

Bethel

Pulpit

The Need Today for Men Like Jonathan

Sermon Number 447

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 24th February, 2013**

Text: *"And Jonathan said to the young man that bare his armour, Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few. And his armourbearer said unto him, Do all that is in thine heart: turn thee; behold, I am with thee according to thy heart" (1 Samuel 14. 6, 7).*

There are two ancient promises in God's Word. One is this: "How should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight?" It is an amazing word, but it was literally fulfilled in what I read to you this morning (1 Samuel 13. 16-23; 14. 1-23). The other ancient promise is this: "The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits." And that was literally fulfilled here. What an exploit it was! Beloved friends, it is a strange thing that Jonathan did here. It seems in a way more wonderful than what David did with Goliath. Everybody knows the story of David and Goliath, but very few know the story of Jonathan and how singlehandedly he overthrew the Philistines.

Well, as we read through the chapter this morning, those were sad, dark, dreadful days in Israel. They were tormented by the Philistines, so much so that there was hardly a sword in Israel. They were days of darkness and declension and sorrow and doubt, and God's great name dishonoured, few who feared His name and sought His face. Pondering over this, it seemed to me that the situation there was identical with the situation in England today. It seems that the Philistines are prevailing, that iniquity is triumphing, that Satan is accomplishing his purposes, and in high places there are very few willing to stand up for what is right.

I could not help but be struck as we read through, all these dreadful happenings, of all these Philistines, and all their excursions and their fighting, and Saul was sitting under a pomegranate tree – the one man who should have been standing for the glory and honour of God and leading his nation against these inroads, not just of the Philistines, but of sin and Satan. Now there are too many people sitting under pomegranate trees today, and

I do not just mean like Saul, and I do not just mean in high places, and in Parliament, but in our congregations and in our chapels, with all these solemn happenings and all the declension in the church of God, there are too many people sitting quietly, happy, resting happy, unconcerned, lukewarm, under the pomegranate tree. It is a sad thing when the Lord's people seem to fall into a fatalistic spirit – just a sign of the times.

I did feel that burden: what we do need is for the Lord to raise up Jonathans for us – Jonathans in the nation in high places and Jonathans in the church of God who are heavily burdened and heavily concerned for the honour and glory of God, and who are willing to stand forth, whatever it may cost, because if ever a man risked his life for the honour and glory of God, Jonathan did here.

If you read through this thoughtfully and carefully and soberly, it seemed a ridiculous and foolish thing that Jonathan was doing, two of them going to fight an army. It is not altogether clear what all this geographical situation was, but it seems as you read it, there was a complete, sheer face of rock and the two of them had to climb it before they met their enemy. But with Jonathan it was the honour and glory of God. He could not bear the Lord's name to be dishonoured. You might say, But Jonathan, what about your father? He is the king, not you. Why don't you sit under the pomegranate tree with him? You are royalty; you have your servants; you have your palace. But Jonathan had this burden for the honour and glory of God. You might say, But what can one man do? What can one man *not* do if the Lord is with him?

What did Jonathan say here? "There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few." That is a wonderful word – a lot of faith in it, a lot of good divinity in it. And one thing that Jonathan had: he had such clear, believing views of omnipotence, that God is almighty, that the most impossible thing with Him is easy. It would be a wonderful thing if this vision – and I hope that is the right word; I use it advisedly – if this vision returned to the church of God today: who our God is, that He *is* great, He *is* almighty, He *is* on the throne, He *is* in control. He does reign; nothing is too hard for Him; He is with His people; He does hear and answer prayer. O to be a Jonathan, or if not a Jonathan, to be blessed with Jonathan's faith!

"There is no restraint to the Lord." There is not, is there? "There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few." Just turning a

moment aside from things in the nation and things in the church of God – your own particular personal circumstances this morning, with your burden on your heart as you come, that thing that is weighing you down. May you have Jonathan's faith to see how great your God is, and may this rest on your heart: there is no restraint with Him. What does it mean? That if He is going to do something, there is no power in earth or in hell can stop it.

