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I Samuel 20 “Jonathan: An Example of Devoted Friendship”

Intro. After young David slew the giant Goliath by his faith in God, he became an instant hero. One of his admirers was the king’s son Jonathan. Look back at 18:1, “Now when he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” The word “knit” means “to tie, or to bind together.” From that moment on there was a strong bond of love between these two friends. King Saul was also pleased with David, and set him over the men of war. They respected him and followed him. On one occasion after David led his men in a great victory over the Philistines, the woman of Israel sang, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (18:7). Though Saul had been very fond of David up to that point, he became very jealous of David, and the relationship between Saul and David deteriorated. But David and Jonathan continued to be best of friends. In fact, in the last of v.17 of our text, it says that Jonathan “loved him as he loved his own soul.” Jonathan was strategically placed in David’s life at the very time David needed a genuine friend. In fact, the very name “Jonathan” means “Jehovah has given.” The Lord had indeed given David a very good friend.

The friendship of Jonathan for David comes like a breath of fresh air in the midst of the atmosphere of jealousy, hatred, and mad fury. There is no more beautiful page in history or poetry than the story of the passionate love of the heir to the throne for the one whom he had so much cause to regard as a rival. Yet Jonathan was not like his father. His self-less love for David rejected jealous thoughts. David’s rise did not affect his relationship with Jonathan in the least. Jonathan was indeed one of the choice characters of the Old Testament.

As you pass through this life, you will make hundreds and even thousands of acquaintances; but you will have few real friends. Each of us should have a best friend. We *need* friends. I just read last night that men with the least contact with friends and family in late life were nearly three times more likely to develop dementia.¹ Those who good friends have better immune systems and recover from illness & surgery better. They have better mental health.² For many of us, our spouse is our best friend. But we should also have a really good friend or two of the same sex outside our marital relationship.

Well, to *have* really good friends, you have to *be* a good friend. Jonathan’s friendship toward David is a great example for us. By looking at their relationship, we should be instructed and inspired to have the same kind of friendship toward each other, especially as brothers and sisters in Christ.

So let’s notice first of all from our text the fact that:

I. FRIENDSHIPS CAN BE THREATENED

That was certainly true of the friendship between Jonathan & David. Outside forces jeopardized their friendship, just as they can jeopardize our friendships. We see an example of this in our text. Back in 19:1 we read, “Now Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David.” Yet that verse goes on to say, “but Jonathan, Saul’s son, delighted greatly

¹ Based on a study of 2,513 men (*Readers Digest*, September 2005, page 59).

² *Reader's Digest*, Sept. 2002, pp. 114-115.

in David.” As a result, Jonathan reminded his father of what David had done for him and his kingdom, and the king temporarily agreed to a truce (vv.4-6). But that didn’t last long. A spirit of jealousy returned and Saul tried to kill David with his spear (v.10). Then Saul sent some men to David’s house, & they were to kill him there, but one again he escaped with the help of his wife, Saul’s daughter (vv.11-12). Then, David went to the prophet Samuel at Ramah, to tell him that Saul was out to kill him. Then, in the last part of chapter 19 we have a strange story. Saul sent 3 groups of messengers to arrest David, but each group fell under the influence of the prophets and they all began to prophecy, including Saul’s messengers! Finally, Saul went to do the job himself, and he also was overcome by the Spirit of God [or a spirit from God; see 16:14], and he began to prophecy, instead of carrying out his work of hatred. What is really strange is that Saul began to preach without any clothes on!³ (v.24). Don’t expect anything like that to happen today! It seems to me Saul’s behavior demonstrated that he was not spiritually fit to be among the prophets, even though he outwardly joined them in prophesying.

Even though God once again protected David, that didn’t satisfy David. Then in v.1 of our text we read, “Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and went and said to Jonathan, ‘What have I done? What is my iniquity, and what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?’” Now the renewed animosity of Saul toward David created a potential problem in David’s relationship with Jonathan. David’s first question presupposes that his friend knows that his death is determined, and he must have wondered if Jonathan was aware of his father’s renewed intentions. Yet David should have remembered that, when Saul first harbored murderous purposes, Jonathan had not waited to be asked, but had disclosed the plot to him, and periled his own life by doing so (19:2). He should have trusted his friend. His question betrays some defect in his confidence in Jonathan.

