that?

That is a phrase people use to describe an unlikely set of circumstances that worked out in an unexpected way.

Imagine an older couple. The wife is ninety years old and the husband one hundred years old.

Somebody shows up to talk to the husband and tells him that he and his wife are going to have a baby.

When the husband hears the news do you know what he does?

He laughs.

An understandable reaction given the circumstances.

After all what are the odds of a couple of that age having a son?

That is what the bible tells us about Abraham and Sarah when the LORD tells Abraham he is going to have a son.

God tells him to name the boy 'Isaac' a name that means 'he laughs' and about a year later what Abraham and Sarah laughed at because it seemed so impossible came to be.

Just as God made a covenant with Abraham, He also made a covenant with Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob after that.

These men became known as the patriarchs (that is the forefathers) of the nation of Israel.

It is most fitting that the father of this nation would have a son in such unlikely circumstances because much of the history of this nation is filled with unlikely circumstances.

[As we turn through the pages of the Bible and read through the history of God's people we discover that one of the ways the LORD has clearly left His fingerprints on the world is through bringing about incredible things in unlikely circumstances. Situations that leave us saying, "What are the odds of that?" As we return to our series in the book of 1Samuel we read about as situation of unlikely odds in **13:16-14:23**. This text gives us some good reminders about odds in life. Here is the first...]

Point #1 – Sometimes the odds are heavily against God's people. (13:16-22)

Time and again we see in the Bible and the history of the church situations where everything seems against those that belong to the LORD by faith.

You may recall that when we were last in the book of 1Samuel the nation of Israel and the Philistines were getting ready to square off in a major battle.

After a few days the men in Israel's army were starting to leave and go into hiding.

Saul seeing what was happening decided to make an offering to the LORD that he was not supposed to make.

After being rebuked by the prophet Samuel and being down to about 600 soldiers, Saul and his men end up in Gibeah in what seems to be a holding pattern.

The Philistines remain camped at 'Micmash' and from there send three raiding parties (literally 'destroyers' in the original language) into the land of Israel.

Things are bad and **verses 19-22** in chapter thirteen give us a bit more of the picture.

The bible does not tell us when or for how long the situation has been like this, but it has likely been for at least sometime.

What is said here is a picture of complete dominance.

The Israelites have very little in the way of weapons of war, they have little to no means of maintaining what they do have, and they have to go to their enemies to maintain their farming equipment at what commentators think is a very high price.

On top of that their enemies are going around the country and likely taking a good amount of their farming produce.

Now let's try and put ourselves in Saul's army.

We are standing there with some farming tools, looking at the enemy camp that has more men and is well armed.

How do you think we would like our chances?

It's not good. The smart thing to do here is run and hide.

[History has a number of examples of situations like this. Have you ever heard of a man named Davey Crockett? According to the webpage 'history.com' Davy Crockett was a frontiersman, soldier, politician, congressman and prolific storyteller. Known as the "King of the Wild Frontier," He is probably most famous for a place called the 'Alamo' a mission in Texas where he fought against the Mexican army for the independence of Texas. There were about 200 men in the Alamo and somewhere between 2-6000 soldiers in the Mexican army. While the Texans fought well, they lost primarily because of the odds.]

The odds at the Alamo were likely much better than the odds for the Israelites against the Philistines.

Being outnumbered is one thing, to be outnumbered and have virtually no weapons is another thing all together.

The odds here are bad and that is the way it is with the people of God sometimes.

It actually may be more accurate to say that is the way it is often times for God's people.

For a long time this was foreign to our experience because for a good bit of the last few centuries in North America that has largely not been the case.

By and large our society has had a shared morality that was largely based on a Christian worldview.

I'm not saying that means that everyone was a Christian, far from it. I am merely saying that our society has a much greater respect for the Scriptures.

That has almost completely changed in the public square of our time.

While we still maintain much more freedom than in many other parts of the world, our society is openly hostile to the Christian worldview and the outlook for the future shows no sign of change.

On paper the odds are not good.

Because that is the case we may at times find ourselves feeling fearful and hopeless.

But let us not give into to these things and end up in despair.

It is far from a strange thing for the odds to be heavily against the people of God.

[Having set the scene of a rather bleak outlook, the writer turns his attention to the son of king Saul named Jonathan. You may remember that it was Jonathan's initial attack against the Philistines that brought their army to Micmash to begin with. His response is very different from that of his father. Where his father acted in disobedience on account of his fear, we find his son acts in faith. What we learn from his action is that...]

Point #2 – Acting in faith often goes against the odds. (13:23-14:14)

Sometimes trusting in God means doing things that make no sense on paper.

The bible does not specifically tell us why Jonathan decided one day to go out to a 'Philistine outpost' nor does it tell us why he did not tell his father what he was going to do.

What we do have though is a contrast between the two.

Jonathan decided to go out and Saul was staying put.

Verse 3 also gives us an interesting side note about who was with Saul (14:3).

You may recall God's judgement on Eli on account of his showing contempt for the worship of God at the tabernacle.

Commentator Ronald Youngblood thinks that the mention of Eli's grandson here is a way of pointing the reader to God's rejection of Saul as king.

The rejected king with the rejected priesthood.

Why was he rejected? Because he didn't trust the LORD.

The writer then goes on to tell us about Jonathan and his armour bearer. (**Verses 6-7**).

Notice he does not presume the outcome of what he is about to do, but he does clearly believe in God's ability whatever the odds may be.

With his armour bearer convinced of the same Jonathan adds this in **verses 8-10**.

