

Jonathan's Friendship 1 Samuel 18:1-4

We're looking at the life of David. And last week we looked at Saul's jealousy of David. A jealousy that resulted in David becoming a fugitive on the run for his life from Saul. But today, we're going to look at a very different response to David, and that was Saul's son, Jonathan. And whereas Saul was eaten up by jealousy, Jonathan developed an extraordinarily deep friendship with David

Now, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, CS Lewis paints a picture of Hell. And he pictures Hell as this city where people aren't just moving away from God, they're constantly moving further and further away from each other. And every time people fall out, or get into a fight, they get up and move off and build another house further away, until they're living tens of thousands of years of travel apart from each other. And if you stand on a hill with a telescope you can just about make out the light of the houses of the oldest inhabitants light years away. And one of Hell's inhabitants expresses his disappointment when he says, 'I thought you'd meet interesting historical characters [here]. But you don't: they're too far away.'

But Lewis' point is that that's what happens when people want freedom from each other and 'I want to be king' rules the day - they just get further and further apart.

And that's tragically relevant for our own lives, isn't it? You see, one of the things our current culture values is this idea of the 'autonomous self'. That no one can tell me how I should or shouldn't live, that no one can have a claim on me. That to really thrive, to be really me, I've got to be free, and no one should be able to box me in. And so, if a relationship is demanding too much of me, I can say goodbye to it, and move on.

And that's why David and Jonathan's friendship has so much to teach us. Because if we idolise individual freedom, and live in an age of social media - where you present the image of yourself as you want to be, or experience the increasingly bitter tribalism of politics - where you're a friend if you believe what I believe and if you don't, you're out, then genuine, deep, friendships are going to struggle to grow, whilst all the time we're starving for community.

So let's look at their story.

1 Sam 17:57-18:4; 19:1-7; 20:12-17; 20:30-42; 23:15-18; 2 Sam 1:25-26

Three points: we're going to see why friendship is such a wonderful gift, what the foundations of deep friendships are, and then at the life changing power of the one friendship we all need.

The Gift of Friendship

Those passages spell out the time in David's life when he was most in danger. He starts off as a young man living under virtual house arrest in the palace of a king who is increasingly paranoid and psychologically unstable, and who makes repeated attempts to kill him. Then, when David flees, he becomes a hunted outlaw and one betrayal, or one false move could cost him his life. So this is David at his most vulnerable.

But did you see how the writer book-ends this dangerous period in David's life? It's with Jonathan's friendship. Right before Saul turns on David for the first time, the writer tells us chapter 18:3, 'then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him.' Then in chapter 23, in their last meeting before Saul and Jonathan meet their deaths, and the threat of Saul is finally lifted, Jonathan

comes to David and the writer tells us, v18, ‘And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord.’

So at the beginning and the end of David’s most vulnerable time, when he’s most at risk - Jonathan’s there. And in between, it’s no exaggeration to say that David would never have survived if it hadn’t been for Jonathan and his faithful friendship. And he put himself between David and his father’s anger. And when David needed warning to stay one step ahead of plots, he gave it to him. And when in chapter 23 David was at his lowest, Jonathan went to him, and strengthened him in God.

And it’s as if this friendship forms a tourniquet around the evil of Saul that could have consumed David. Or the strong walls of a refuge that protects David from beginning to end of the threat.

But just think about that? You see, of all people, who had most to lose by David’s success and survival, and the most to gain by his death? It was Jonathan, Crown Prince of Israel. Remove David and the throne was his. Let David survive and Jonathan will be relegated to, at best, second position, or worse, be slaughtered along with his whole family when the new king took his throne.

And so, as we read this story, what we’d expect to see is Jonathan treating David as a dangerous rival. Instead, when David most needs a friend, it’s Jonathan who’s there.

Now, if we all want deep friends like that when all is well with the world, to share the good times of life with, how much more do we need them when life is hard, and you’re facing stuff you can’t handle, or you feel lonely or afraid, or sickness strikes or life deals you a bad hand? All of us would want this kind of deep friendship. The kind of friend that carries you through - whether that’s in a wife or husband, or family member, or friend. As Proverbs 18:24 puts it, ‘A friend who sticks closer than a brother.’

And when you have a friend, or friends, like that, it’s a huge gift of God in your life. Last month, Su and I were in the US for the marriage of a young couple who met here. And at the reception we got to meet the friends of one of the families. And one after another they came up to introduce themselves and each one told us the same story, ‘we’ve all known each other for 30+ years, we’ve been in the same home group, and we’ve watched our kids grow up together, and they were there for us when our kids went off the rails, and this couple stood with us when our marriage was on the rocks, and those ones mentored our son, and when we most needed it, we’ve been there for each other. It was this remarkable community of friends.

So if we all want those kind of friendships, how do you find and become a friend like that?

The Foundations of Friendship

And I want us to see three things that David and Jonathan’s friendship was built on.

Firstly, the *click of friendship*. Or if you want a more spiritual title, the *‘one-soul’ of friendship*. Look what happens when these two young men meet, 18:1, ‘As soon as [David] had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.’

