

Jonathan and David

1 Samuel 18-20, 23
David H. Roper

History is filled with stories of great friendships. We are always drawn to these stories because we are drawn to the idea of friendship. We want friends. A Roman statesman and author by the name of Cicero has preserved for us the story of Damon and Pythias, whose names are somewhat synonymous with friendship. When I was a youngster, I heard a poem about them which, for some reason, I've never been able to forget. One fragment goes,

*They've sung of waiters
Who love their waitresses,
They've sung of alligators
Who love their alligatresses;
They've sung of Damon's love for Pythias
Love, like the poor, is always wythias.*

Pythias was a young statesman in Rome who got into trouble with the government and was condemned to die. While he was awaiting execution, he indicated a desire to go home to his family and bid farewell to them. His friend, Damon, took his place in prison as security for him while he was gone. The Emperor, Dionysus, was so touched by this display of friendship that he granted them both a pardon, with the proviso that they include him in the secret of their friendship. I think we can understand why Dionysus would feel that way, for we too would like to know the secret of friendship.

There is another story which has come down to us in history as a beautiful illustration of friendship. It is found in the Old Testament -- the story of David and Jonathan. And here we have not only a description of a very warm and intimate relationship but also the secret of their fellowship, of how they became friends. It is an incomparable story. Of course, I have not read all the literature on friendship which exists. But anything else I have read in no way compares with this story of David and Jonathan. That is as you would suppose. This is God's word, and the insights into people and personal relationships here are much more profound than any you can find in secular literature.

As you know, I Samuel is the book of Saul's reign. Saul was the people's choice, the man with so much promise, the man of regal bearing and regal gifts. And yet he was a man who prostituted his gifts and, in the waning years of his life, went insane. He was a dark and brooding presence, filled with animosity and hostility, deluded, thinking everyone was out to get him -- particularly his young protegee, David. His life is a very tragic story of decline, because he rejected the truth about God. The Scriptures say that an evil spirit from the Lord oppressed him. That is a strange statement unless you understand that the writer is saying that because he rejected the Spirit of God, God gave an evil spirit permission to oppress him. He gave Saul what he wanted. Saul's latter years are very tragic indeed.

Set over against the story of Saul is the story of David, who is anything but a tragic figure. He is the man of the Spirit, the man after God's own heart, God's choice. His life is played out against this black background of Saul's animosity toward God and toward him.

Caught right in the middle was Jonathan. Jonathan was Saul's eldest son, the heir apparent to the throne, a man who had an intense loyalty to his father, both as father and as king, but who also was loyal to David. As the story develops you can see how the tension intensifies as Jonathan is caught between these two loyalties. By all rights, Jonathan should have been king. Yet David took his place as king David had already been anointed king secretly by Samuel at Bethlehem. It was only a matter of time before he would take what was Jonathan's rightful place on

the throne, and Jonathan knew that. Yet he was loyal to David, and he was loyal to his father as well. The story of Jonathan and David's friendship develops, then, out of this tension we can see as we read the account. We begin in chapter 17 at verse 57. This incident took place right after the slaughter of Goliath.

So when David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the Philistine's head in his hand. [A somewhat grisly scene!] And Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." Now it came about when he had finished speaking to Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself And Saul took him that day and did not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt.

This evidently was an ancient custom - friends exchanged armor. In this case David had none to exchange, and so Jonathan gave him his. The ancients believed that clothes were but an outward expression of the man that clothes didn't make the man but rather that a man's apparel was simply an expression of what the man was. So in essence Jonathan was giving of himself to David when he gave him his armor. David had already rejected Saul's armor, but he accepts Jonathan's.

Two things are noteworthy about this first encounter between Jonathan and David. First, the friendship started with a natural attraction. Jonathan felt a great affinity for David as he heard him talk. The conversation between Saul and David is evidently shortened in this account. As David talked to Saul, Jonathan began to recognize that he and this young man thought the same way about things. It wasn't just that they did the same things they were both warriors -- it was that they looked at life the same way.