As I have been pondering over this, I must say, beloved friends, I have been sorely troubled about this subject this morning, but I could not get away from it. I thought, Whatever am I going to say? Whatever are the people going to think? But it has been with me all week – Jonathan and his armourbearer, scaling up that sheer rock, only two of them against that great army, almost the most ridiculous thing you read in the whole Bible. But it was not, you know. It was victory. You read at the end of the chapter, "Who hath wrought salvation in Israel." If only we believed this, that there is no restraint with God – no restraint with Him in fulfilling His purposes; no restraint with Him raising up men in high places; no restraint with Him overturning sin and Satan; no restraint with Him hearing and answering your poor prayers, spiritual and providential; no restraint with Him dealing with your hard causes. "There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few." It means this: He does not need any human arm to help Him; He does not need an army; He does not need a multitude. "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

"There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few." Really, I think Jonathan is one of the most gracious characters in Scripture. Not only do we see him here with his burden and concern for the honour and glory of God – he could not bear the Lord's name to be dishonoured and he could not bear those Philistines to be overcoming God's Israel, and he could not bear his father to be doing nothing – yet have you ever noticed right through the life of Saul, Jonathan, David, Jonathan was so upset, so distressed with the way his father behaved, and yet though he could not agree with him, and though so often he had to go against him, yet he always did what he felt was right and he always honoured his father?

But you see the humility of this man Jonathan when David appeared. Jonathan was going to be king of Israel, and he realised that this young man who had appeared is going to take his place, he is going to be king. How did Jonathan receive it? Well, he received it in love and he even rejoiced in it. He was like John the Baptist when they said, Master, all men

forsake thee and go after Another, and he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." We read of Jonathan taking off his royal robes and putting them on David. He said, "Thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee." The grace you see in Jonathan all the way through, the humility, and how he risked his life to be a help to David! That lovely occasion when David was at the end of everything, and he was there in that deep, dark wood – he was there naturally; he was there spiritually; he was there feelingly – and we read that "Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God."

Well, that is Jonathan. But as you read through the life of Jonathan, he does not give you the impression of being a boisterous man, a man who wants to be first, one who wants to take the limelight. He appears all the way through, he does not have much to say. He is very quiet. He likes to be in the background. It almost seems in this chapter he was acting contrary to his own character, but he felt it was for the honour and glory of God.

Well, here Almighty God had a purpose to be fulfilled, and that purpose was to overthrow the inveterate enemies of God's ancient people Israel, the Philistines. Now if God has a purpose to be fulfilled, there is nothing can ever overthrow it; there is nothing can ever stop it. You say, How could it be when Israel seemed to be lukewarm, lifeless, demoralised, their king lying down under a pomegranate tree? How did the Lord do it? He put an exercise in the heart of one man and that was the beginning of it all; and the end of it: "The Lord hath wrought salvation for Israel."

I wonder if the Lord has put an exercise in anyone's heart here this morning. I suppose this word *exercise* is often used but very difficult to explain. I remember some few years ago there was a person came to live in Bedfordshire and started attending one of our country chapels in Bedfordshire, and I had a phone call from him one day. He said could he come to see me, so I said, Yes. He said, "I found it quite interesting going to your chapels and I like going, and I like the preaching, and I agree with it. But," he said, "there is one thing I have never heard of before." He said, "Could you explain it to me?" He said, "All the different ministers who seem to come seem to use this word, speaking about an *exercise*." Well, it is something better known and felt and experienced than explained. But if the Lord puts a godly, gracious exercise in your heart to do something, or go somewhere, or say something, or do something, you will certainly know it.

But beloved friends, here comes the warning, and it is a very serious warning, a very solemn warning. It is this: *beware of a false exercise*. There are some people, they want something, they want it badly, but it is for themselves. They say they have an exercise. Now we need to be delivered from false exercises. So if the Lord lays something on your heart, how do you know whether it is a true exercise or not, and how do you know if it is a false exercise? I think most godly boys and most godly men at some time in their lives, it crosses their mind whether they ought to preach or not. How do you know whether an exercise is a true exercise or not?

"Jonathan said to the young man that bare his armour, Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few." How would anyone know that that was a right exercise, a right burden, that dear Jonathan had? It seemed foolish; it seemed ridiculous. Shall I tell you? There were three things here and you will never have these three things if it is a false exercise.

