

It's one thing to believe that God is in charge of everything and is working his purposes out, it is another thing to live in the light of that great truth.

One of the important aspects of God's providence that we have noted as we've looked at different passages is that it is so often unseen - the Lord is working out his purposes behind the scenes, and yet we are called to live obediently right now. Our job isn't to try and work out what God is doing right now, it is to act on the basis of what God has revealed (this is what it means to "live by faith"). We often get in a muddle when it comes to guidance because we think we need to work out exactly what God is doing - thankfully we aren't given that burden to carry!

There are a number of great examples in Scripture where godly men and women act in faithful obedience even though they don't know what God is doing or may do with their lives. Some are very familiar to us - think for example of Mordecai's appeal to Esther -

"For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14)

Esther acts in courage and faith even though she doesn't know for certain that God will use her bold stand.

Shedrach, Meshach and Abdenego find themselves in a similar situation. They know it is not right for them to bow down before Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, but they don't know for certain that God will rescue them. But they obey anyway -

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."
Daniel 3:18

A slightly less familiar example of this trust in God's rule despite not knowing the future is found in 1 Samuel 14. It comes at a point in Israel's history when Saul has been rejected by the Lord, but is still on the throne. David has been anointed King, but is on the run and has not yet been recognised by all Israel.

Caught in the middle is Jonathan. He is Saul's son, so would normally be expecting to become king when his father dies. However, he trusts the Lord and recognised that David was the true king.

In chapter 14 Israel are facing their enemies - the Philistines. Saul is hiding away terrified (vs 2), showing his lack of trust in the Lord. But it is Jonathan who the Lord uses to bring victory on this particular day. And it is one verse in this chapter which shows us what trust in the rule of the Lord looks like -

“Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armour, “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.”

It might seem like Jonathan is about to engage in some foolhardy heroics by attacking the whole Philistine garrison personally, but that's not what's going on! He is showing his trust in the Lord. But he has reasons to trust, it's not just wishful thinking.

He sees the situation they are in as the Lord does. That's shown by the fact he describes the enemy as “these uncircumcised”. This is not Jonathan using a crude racial slur. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between the Lord and his people. The Philistines are not part of God's people. They are trying to remove God's people from the land the Lord had promised to them. Jonathan is saying, in effect, “what gives them the right? They are going to fail.”

Jonathan also trusts in the power of God. “Nothing can hinder the Lord saving by many or by few”. Saul was hiding because the Philistines looked like, and were, a terrifying war machine. But they were nothing compared to the Lord! Jonathan truly knows his God and believes in his power.

This faith is not about taking God for granted though. Just like Mordecai with Esther and Daniel's friends, there is a crucial aspect to Jonathan's faith - a belief that God is free to act as he wishes. "It may be that the LORD will work for us." This isn't a lack of faith. It is Jonathan recognising he does not know exactly what God will do. He is free to use us, he is equally free not to - either way his purposes will be achieved somehow. It is wrong to say we know exactly what God will do in a given situation, but this should not hold us back from acting.

And that is exactly what Jonathan and his armour bearer does. They act! They know and trust in God's character, promises and his providential rule - and they go for it!

There are obviously lots of applications to us and our lives as we think through this approach to God and his promises.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How do you think knowing the fact that God is in charge should lead us to live? Do you think it leads to confidence and risk taking in following Christ? What do you think you need to know before you take a big decision?

Can you think of some biblical examples of where people have trusted and obeyed God even though they didn't fully know what he was doing, or going to do?

Read 1 Samuel 14:1-15

God's people are under threat from the Philistines. Where is Saul? If he was truly God's King, what should he be doing?

What does Jonathan decide to do? (vs 1) How is that different to what his Father is doing?

What is Jonathan's plan? (Vs 6) Why does this seem crazy, from a human point of view?

Is Jonathan just being stupid?

How does Jonathan view the Philistines? Why is it significant that he calls them “these uncircumcised?”

What difference does trust in God’s promises make for the decision we make in our lives?

Does Jonathan presume that God will use him? Does this stop him from acting?

Can you think of times when it is right to say “it may be that God will work for us.....” Are we sometimes too tempted to hold back until we know absolutely for certain?

Why is Jonathan not scared of the Philistines war machine? Where is his confidence? See also 1 Samuel 2:4-8

What are some of things that we can be scared of? How do they stop us from trusting and obeying God? How can we grow in the kind of faith that Jonathan has?

It is striking that Jonathan doesn’t get worked up about getting God’s guidance, instead he trusts in God’s promises and power (that is, he focuses on God’s providential rule) - and then he acts. How can we apply this to how we make decisions today?