Both David and Jonathan were, to my thinking, swashbuckling men of faith, go-for-broke individuals, who were willing to fling their lives away and entrust themselves to the Lord, no matter what it might cost them. The theme of Jonathan's life is found in his own words: "The Lord will deliver, whether by many or by few." That is, "It doesn't make any difference how many of us there are; it doesn't make any difference how many of our opponents may exist. The Lord will deliver." That was the keynote of his life.

David likewise felt this way. As David was explaining to Saul his victory over the giant, Jonathan's heart was knit to the heart of David, and he made a covenant with him. This is where friendships usually start, with some sort of attraction like this. People think the way we think, like the things we like, are interested in things as we are interested in them, and we note that they have the same perspective as we. This is not necessarily wrong. We have to remember that even the Lord chose twelve men. And Mark says he chose them on this basis: he chose those whom he would. He was drawn to these men, he liked them, he felt a natural attraction.

But it takes far more than this elementary attraction to sustain friendship. So many of us go through life merely attracted to people, but the relationship never goes any further. We make a series of touch-and-go landings through life, but we never really commit ourselves to anyone.

The second thing I want you to note is that Jonathan did take his friendship onto the next step, which was an act of commitment to David. This act was symbolized in the giving of his apparel to David. He gave of himself. The essence of friendship is giving. That is why Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life [literally, "his soul"] for his friend." It is not that he dies as a martyr for his friend, necessarily, but that he gives up his whole being to this other person. The question Jonathan asked was this: "What is the one thing David needs which I can give out of my person?" He wanted to give of himself. That is the basis of all friendship. Therefore a friendship is not something which necessarily happens to me; it is something which I initiate toward someone else. My friend is not the person who meets my needs; my friend is the person whose needs I meet.

Therefore I can never say I have no friends. When we say that we betray the fact that we do not really understand what a friend is. We tend to think of a friend in terms of someone who will listen to me someone who will talk to me when I'm lonely, someone who will look at things my way. And it is true, if we look at life in this way, that

we may not have many friends. But if we see that the key to friendship is giving, and that my friend is the one whose needs I meet, then I have no end of friends. I have hundreds of friends, because there is no end of people who have needs to be met.

The Old Testament concept of a friend is tied in with the idea of a neighbor. As a matter of fact, the two Hebrew words are exactly the same. Your friend is your neighbor. We think of our neighbor as the person who lives next door to us. But that is not a neighbor as the Old Testament understands it. My neighbor is the next person I meet who has a need. That is why when the rich young ruler asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded by telling the story of the good Samaritan, the point of which is that the next person you meet who has a need is your neighbor.

This sets us free from going out and looking for friends everywhere, in the sense that we look for someone to minister to us, and then we feel depressed and sorry for ourselves because we don't find that kind of friend. In biblical terms, that is not my friend. My friend is the person who has a need, and whose need I can meet by pouring out my soul to him.

It is symbolized here in verse 4, in Jonathan's stripping himself of his robe and giving it to David, even including his sword and his bow and his belt. David had come from the hills. He had been a shepherd. He did not have proper apparel to wear in Saul's court. He did not have armor. So Jonathan provided whatever his need was. The result was that David became successful -- successful in the eyes of everyone except Saul. Note verse 5:

So David went out wherever Saul sent him, and prospered; and Saul set him over the men of war. And it was pleasing in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants.

But not in the sight of Saul. Saul's animosity grew, and the chapter which follows describes the development of that hatred. David came back from a successful campaign against the Philistines, and the women came out to greet him, singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" -- a tactless thing to do, to say the least. Saul was a bit upset, took it a little personally, and became suspicious of David, verse 9:

And Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on. Saul then tried to impale David with his spear,

and, verse 12,

Now Saul was afraid of David, for the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul.

Then he made an arrangement with his younger daughter whereby she was to be given to David in marriage in exchange for a dowry which consisted of the foreskins of a hundred Philistines. David went out and slew twice the number of Philistines Saul had requested and brought them back to him. By that ploy Saul had thought to do away with David, but David was spared. Then in verse 30:

Then the commanders of the Philistines went out to battle, and it happened as often as they went out, that David behaved himself more wisely than all the servants of Saul So his name was highly esteemed.

