

Jonathan, a Friend Closer than a Brother 1 Samuel 18:1-9, 23:15-18, Proverbs 18:24

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A British publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. Among the thousands of answers received were the following:

- "One who multiplies joys, divides grief, and whose honesty is inviolable."
- "One who understands our silence."
- "A watch that beats for all time and never runs down."

The winning definition read: "**A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.**"

Isn't that the truth? By that definition most of us have many acquaintances but few if any real friends. Our story this week is of just such a friend who like that definition came in when the world had gone out.

You'll remember from last week's tale that having killed Goliath young David was at the peak of his popularity; soon afterward, he was working in Saul's Court as his armor bearer and harpist. David then went on to become a talented soldier and leader of the King's military. He was described as, *a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him.* At the time Saul loved him greatly and he had everyone's approval. (16:18-21).

Until one day Saul heard the villagers singing, *Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands.* This awakened an insane jealousy in Saul's heart that would eventually consume his life. Now both hating and fearing David, King Saul spent the rest of his reign – possibly from seven to ten years – unsuccessfully seeking to find and kill David; a story which we will deal with in more depth next week.

We don't know for sure when David wrote the words of the 23rd Psalm, but you've got to wonder if it was during these dark years of constantly fleeing from Saul, because in verse 4 he says, *"even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."* Some of you know how David felt. I'm talking about those valleys in our lives that take us lower than we've ever been before. The ones where we feel as if we just can't go on and that the whole world has caved in on us. Some of you are there now. But it was also during this period of David's life that God showed his faithfulness and his love for David by providing him with Jonathan, the truest friend that anyone could ask for; which is the story we will tell today.

Today's scripture lesson introduced us to Jonathan, King Saul's Son, who upon meeting him after the conquest of Goliath immediately took such a liking to David that the two bound themselves together in a covenantal friendship – a brotherhood – that would even last beyond Jonathan's death. After that battle, Jonathan took off his own robe and gave it to David along with his armor, his sword, and even his bow. Then, three times in the years to come, even at the risk of his own life, Jonathan would intercede with his father to save David's life. This also we will hear more about next week, but for

today let's look at the qualities of Jonathan that made him one of the greatest, perhaps most under acknowledged, hero of faith ever recorded in our Bibles.

Here is what you need to know about Jonathan. First that he was probably at least ten-years older than David and already a fearless soldier of great capability and fame. While David was still a teenager shepherding sheep, Jonathan was commanding 1/3rd of Saul's army and performing acts of valor in war quite comparable to David's duel with Goliath (1 Samuel 14). Coming into Saul's court, David would certainly have known of Jonathan's heroic exploits. That he himself became such a great warrior was most likely due to his military training under Jonathan's mentorship.

At their first meeting, surely Jonathan recognized young David's future as a very capable warrior, but even more so he recognized in David a deep faith in God which he himself shared. Unlike his father, Jonathan remained completely **faithful** and reliant upon God all his life. Like David it was his faith that made him so courageous; as exemplified by an earlier time when the Philistines were again raiding the land and out of fear most Israelis had gone into hiding, so Jonathan decided to carry out a solo attack on the enemy.

*Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, 'Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; **it may be that the Lord will act for us; for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few.*** (14:6).

In the fight that followed, Jonathan singlehandedly killed over 20 soldiers thus routing the enemy and rallying his own troops to chase the fleeing Philistine army. That day Jonathan gave Israel a great victory. Later Jonathan would recognize this same burning faith in young David as he faced Goliath, which was most likely why the king's son and a no-name shepherd boy so quickly bonded in firm friendship.

Along with his faith in God, also came a **humility of spirit**; Jonathan trusted God to guide his life. Watching David grow as a valiant warrior, Jonathan quickly realized that the Spirit of God which had left his father now lived powerfully in David and for that reason he also protected David even while knowing that instead of himself, David would be the next king.

Again unlike his father, Jonathan was not jealous to protect that which was not his. He was willing to let God's anointing go to whomever God chose and so he spent the rest of his life protecting David from Saul's murderous attempts. One of the last times they met before his own death, even as his father's army was out looking to kill David, Jonathan went to him in one of his hideouts to encourage and strengthen him. He said to David, *'do not be afraid; for the hand of my father Saul shall not find you; you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you; my father Saul also knows that this is so.'* (23:17).

This courageous, humble faith and a deep abiding love for God, is what made Jonathan perhaps the Bible's best example of what Jesus would later describe as living by the

Greatest Commandment. Because he *loved God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, Jonathan also loved David as he loved himself* and would gladly have given his life in defense of David.

At first, knowing of their deep friendship, Saul kept his attempts to kill David from his son's knowledge (20:1-3); But having twice dodged Saul's thrown spear and another time having to sneak out of his home by night to avoid a morning execution, David knew his life was now in grave danger.

At first, not believing that his father wanted to kill David, who was both Saul's son-in-law and recognized as one of his most faithful servants, Jonathan devised a test to see if Saul was really plotting David's death. When this proved to be true, Jonathan then defended David's loyalty to his father the king, only to have Saul now hurling both curses and another spear at his own son. After which Jonathan secretly went to warn David that his life truly was in danger. But before the two of them departed they again reaffirmed their covenant that even their descendants would remain friends forever.

Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, "The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever." ' So David got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city. (20:42)

As the book of Proverbs would teach us....