The first thing: he was really burdened and concerned for the honour and glory of God. It was not himself; it was not Jonathan; it was the honour and glory of God. He could not bear that these uncircumcised Philistines should be ruling over the land, taking charge, taking control. He could not bear the thought of Israel's God being dishonoured. It was that burning desire, not for self, not for fame, but for the honour and glory of God. Now that marked it out as being a true exercise from his God.

Now the second thing: he felt completely and absolutely empty and helpless. If anything was to come of it, it must be the Lord. He was not speaking full of assurance. He says, "It may be that the Lord will work for us." He hoped He would; he believed He would; he prayed that He would; but he was not full of self confidence. He said, "It may be that the Lord will work for us." His point was, if the Lord did not work for them, well, it was going to be completely futile. O that sense of utter helplessness and unfitness and unworthiness! Now you never have that with a false exercise.

What about the third thing? Well, naturally speaking, humanly speaking, it was certain death for Jonathan. If he made a mistake, if he was wrong, if the Lord was not with him, it was going to be a cruel death. Two people going against an army, and could it be right? But he was willing to risk even life itself if it be God's will. Now you never have that in a false

exercise – something which will humble you and abase you and even annihilate you and put you out of the way for ever.

So beware of false exercises, but if you are Jonathan here this morning and you have a right exercise, then, "This is the way, walk ye in it." If you read books on a subject like this, they would tell you about William Wilberforce – one man and what he did. They will tell you of David Livingstone – one man and what he did. But there are still these Jonathans today, in a lesser measure. I have thought of various things, people with an exercise, and dare they go alone, and perhaps they are standing alone. I have thought of John Broome in his old age. It was laid on him so much that there must be, there shall be a magazine for older teenagers and young people, and he was just alone in it. No-one else seemed to have that burden. No-one else seemed to be particularly concerned. No-one else seemed to be interested. But he felt it was from the Lord, and he went alone and he did it. The magazine has been appearing. These enterprises of faith!

I could not help but think of our godly old deacons, Mr. Watts, senior, Mr. Gurney and Mr. Pearce. Thinking of my own case personally, I was only thirty-four years old, a lot younger than many of you here. I had only preached in this pulpit once, and they felt so powerfully, like Jonathan, that they asked the church to invite me to come here as pastor. It seemed a strange enterprise – it seemed like it to me – but I am still here many years later. But some of those old, godly men in our churches had a thing laid on their mind and they did it.

I believe there was a poor, humble, trembling man in a little chapel called Hook Norton that no longer exists, and in fear and trembling he wrote one day to two young men. He did not know them too well, but he asked them both, would they come and preach at Hook Norton? Everybody thought, What are you doing? Is it according to church order? Is it right? Do you know these men? They are only young. What are you doing? Well, they became two of our best-known, best-loved ministers. One was Herbert Dawson of Bethersden and one was William Hope of Abingdon, whom you older ones remember. There are false exercises, but if the Lord gives you an exercise like Jonathan, however strange, then, "This is the way, walk ye in it."

"And Jonathan said to the young man that bare his armour, Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that

the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few." That is Jonathan. What about the armourbearer? Jonathan was a great man. He was a prince in Israel. The armourbearer – perhaps he was not much – he just carried Jonathan's armour. We do not even know his name, but he is still honoured in the Word of God three thousand years later. Beloved friends, if you cannot be a Jonathan, can you be an armourbearer? O what a blessing these armourbearers are to the church of God! What a blessing they are to ministers of the gospel! What is it? They speak kindly. They encourage. They go with you. They are willing to help.

"And his armourbearer said unto him, Do all that is in thine heart." Where is Saul? He is the one who should have been here. Where are all the armies of Israel? This young armourbearer – we are told he was only young, but he was a support to the people of God; he was a support to the Lord's servant; he was used in fulfilling the Lord's purpose. O may we have many of these armourbearers at Bethel, as it was with Moses – he had an Aaron on one hand, and he had a Hur on the other hand. They were holding up his arms.