David prospered despite the opposition of Saul -- because of the ministry of Jonathan in his life. Jonathan's desire was to give to this young man and to provide whatever he needed in order to equip him for war and for life in the court. The thing to keep in mind is that Jonathan was the heir apparent. Jonathan was the one who should have received the acclamation of the people. He was the one who should have been king, not David. In Saul's eyes, David was the usurper. But Jonathan was careless, selfless, about his own goals and purposes in life; his only desire was to see David magnified. Chapter 19, verses 1 through 7:

Now Saul told Jonathan his son and all his servants to put David to death. But Jonathan,

Saul's son, greatly delighted in David. So Jonathan told David, saying, "Saul my father is seeking to put you to death. Now therefore, please be on guard in the morning, and stay in a secret place and hide yourself And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak with my father about you; if I find out anything, then I shall tell you." Then Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, "Do not let the king sin against his servant David, since he has not sinned against you, and since his deeds have been very beneficial to you. For he took his life in his hand and struck the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great deliverance for all Israel; you saw it and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood, by putting David to death without a cause?" And Saul listened to the voice of Jonathan, and Saul vowed, "As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death." Then Jonathan called David, and Jonathan told him all these words. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as formerly.

Here Jonathan is acting as the reconciler, the intercessor, on behalf of David -- healing relationships, building him up. His concern is not only to build him up as a man, but to build him up in the eyes of others. He is carrying on the identical ministry that our Lord carries on in our lives. He is the One who has made reconciliation and He is our intercessor. Of course Saul the father is not to be equated with God the Father. But Jonathan here is like our Lord in his reconciling, healing ministry, putting relationships back together, making us whole. Jonathan's concern was not only that David himself grow and be built up, but that his esteem in the eyes of others might grow and develop.

How easy it would have been for Jonathan to take his father's side and to be openly critical of David, or perhaps to remain silent and thus tacitly to agree with his father's criticism. How often we do that when we are in the presence of some strong and powerful personality who is criticizing a brother. We fall into the same trap. I do it; you do it. I did it last week. It is a shameful thing, but we do it, instead of building up one another and encouraging one another, being positive and reconciling and healing in the lives of other brothers and sisters. Pascal said, "I set it down as a fact that if all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world." But the keynote of Jonathan's relationship to David is that he gave and gave and gave of his own soul, in order that David might become what God intended him to be.

Throughout the rest of chapter 19 there is a development of this animosity toward David on the part of Saul. Eventually David had to flee for his life. David's wife, Michal, the daughter of Saul, conspired against her own father. It is ironic how Saul's own children sided with David throughout the period of David's exile. David had to flee for his life from his house in the middle of the night. He fled to Ramah, where Samuel lived, and Samuel ministered to his needs. But he knew he couldn't remain there. He had to go back to Saul's court. There was soon to be a feast of the new moon, and David had to be there to eat with Saul. So he and Jonathan decided on a strategy. They worked out a plan whereby he would know whether or not he was accepted by Saul. In chapter 20 you have this third contact between Jonathan and David:

Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and came and said to Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before your father, that he is seeking my life?" And he [Jonathan] said to him, "Far from it, you shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. So why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!"

It is amazing to me, in reading through this passage, how positive Jonathan was, not only toward David but also toward his father Saul. He found it very difficult to believe that Saul was trying to kill David. He had to be convinced:

Yet David vowed again, saying, "Your father knows well that I have found favor in your sight, and he has said, 'Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.' But truly as the Lord lives and as your soul lives, there is hardly a step between me and death." Then Jonathan said to David, "Whatever you say, I will do it for you."

There it is again, the basis of all friendship: "David, what do you need? What does your soul desire? I will do it for

you. My soul is knit to yours, it is available to you. My person -- all that I have -- is yours. What do you need?"

So David said to Jonathan, "Behold, tomorrow is the new moon, and I ought to sit down to eat with the king. But let me go, that I may hide myself in the field until the third evening. If your father misses me at all, then say, 'David earnestly asked leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city, because it is the yearly sacrifice there for the whole family. 'If he says, 'It is good, 'your servant shall be safe; but if he is very angry, know that he has decided on evil Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you.'"