Some friends can lead us to ruin, but a true friend is closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24 NCB)
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Jonathan was just such a friend. While courage is also a good quality to have, it is **faith, love, and loyalty** that made Jonathan such a true friend. Jonathan was also loyal to his own father – he stood by Saul even when he knew that his father was in the wrong – except when it came to deserting David. Recognizing that God's anointing was now resting on David, Jonathan willingly placed his own aspirations below David's future; *you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you.*

Our modern word for their kind of friendship would be a "bromance." Jonathan and David were kindred spirits in so many ways, they were both natural leaders of men, equally impulsive, equally brave, equally convinced that God was behind Israel. Their close friendship was forged out of a mutual commitment to faith, loyalty, and love.

Throughout his life and reign, David would eventually collect eight wives and sire over eighteen children. While we do not know the name of Jonathan's wife, we do know that he had a young son named Mephibosheth, who became crippled when the nurse fleeing

at the news of Jonathan's death dropped him. After he established his rule, David sought out youth in order to honor Jonathan's memory and their lifelong covenant of friendship. He restored to Mephibosheth all of his family's property and inheritance from grandfather Saul and further honored Mephibosheth by inviting him thereafter to daily eat at the king's table.

So here we have the story of a friendship that transcended personal ambition, family differences, and even the circumstances of war. It was a friendship based on their mutual recognition of God's will for Israel as expressed through the life of David. It's a friendship that lasted because both parties were committed to it despite their own needs and desires. And it's a friendship that can be a model, not just for our friendships, but for our commitment to Jesus Christ, the one who is the true and eternal King, not just of Israel, but of the whole world.

What then can we take home from this story of the friendship between Jonathan and David? Certainly that **all true friendships require similar qualities of faithfulness, loyalty, and love ... but to have such a friendship you also need to be such a friend.** If you want to have a friend like Jonathan, you have got to cultivate a heart like Jonathan.

Let's consider Jonathan's LOYALTY. Jonathan was loyal to his father in all other matters unless it came to betraying his loyalty to God and David as God's anointed. Many years later, Jonathan would come to the end of his own life fighting beside his father Saul in yet another battle defending Israel from their Philistine enemies (1 Samuel 21). Yet, when he finally became convinced that his father was indeed trying to kill his friend, Jonathan said to David, *whatever you say, I will do for you* (20:4). That is the voice of loyalty. Jonathan knew that protecting David would cost him the throne-- maybe even his own life, but he was willing to risk his kingdom for his friend.

How might such loyalty translate into your life?

What are you willing to risk for your friends?

Jonathan risked a kingdom; you probably don't have a kingdom to risk, but would you risk comfort? Popularity? Resources? Reputation?

While Jonathan was willing to risk everything in order to protect his friend; but I don't think Jonathan would have helped David hide a drug habit, or keep suicidal thoughts a secret, or anything else like that. Doing such things for a friend would actually be disloyal, because those things would endanger that friend, not protect him.

So if you want to cultivate a heart like Jonathan's heart, you must develop a heart of loyalty for your friends.

- That might mean staying with and listening to your friend cry deep into the night when you really want to be at home in bed.
- That might mean confronting your friend about their bad habit even at the risk of ending your friendship.
- That surely will mean sometimes saying to your friend, as Jonathan said to David, *"Whatever you say, I'll do for you."*

So a main characteristic of Jonathan's heart was loyalty, a second was **LOVE**.

Three times the Bible says, *"he loved David as he loved his own soul."*

Jonathan certainly liked his life as the king's son, and yet he willingly risked his own life to protect David's. That, my friends, is a picture of Godly, Biblical friendship. Such love for a friend doesn't come along every day.

You may have many friends, but how many of them would lay down their life for you? How many of them would you lay down your life for?

Jesus would later say that such willingness to lay down your life for another is the ultimate proof of true friendship (John 15:12-13). And Jesus proved His own love for us by doing just that even before we considered ourselves His friend (Romans 5:6-8).

Finally there is **FAITHFULNESS**. A main reason why David found such a soul mate in Jonathan is because they shared a common faith. This is a Biblical teaching that a lot of people these days find difficult to hear, but **if you want to have a friendship like the one between Jonathan and David, it has to start with having the same faith.**

2 Corinthians 6:14 is a verse that is usually applied to dating and marriage, but its real application is much broader. That verse says,

*Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness?
Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?
2 Corinthians 6:14*

Other translations say, *"do not be yoked together with unbelievers."* Understand that this verse is not saying that you can't have any non-Christian friends; but it is saying that you should not allow yourself to be yoked, or bound together with a non-Christian. That means your most intimate friendships, friendships that bind you together – which

does include your marriage – should possess a common faith. That was true in Jonathan and David’s case; it should be no less true in mine, or in yours.

What that means Christian, is that if your closest friend is an unbeliever, then you are on dangerous ground. You see, a yoke is a wooden harness that a farmer places on the shoulders of two oxen or horses, to bind their strength together into one effective tool for plowing and clearing land. The problem with wearing a yoke, though, is that both animals must be pulling with the same strength and in the same direction. If you’re not pulling together with your friend towards God, your friend will be pulling you away. As the Apostle Paul once pithily advised

Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.' 1 Corinthians 15:33
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Jonathan’s heart was a heart of loyalty, love, and faith towards God, which also made him a true friend for David. If you want similar friends who will accept you, understand you, challenge you, and stick by you whatever the cost, then you can do no better than to begin cultivating your own heart like that of Jonathan’s

Of course, that’s quite a task; it sounds like a lot of work.

It’s probably too much to do on your own.

That’s okay, because God is willing to help you do it.

And this is certainly something worth praying about – beginning with yourself.