Jonathan must have been unaware of the two most recent attempts against David. So notice Jonathan’s response in v.2, “By no means! You shall not die! Indeed, my father will do nothing either great or small without first telling me. And why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!” Jonathan points out that his father had a habit of confiding in him. After all, the most introverted and solitary soul needs some heart to pour itself out to, and King Saul found one in Jonathan. The last he had heard from Saul about David, Saul had pledged that he would not kill David, as we see back in 19:6. He certainly wanted to believe his father, and he evidently had not personally witnessed or heard anything to the contrary. I believe Jonathan tended to believe the best about people.

Then in v.3 David gives a very good reason for his friend’s suggestion that Saul had not taken him into his confidence. He says, “Your father certainly knows that I have found favor in your eyes, and he has said, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.’” Saul knew that Jonathan loved David. This made Saul hate David all the more. In his mind David seemed to have some charm to steal hearts, and bewitched both Saul’s son and his daughter. He knew it was best to keep his plans against David to himself, and not tell Jonathan.

As a result of all this, a painful rift in the family unity was developing. It seemed clear that Saul was no longer willing to trust his son Jonathan with any of his plans regarding David. Of course Saul was wrong in regard to David. David was not the problem. Saul’s jealousy and hatred is what was the true cause of the rift in the family!

³ Actually, it may mean that he took off his kingly garments (cf. Gen. 38:14), and only wore his undergarment or tunic (cf. use of “garments” in Gen. 39:18; Ex 31:10; 2 Sam. 13:31, & in 1 Kings 22:10 the Hebrew word is translated “robes”).

Even though Jonathan wanted to believe the best about his father, there was much in the last part of chapter 19 to make David sure of Saul's designs. In fact, he is so sure, that he makes a solemn statement to his friend, "There is but a step between me and death" (v.3b).

There are two lessons I want to draw from this part of the story:

1. Fear can overcome our faith. Was there truly but a step between him and death at this time in his life? David should have called to mind Samuel's anointing him to be king. Wouldn't God protect His anointed? He had so far! He should have also remembered his victory over Goliath. If God gave him victory over a greater foe, should he trust God once again for victory over Saul? But faith does not always remain strong. Sometimes our faith will waver. If he had been living in the serenity of trust, he would have known that the narrow space between him & death was as good as a thousand miles, and that Saul could not force him across it, for all his hatred and power.

Sometimes fear & other factors can cause our faith to waver. Here we see that even happens to the great men of faith. We can take comfort in that. But when it happens, we need to get our focus away from our problems, & back on to God, who is worthy of our trust. He can protect you, and provide for you.

On the other hand, notice something else:

2. David's statement is true of all of us. At any time there could be but a step between us and death. At any moment an aneurism could bust open in your brain, & you could be dead within minutes. These days even young adults have dropped dead from a heart attack. Whenever you get into a car, you are within a step of death. Death can come at any time. That is the reason we ought to be ready at any moment to move out into eternity and into the presence of God. Don't put off accepting Christ as Savior!

Now you can imagine how this situation would threaten the friendship of Jonathan & David. Would their friendship pass this test? Would your friendship pass such a test?

The next primary lesson we see from our text is this:

II. FRIENDS OFFER TO HELP ANY WAY THEY CAN

In David's mind, he felt that he could not continue to evade Saul's attacks without Jonathan's help. And Jonathan feels obliged to admit the justice of the explanation of his own ignorance of Saul's purposes. So notice how Jonathan assures David of his help. He says to David in v.4, "Whatever you yourself desire, I will do it for you." That's what a true friend says, isn't it? He pledges to do whatever David desires.

The touchstone of friendship is practical help and readiness to do what the friend wishes. Do you offer to help your friend, regardless of the kind of help needed?