"And his armourbearer said unto him, Do all that is in thine heart: turn thee." These are the armourbearers. We have them at Bethel. We are blessed with them. Make sure you are one of them. "Behold, I am with thee according to thy heart." You go along with the Lord's people in their joys; you go along with them in their troubles; you go along with them in their burdens; you go along with them in their exercises. "Behold, I am with thee." What a wonderful thing if we are in trouble and we have the Lord's people with us in their sympathy, in their prayers. What a wonderful thing if we are preaching and we have people with us, and supporting, and praying, and faithful and loyal. May we be blessed, if not with Jonathans, may we be blessed with these armourbearers.

"And his armourbearer said unto him, Do all that is in thine heart: turn thee; behold, I am with thee according to thy heart." Well then, you see what happened. These two men, you see them climbing up this sheer face, and they suddenly appear before the Philistines. But Jonathan was not presumptuous. He was still a little bit fearful, and he asked for a token like Gideon did. He asked for a sign. When they saw them appearing, if they said, to all intent and purpose, if they said, "What are you doing? Go back," we will know it is from the Lord. That is it. We have been mistaken. We

are wrong. We must turn back. But if they say, "Come hither, we will show you something," that will be a sign.

You think of these two going and immediately they slew twenty, and what did the Lord do? The whole Philistine army saw what was happening. They were confused. Humanly speaking, it seemed they did not know there were only two, because it was climbing up this rock and going through a narrow passage. It seems they perhaps thought there was an army behind. They began to flee and fight one another. There had been Israelites who fled almost as traitors, living in the land of the Philistines. They turned back again. It was confusion and the whole Philistine army was routed. You see the impossible taking place.

There are a few things. One is, God did not fail Jonathan. He did not fail him and He will not fail you, whatever your burden, whatever you have before you, even this evening or next week, whether it is in providence or in the church of God, whatever you have in the coming days. God did not fail him and was with him. He knew the presence of his God. And we read, he "wrought this great salvation in Israel."

And do not be surprised – before the end of the chapter everything was going wrong, and poor old Jonathan was going to be put to death by his father. There is not time to go into all the details of it. Everything went wrong. The people began to find fault, things are being disturbed. You will find that if you walk in obedience to God's will, you have Satan opposing. Of course, Saul pronounced that terrible oath on anybody who touched food that day. He joined in the battle when he saw the Philistines fleeing. He did not want them to lose time. Jonathan his son did not hear what he said about the curse and ate some honey by the way, and at the end of the chapter Saul announced that Jonathan was to be put to death. How quickly Satan would intervene! The whole of Israel rescued Jonathan. "The people said unto Saul, Shall Jonathan die, who hath wrought this great salvation in Israel? God forbid: as the Lord liveth, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground." Now this is it: "for he hath wrought with God this day." It was God who did it, not Jonathan. It was "he hath wrought with God this day. So the people rescued Jonathan, that he died not." The Lord through two people wrought salvation for Israel.

Just two things in conclusion. William Cowper in his well-known hymn says,

"O! I have seen the day,
When, with a single word,
God helping me to say,
'My trust is in the Lord,'
My soul has quelled a thousand foes,
Fearless of all that could oppose."

The Christian conflict, the Christian warfare.

The second thing: "Behold, a greater than *Jonathan* is here." When we see Him by faith, see Him going forth to grapple with sin, Satan, all the powers of death and hell, and He did not have an armourbearer with Him. He trod the winepress alone, the winepress of God's wrath. Of the people there was none with Him. He looked for some to help, and behold there was no man. His own arm brought salvation. And if Jonathan was willing to die, our Saviour knew He must die. But O to see that greater than Jonathan grappling with all the powers of hell and coming forth victorious!

"I sing my Saviour's wondrous death;
He conquered when He fell.
'Tis finished!' said His dying breath,
And shook the gates of hell."

A greater than Jonathan. And today He has wrought salvation in Israel.

* * *

Now let the feeble all be strong,
And make Jehovah's arm their song;
His shield is spread o'er every saint,
And thus supported, who shall faint?

What though the hosts of hell engage
With mingled cruelty and rage?
A faithful God restrains their hands,
And chains them down in iron bands.

Bound by His word, He will display
A strength proportioned to our day;
And when united trials meet,
Will show a path of safe retreat.

Thus far we prove that promise good,
Which Jesus ratified with blood;
Still is He gracious, wise, and just,
And still in Him let Israel trust.

P. Doddridge