Do you understand what David is saying? He is saying, "Jonathan, the covenant you have with me is like the covenant the Lord has with his people." The Lord had made a covenant with Abraham, saying that he would make his name great, that he would bless him and would use him to bless the entire world. That covenant was reaffirmed in the life of Isaac and Jacob and others throughout the whole history of the nation. God said, "I will be your God; you will be my people. And I will fulfill in your life every desire of my heart." It is an unconditional promise God has made to his people.

There is a word which occurs very frequently in conjunction with the covenant. It is translated in various ways - sometimes as "mercy," sometimes as "loving-kindness". But the word basically means "loyalty". It indicates that God not only gives his word but that he is faithful to it. He covenants with his people that he will produce in our lives all of his will, and then he is loyal to us. He fulfills that promise. He follows through. The interesting thing is that David uses both of these terms in this statement to Jonathan. "Therefore," he says, "deal loyally with me, because the covenant you have with me is a covenant of the Lord."

This adds another dimension to friendship. Friendship is not just giving of myself to another person, but it is giving for a particular purpose - that the person might be everything God intends him or her to be. God has a plan for your life, and he is going to fulfill that plan. He is loyal to you to accomplish that plan. And he uses me in your life, and he uses you in my life, to accomplish that plan. Therefore the fact that you are a friend tells me that I not only must give of myself to you, that I am to give of myself to the end that you might be everything God intends you to be. That was the covenant David and Jonathan experienced.

Up to this point the covenant appears to be somewhat one-sided. It is Jonathan who has made the covenant with David, but now, in verses 14 and following, Jonathan goes on to raise David to this higher plane:

"And if I am still alive, will you not show me the loving-kindness of the Lord, that I may not die? And you shall not cut off your loving-kindness from my house forever, not even when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David...

Jonathan has said to David, "David, I have made a covenant of the Lord with you. I will see to it that all God desires in your life will be fulfilled. Will you do the same for me? I want to be your friend. You make the same covenant with me and with my family." Because that is what mutual friendship is. "I seek the very best for you -- I seek God's best for you. You seek God's best for me."

According to their plan, Jonathan went on to the feast and appeared before his father. The first day David didn't appear, and Saul thought that perhaps David was ceremonially unclean and could not eat with them. The second day he was not there either, and Saul was enraged. Verse 30:

Then Saul's anger burned against Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you are choosing the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness?"

The English translation does not quite bring out the force of the Hebrew statement here. Saul is actually casting doubt on the virtue of Jonathan's mother, saying "You're an illegitimate child and no son of mine! Because if you were my son, you wouldn't behave this way. And the very fact that you are behaving this way indicates that I'm

not your father." So Jonathan's friendship with David has come to the place where he has to choose against his own father. He didn't want that; he respected and honored his father -- not only as his father but also as his king. He didn't want any alienation. But he knew that his father was acting out of the will of God, that God had no plans for Saul to continue his reign, nor for him to inherit the throne. Jonathan knew that. The issue now was whether or not he would fulfill God's plan in David's life, no matter what it cost him. It cost him the throne, it cost him his relationship with his father, it cost him ridicule before the court. But Jonathan was willing to do it. Saul goes on in verse 30 to remind him,

"For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Therefore now, send and bring him to me, for he must surely die."

It was true that as long as David lived, Jonathan would never inherit the throne. But Jonathan chose David and the pursuit of God's will in David's life, rather than to act contrary to the will of God -- though it cost him everything. So the next morning Jonathan took his little squire and went into the field. He fired three arrows down range, sent the lad after them then waved him back to the house. And David and Jonathan met secretly, verses 41 and 42:

When the lad was gone, David rose from the south side and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed three times. And they kissed each other and wept together, but David more. And Jonathan said to David, "Go in safety! Inasmuch as we have sworn to each other in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord will be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants forever.'"

Their friendship had progressed to the point that the one thing they held in common which was most precious to both was their relationship to the Lord. Jonathan lived that David might realize God's best in his life. David lived that Jonathan might realize God's best in his life. There was this mutual friendship which existed because each wanted God's will to be fulfilled in the other's life. That is what friendship is. You see, if we rightly understand friendship, we will never be without friends. We can never say, "I have no friends," because there are friends on every hand whose life we can share.