Well notice the specific way David wanted Jonathan to help. In v.5 David said, "Indeed tomorrow is the New Moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king to eat." According to Numbers 10:10 & 28:11, there was to be a sacrifice to the Lord at the beginning of each month, at the new moon. This was the type of sacrifice that was to be eaten by the participants, resulting in a feast (cf. 2 Kings 4:23; Isa. 1:13; Amos 8:5). Evidently, the king & his court had a monthly feast at that time. Then David proposed a strategy for finding out Saul's disposition. In vv.6-7 David said, "But let me go, that I may hide in the field until the third day at evening. If your father misses me at all, then say, 'David earnestly asked permission of me that he might run over to Bethlehem, his city, for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family.' If he says thus: 'It is well,' your servant will be safe. But if he is very angry, then be sure that evil is determined by him." It was a shrewd idea to

make Saul reveal himself by the way he took David's absence. If he intended to arrest David, he would be upset at his absence, and the fact that his plan was foiled again. Even though we cannot condone David's likely use of deception,⁴ we have to admire his use of psychology here to determine what was in Saul's heart.

Now I want you to see two truths about our offer to help our friends:

A. Our Offer of Help Should Be Selfless – Saul was out to kill David, and if he did so, he would have told Jonathan, "I did it for you, to ensure your place on my throne." But perhaps the real issue is Saul's fear that David would take the throne from *him*! Be that as it may, look at it from Jonathan's perspective. He sides with his friend David and offers to help him, even though it could mean that David would take his place as king of Israel. It would also mean siding with David over his own father.

In fact, look at his statement in the last of v.15. Jonathan speaks of a time "when the LORD has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." Jonathan is so unselfish in his recognition of David as the inheritor of the kingdom. What selflessness he exhibits as a friend! Then, what a proof of the victory of love over self is his statement that he made later in 23:17, "You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you." Jonathan was perfectly willing to play second fiddle to David. He was perfectly willing to be the assistant coach, rather than the head coach. With such unselfish love from his friend, it is not surprising that David spoke the following words upon Jonathan's death, "Your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women" (2 Sam. 1:26).⁵ Jonathan stands for all time as the noblest example of human friendship.

Here we see a great example of the fact that love ought to characterize our friendships. I am not talking about nothing more than good feelings or romantic love. I am talking about self-less commitment to your friend. Jonathan consistently placed David ahead of himself. That is what a true friend always does! Romans 12:10 says, "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another."

But why would Jonathan be so selfless to help David, against the wishes of his father? That leads to the second truth:

B. Our Offer of Help Should Be Morally Right – Remember, Jonathan said, "Whatever you yourself desire, I will do it for you." Wouldn't he have said the same thing to his father? Surely. Yet such an open-ended offer must always be conditional in one respect: what they ask must be morally acceptable. Jonathan knew his father was wrong in his desire to kill David. David had done nothing wrong. David loved and served both God & the king. Jonathan knew that his father was full of unjust jealousy. He knew that his father was no longer following God. So he made the difficult choice of siding with David, and helping him, for David was in the right. He chose to support the one whom God had chosen. He chose to support the one who was in the right.

Here we see an example of the fact that we must put spiritual principles over the ties of flesh and blood. There are those who believe that you should stand with your kinfolk right or wrong. Or that you should stand with a friend right or wrong. But where should your greatest loyalty be? The ties of family & friends are very important, but shouldn't your loyalty to your heavenly Father & your heavenly Friend take precedence over earthly bonds? Jonathan's decision to help David instead of his father was based on doing what was right. Jesus said in Mt. 10:37, "He

⁴ Even if he really did have an annual family reunion, it is clear he had no plans to attend it. But as already noted, this happened at a time when David lacked faith, and seemed to be in dire straits.

⁵ There is absolutely no evidence that David was referring to any kind of sexual love between them.

who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” Sure, it is true that your closest family members will be there for you whenever everyone else walks away. But isn’t it also true that if you are loyal to God, *He* will be there for you even when your family walks away? Jonathan stood for what was right in this situation. He remained true & loyal to his friend David, even though it would cost him his throne, and could cost him his relationship with his earthly father. He shows us that our highest loyalty should be to God, and to those who are living for God. But those “friends” and family members that seek to lead us away from God should not be followed. We will support such friends only to the degree that it is right to do so.