His plan is totally foolish from a battle plan perspective.

When you are two guys against a group you don't let them see you.

It would be far better to sneak up on them and surprise them.

If they do see you, you don't wait around for them to come and get you.

If they tell you to climb up a steep cliff to fight, that is the last thing in the world you should do.

A couple of rocks, or arrows, or a spear would finish them off no problem.

What Jonathan is doing here is putting his life and that of his armour bearer completely in God's hands.

There is no earthly way the two of these guys should survive what they are about to do.

Their enemies clearly know that which is why they say what they say in **verses 11-12a**.

Most of the Israelite soldiers were hiding in holes so it is not surprising their enemies saw them as weak and of no threat.

They probably didn't really expect Jonathan and his armour bearer to climb the cliff.

Even when they started climbing they likely did not consider them any kind of real threat.

Little did they know that their arrogance was precisely the sign that Jonathan was hoping for (**Verse 12b**).

Even though everything is against them, Jonathan takes the action he does because he believes God is with him.

[We see examples of this sort of thing happen time and again in the Bible. What are the odds Elijah should prevail against 450 prophets of a false god? What are the odds that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survive a blazing furnace? What chance does a man have inside the stomach of a giant fish? What are the odds of a handful of uneducated men changing the whole world? Not good.]

You know the Bible is full of stuff that makes no sense on paper, especially in the New Testament.

Do you want to save your life? Jesus says to lose it.

Do you want to store up treasure? Jesus says to give it away.

Do you want to be the greatest? Then become the least of all.

A follower of Jesus is going to regularly face decisions where acting in faith goes against the grain.

The fact is most people in our society think believing the bible is silly.

Some are starting to label it as being dangerous.

What will we do when the odds are against believing what is right and true?

[Jonathan here entrusts himself to the LORD. He acts in faith despite the odds being against him and according to verses 13-14 he and his armour bearer defeat a group of 20 soldiers. We may never find ourselves on a battlefield like this one, but we are nevertheless called to exercise this same kind of faith. We need be very careful, however, that we have the right perspective on these things. It would be very easy to read a text like this and be over confident thinking that we can be every bit as brave as Jonathan. It would also be easy to read this text and be plunged into despair thinking we could never have this kind of courage. The third lesson of this text corrects both of those errors. The third lesson is this...]

Point #3 – Whatever the odds, the hope of God’s people is God’s grace. (14:15-23)

Whether we are enjoying seasons of great blessing or circumstances that seem impossible our future good depends solely on the favour of the LORD.

Jonathan knew before, during, and after his fight with the 20 Philistines that his victory depended of God acting on his behalf.

Verse 15 shows us that same thing on a much larger scale.

Sizing up the odds of victory from a military perspective the Philistines have nothing to be afraid of.

They have the numbers they have the weapons and yet they are struck with ‘panic’ it says.

Even though their army is divided into different locations they are all afraid.

Why? They have nothing to be afraid of.

They are afraid because God has put fear into their hearts.

Jonathan, though he is a man of great courage, does not win this battle for the people, the LORD does.

Saul’s men see the Philistine army ‘melting away’ according to verse 16 which prompts the king to gather his soldiers.

He also tells Ahijah the priest who was with him to bring the ‘ark of God’ likely a step to try and figure out what is going on.

It quickly becomes obvious that the LORD is in fact at work though so Saul heads into battle with his men to find the Philistines in “total confusion, striking each other with their swords.”

That brings out the men who were hiding, those that had actually gone over to the enemy return to their own people and they all joined in the chase after their fleeing enemies.

So you have one man of courage and faith (Jonathan), a king who failed to trust God, a small group of soldiers with the king, a group of sellouts, and an army of cowards.

That is why we read this in **verse 23**.

The people are not saved by Jonathan’s courage, nor are they abandoned because of Saul’s failure, or their own lack of strength.

They are saved because the LORD is gracious to them.

I’m quite sure there were many brave men in the Philistine army who had fought in a number of battles, but no man’s courage, no matter how great, can withstand the terror of Almighty God.

Likewise we would do well to consider to source of Jonathan’s courage.

No doubt he was an uncommon man of bravery, but it was not his confidence in himself that caused him to climb the cliff, it was his confidence in the mercies of the LORD.

No one no matter how weak in and of themselves will falter if they are upheld by the strength of the LORD.

Do you see? All that happens here is because the “LORD rescued Israel that day”.

Not because they earned it, but because the LORD is compassionate and gracious towards His people.

[That is the heart of the gospel. Jesus is conceived, born into the world, lived faithfully upon it, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven because God is gracious. When we put our faith in Christ God willfully looks beyond our evil because Jesus has paid our debt, and He places upon us His perfection. Why? Because God is gracious. God the Holy Spirit moves in us taking us from being spiritually dead to spiritually alive, making us into new creatures with new delights and desires that bring glory to God and everlasting joy to us. Why? Because He is gracious.]

As we examine our lives individually and the future prospects of the Church as a whole we may see impossible odds.

If we do then we have a great deal of company with the people of God throughout history.

If we are people who truly live by faith, then we may very well find ourselves acting in ways that don’t make a whole lot of sense to the unbelieving world, in ways that go against the odds.

Our hope in those times does not lie in our own strength whether physical or spiritual.

It is not our own goodness or wisdom that will see us through to that glorious day when Jesus comes and puts an end to every evil in the whole of creation.

No brothers and sisters, we will see that day according to the grace of our loving God.

May His Name be praised forever and ever, Amen!