There was one other encounter between David and Jonathan, found in chapter 23. This was the final meeting between these two men. Some short months later both Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle. In 2 Samuel 1 you have the beautiful eulogy which David prayed over their bodies, in which he said,

**I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
You have been very pleasant to me.
Your love to me was more wonderful
Than the love of women.**

Now, you have to understand the context in which David said that. There is no reason why his wives could not have been his friends. I think David was speaking out of his own experience. Up to this point in his life he had not yet found with his wives the relationship he had with Jonathan. God's intention for all of us is that we should experience this degree of friendship in marriage, but that was not David's experience at this point. But this does point to the depth of his relationship with Jonathan. "There is no greater love than my love for Jonathan," David said.

In chapter 23 we have these final, parting words between these two men. Verses 15 through 18:

Now David became aware that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Siph at Horesh. And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God. Thus he said to him, "Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father shall not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be next to you; and Saul my father knows that also." So the two of them made a covenant before the Lord; and David stayed at Horesh while Jonathan went to his house.

Jonathan says to David, "You will be king in Israel. I'll see to it" And that is God's ambition for all of us. God

wants us to be kings. He wants us to reign in life. You can help me become a king, and I can help you become a king, if I see you as my friend, one to whom I can give. Jonathan says, "And I'll be next to you. I'll be the one who supports you and encourages you. I don't care for the fame and the glory and the power. I just want to have a part in your being what God wants you to be."

That reminds us of Jesus' words about John the Baptist. John is described by Jesus as the friend of the bridegroom. Jesus is the bridegroom; John the Baptist is the friend. He prepared the way for the Lord. He set things up so that the Lord could follow the Father's will. John said, "I must decrease, but he must increase." That is the way we must look at a friend. He must increase. I am not to look at him as someone who will cause me to increase; he must increase and I must decrease.

This calls to mind Paul's words in Philippians 2: "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself [stripped himself of his reputation, as Jonathan stripped himself of his robes], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." In his own words, Jesus came "not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as ransom for many." And Paul says, "Let this mind be in you" -- this desire to give, to love, to share of our lives, whatever it costs us. And it will cost! It will cost the giving up of our soul. This, then, is the secret of friendship.

You see, friendship is not something which occurs on my behalf, something someone extends to me. A friend is someone to whom I give, someone I want to share life with, so that they come to a full realization of everything God has planned for them. That is what a friend is. It will involve giving. It will involve teaching. It will involve exhortation and correction. Proverbs says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." It will involve the bearing of burdens and the sharing of life. And it will be costly. But that is the stuff of which friendship is made. Proverbs says, "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend." If we take this attitude toward our brothers and sisters in Christ, if we see them as friends in this way, the result will be a sharpening of their life in Christ. I am sure that your response to this is the same as mine: "That's incredible. It's impossible! I don't have the make-up. My personality is not adequate for that assignment." I don't know about you, but I'm a loner. I'm very independent. It is difficult for me to extend myself to anyone else. It's impossible. I don't have the natural gifts.

But there is a secret in Jonathan's name. I mentioned earlier that the keynote of his life was that he gave. The Hebrew word for "give" is "natan". The same word is found in Jonathan's name. His name in Hebrew is derived from "Yah (the Lord) natan (gives)". "The Lord gives." Jonathan could be a giver because the Lord is a Giver. That is his character.

John tells us that God so loved the world that he gave. That is the kind of Lord we have, who lives within us. If we lay hold of him, if we ask him to make us the kind of person who seeks friends in that way, he will do it. That is his nature, and he can't deny himself. We may be unfaithful, but he is not. He cannot be unfaithful to himself in us. He must change us, he has to fulfill, through our lives, what he has commanded. "We love," John says, "because he first loved us." We give, because he is the Giver.

If you do not know the Giver, the door is wide open. He wants you to know him. He wants you to share his life. He wants to impart to you all his power to be that kind of friend. If you know him, then you can lay hold of that truth, and you can give as he gives.

Father, we thank you that you are the One who gives and gives and gives. There is no end to the supply. We grow tired in mind and body, weary of extending ourselves, but you never grow tired. We pray, Lord, that we may see people as our friends, see them as those to whom we can give ourselves, and whom we can encourage to lay hold of all that you have for us. And we thank you for that truth, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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