Next we see another truth about friendship:

III. FRIENDS REASSURE FRIENDS OF LOYAL DEVOTION

As the story unfolds, it is clear that Jonathan & David have loyal love for one another. In fact, Jonathan was intensely loyal to David. For a relationship to flourish, we need to know that our friend is loyal to us. Prov. 18:24 says, “...there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” Many people will let you down, but a real friend will not. Prov. 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” When you go through troubles & trials in life, you find out who your real friends are. When David was in trouble, Jonathan proved to be his friend. As it turns out, Jonathan was faithful and true to David to the very end of his life.

Have you ever had a friend that seemed to be a friend when it was just the two of you. But as soon as another one of their friends came along, they would abandon you for them. That’s not loyalty. A true friend will be loyal, & include his friend in his circle of friends.

But not only should we be loyal to our friends, at times we need to assure them of our loyalty. We find two examples of this here in our story. First of all:

A. Jonathan Assures David of His Loyalty - In spite of the assurance of help offered in v.4, David is not yet fully assured. So David said in v.8, “Therefore you shall deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you. Nevertheless, if there is iniquity in me, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father?” David’s words in v.8 have a touch of suspicion in them. It was understandable that he would be concerned that Jonathan’s loyalty to him would be trumped by his loyalty to his father, king Saul. So he reminded Jonathan of their “covenant” of friendship (See 18:3-4). Note, too that he does not say, “We made a covenant”, but “you have brought your servant into a covenant”, as if it had been the other’s wish rather than his.

This lack of assurance of Jonathan’s loyalty may have hurt Jonathan, who next speaks with unusual emotion in v.9 saying, “Far be it from you! For if I knew certainly that evil was determined by my father to come upon you, then would I not tell you?” He called upon David to clear all this fog out of his heart, and to believe in the genuineness and depth of his love, and the frankness of his speech.

David still is not fully satisfied. He says to Jonathan in v.10, “Who will tell me, or what if your father answers you roughly?” So Jonathan takes him out into the privacy of the open country to reassure his friend even further (v.11). Notice what he says in vv.12-13, “The LORD God of Israel is witness! When I have sounded out my father sometime tomorrow, or the third day, and indeed there is good toward David, and I do not send to you and tell you, may the LORD do so and much more to Jonathan. But if it pleases my father to do you evil, then I will report it to you and

send you away, that you may go in safety....” Jonathan solemnly calls God to witness that he will disclose his father’s purposes, whatever they are.

Now, there is a turn in events. Whereas before David was seeking assurances from Jonathan, next we see:

B. David Assures Jonathan of His Loyal Love – As I have already noted, Jonathan was far surer than David of his high destiny and final triumph. That is why he said in the last of v.13, “And the LORD be with you as He has been with my father.” Then in the last of v.15 he spoke of the time “when the LORD has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.”

In that day, it was common for new kings to kill of the family of the old king, to minimize any opportunity for rebellion. Knowing this, Jonathan sought some assurances of David’s loyal love for himself and his household. In vv.14-15 Jonathan says to David, “And you shall not only show me the kindness of the LORD while I still live, that I may not die; but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever....” Jonathan did not want David to treat him as his father had treated David, as a rival. So we read in v.17, “Now Jonathan again caused David to vow....” David gave Jonathan the assurance he needed that he would do as Jonathan had asked. And sure enough, after Jonathan died in battle later on, David did come to the throne. David took the lame son of Jonathan, named Mephibosheth, and brought him to his palace, set him at his table, and took care of him (2 Sam. 9).

What a great lesson we see here. Why was David gracious to Mephibosheth? He showed kindness to Mephibosheth for the sake of Jonathan. Even so, God has shown kindness to you and me for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, & because of our relationship with Him. It is not because of who we are or what we have done that He saved us.

Conclusion: So what I have shared with you are the building blocks of a true & lasting friendship. Offer help. Put God first. Have loyal love. Be true to your word. To have good friends, you need to practice this kind of friendship.

Jonathan is not unworthy to remind us of the perfect love of the Firstborn Son of the true King, who has loved us all with a yet deeper, more patient, more self-sacrificing love. If men can love one another as Jonathan loved David, how should they love the Christ who has loved them so much?

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Alan Carr, www.sermonnotebook.org (notes from sermon on 18:1-4); Joe O. Lewis, *Layman’s Bible Book Commentary*, Vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman, 1980); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Ben F. Philbeck, Jr., *The Broadman Bible Commentary: 1-2 Samuel*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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