So David has just slain the giant Goliath, and Jonathan hears him talking to his father Saul after the battle, and there is this almost instantaneous bond. And the writer says Jonathan's soul was knit to David's. So, given that these two were poles apart in social class - David, was just a shepherd boy from a poor family, and Jonathan was crown prince of Israel, what was that?

Well, just like David, Jonathan was one seriously brave young man. And both these guys had survived battle - and there's something about someone who knows what it is to stand where you stand, and experience what you're experiencing, that can light that spark of friendship isn't there? But there was more than that. If you look at Jonathan's words both before and after this, he and David shared a God-centredness. Like David's psalms, Jonathan's words are packed with references to God, and these two young men shared a passion for the Lord's fame and honour. And that meant they were both prepared to take risks for God, because they knew he was worth it. But that passion for God's honour didn't just extend to the heroic, adrenaline rush moments. In chapter 20:22, when it looks like David may have to go on the run, Jonathan says that if that happens then 'the Lord has sent you away'. So these two had a shared understanding that God is sovereign over all of life, not just the highs but the lows, not just the times when you're laughing together, but the times when you weep together. That was why these two clicked - they saw in each other God-centered courage and God-centered faith.

Now, have you ever experienced that? You meet someone, maybe for the first time, and you hardly know them, but you get chatting, and there's this click, this chemistry, and you feel like you've known them for years. To quote CS Lewis again, in his book *The Four Loves* he calls it the 'you too' moment. And it could be a shared passion for music, or sport, or books. It could be about humour, or politics, or some life experience, and you're talking and it's 'you too?' You see it that way too? You've experienced that too? You share that passion too?

I was talking to a friend this week and I was chatting about my childhood and some of the scars it had left, and then he talked about his, and I was sat there thinking - 'you too... you get this'. Or Su and I met up with John this week to measure up Sunday school rooms, and at the end we got talking about the Narnia stories and I said how I'd just finished reading the Silver Chair to Katie, and John goes, 'oh Puddleglum, what a star - always looking on the bleak side but always faithful, always brave.' And I'm standing there thinking, 'Puddleglum's my favourite character and you get Puddleglum John! You too!'

But that shared passion doesn't mean you agree with them on everything. In fact, you may support different teams or see things very differently politically, or even theologically, but there's this click. Because deep friendships are not the same as tribalism, are they? I mean, in our shame and blame culture, if you're in my tribe, if you believe the same things I do, then you're ok, I'll accept you. But if you think differently, if you disagree, you're out, you're one of *them*.

But in deep friendships there's this soul knitting that goes on that's a million miles from tribalism, or the jealousy we saw last week. Because when you're knit together when they go up, you go up; when they go down, you go down; when they get praised, you're happy; and when they mourn you do too. There's this glue that binds you.

And here, in chapter 20:23 Jonathan tells us what it was for them: 'The Lord is between you and me forever.' You see, common passions can only do so much. Ultimately, for a friendship to deepen and

last it needs a glue that doesn't depend on the friends. And for David and Jonathan, they knew that whatever happened, God was the guardian of their friendship.

The second foundation is the ***vulnerability of friendship***. Now, again, today you're told that if you want to be truly happy you can't have someone else telling you what to do. You've got to be king or queen of your life. But look what Jonathan does at the beginning of their friendship: 18:4, 'And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.' So here is Jonathan, the crown prince, and he takes off the robe that marked him as heir to the throne, and gives it to David. And he hands David his sword, probably hilt first, and his armour. Now what's he doing? He's effectively saying, I'm handing over to you my right to be king, I'm putting my life in your hands, I'm making myself vulnerable to you.

And it's exactly that attitude that Saul rages against in chapter 20. Look at v30-31: 'Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame... As long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established." But that's the point isn't it? That's what Jonathan gets and Saul doesn't. Real, deep friendships don't consist in you establishing yourself or your kingdom. A friend is very different from having a subject or a servant who does your bidding, or always agrees with you. Deep friendships don't consist in holding the sword and poking with it and you do what I want or it's all over. In deep friendships there's a handing over of the sword; there's a handing over of the royal robe.

And, there's a handing over of the armour, which is what Jonathan does here. There's a dropping of the guard, there's a genuine vulnerability. Now, I'm sure you know what it's like to be guarded with someone, don't you? You keep them at arms length and you know better than to let down the shield. But with a true friend you don't need to be guarded. You can be yourself.

And that is quite unlike Facebook! Because on social media, you're at your best. You post your best pics and your best holidays and you mask who you really are and create an image who you wish you were or how you wish to be seen. But in true friendship there's an unmasking. There's a dropping of the guard, a handing over of the armour. There's a knowing of one another at our worst.

But the third foundation is the ***covenant love of friendship***. Now, when she was much younger, one of our girls had a best friend, in fact she still does. And before that friend went back to her home country they bought each other one of those BFF, Best Friends Forever necklaces - where one of them has one half and the other, the other. Now, apart from that just being sweet, what were they doing? In a sense, they were making a covenant, weren't they - they were saying, we're going to be thousands of miles apart, but we're still going to be friends.

Well look at 18:3, 'Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.' Now, if Jonathan had turned on David at any point, he could have gained the kingdom couldn't he? And yet he doesn't. He stays faithful and loyal. Why? Because he had made a covenant with David.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and martyr was being held in a Nazi prison, his niece got married. And Bonhoeffer wrote to her and her fiancé on their wedding day and said, 'From this day on it's the covenant that sustains the love, not the love the covenant.' And that's as true of deep friendships outside of marriage as it is true of the deep friendship within marriage. It's the promises

that we make to each other that sustain love. And Jonathan has promised himself in friendship to David, a friendship marked by the kind of steadfast love that sacrifices for the other.

And look what Jonathan says when he and David part in chapter 20. Verses 14-15, “If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord, that I may not die; and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David.” You see, Jonathan knows that one day David will be king - but he also knows that when that day comes, if David behaves like any other king, Jonathan and his family would be toast, because David would wipe out any threat to his throne. So Jonathan throws himself on David’s steadfast love for him. Why can he do that? Because their friendship was covenantal. Because it was never about using the other - because friendship isn’t networking! It was one of covenant love where steadfast love kindled steadfast love.

And it’s Jonathan’s steadfast love that David laments when he hears that Jonathan has died: 2 Sam 1:25-26, ‘How the mighty have fallen in the midst of battle! Jonathan lies slain on your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women.’ Now was that some kind of homosexual love? No. And frankly the fact that we might think that says a whole lot about the sexualisation of our culture. Or was it David committing some kind of emotional adultery against his wife - getting closer to his mates down the bar than to his wife. I don’t think so.

You see, David knows that romantic, or sexual love, on its own, could never have got him through his darkest days. What David needed was a love of radical self-denial, a love that would risk itself to protect him, a love that would give up the throne so that one day he might take the throne. And Jonathan embodied that.

And look what Jonathan does when these two meet for the last time. David’s in hiding, with Saul hunting him down. And, at great risk to himself, Jonathan comes to David and says to him, chapter 23:17, “Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel.” Now, he’s not simply encouraging David with words of human friendship, is he, like, ‘I believe in you.’ Instead, the writer says in v16 that Jonathan ‘strengthened his hand in God’. He’s reminding David of God’s promises - you will be king. He’s pointing him to the Lord. And that’s what steadfast covenant love always does, it points you to one higher and more trustworthy than you. And that’s the sweetness of a true friend - that when you feel like quitting, when you feel the pressure of what’s against you, they remind you, ‘God is faithful; you may feel weak but God is strong, you may feel down, but God will lift you up - he’s chosen you by grace - stand strong in him.’

The problem is that though we want friends like that, and we want to be friends like that, our self-centredness can get in the way, can’t it? And we want others to sacrifice for us, but sometimes we find it hard to sacrifice for them. And we like our tribes, and our cliques, because they bolster our sense of power and significance; and we prefer the social media image of me to the real me.

So, what can bring about the heart change that we need? What can disarm us so that in place of guardedness or selfishness, steadfast love has the chance to flourish? And the answer is, we all need to be befriended.

The Life-changing Power of the One Friendship we all Need.

And here Jonathan takes off his royal robe and humbles himself. He empties himself for David's sake. And the Lord Jesus does the same for us. If Jonathan was crown prince of Israel, Jesus was king of heaven and earth, yet, like Jonathan, he takes off his royal robe and lays it aside, he gives up his throne, and in his incarnation and at the cross, he humbles himself.

And he does so, so that, just like Jonathan saved David, Jesus might save us. It's why Jesus says of himself that he's 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Luke 7:34). A friend who sacrifices everything at the cross so that, like David, we might go from having and deserving nothing, to inheriting the kingdom. A friend who enters into covenant with us, who pours out his life in steadfast love for us. A friend who doesn't just risk his life like Jonathan, but gives his life, that we might become his friends. As he says in John 15, "No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). And in Christ you have been befriended by God, with a love that can melt our hearts, and turn our self-centredness into self-sacrifice.

But before we can experience that, we've got to hand over our robes and our swords. You see, in Saul, we see someone resisting God's true king, trying desperately to hang on to power. But in Jonathan we see someone gladly yielding the throne of his life and the crown of his head, to the one true king. And if you and I would know Christ's steadfast, covenant love daily changing our hearts, we've got to daily do what Jonathan does. And recognise, Jesus is king not me; and the throne of my life is his to sit on, not mine. That's the path to true friendship - to becoming the kind of person who can be a true friend.

You see, it was in giving up any claim to a royal house and a royal line, that Jonathan preserved his house and his family line. Because David did protect and care for Jonathan's offspring after his death. And it's only by giving up our lives to Christ, that we save them. It's in losing ourselves to him, and laying down our self-centredness, that we'll find ourselves, and better still, find Christ's endless resource of steadfast love for ourselves and for others.