

THE LOYALTY OF A TRAITOR

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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Samuel 20:1-42
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1 Samuel 20:1-42

We just recently watched all of the *Star Wars*¹ movies as a family in preparation for the newest release that is coming out at the end of this year. So my kids are all up to date on Luke and Leah, Anakin and Padme, Darth Vader and the Sith. And my sweet wife, who hates *Star Wars*, sat through all of them. We're ready to go.

One of the most powerful storylines of *Star Wars*² is that of Anakin Skywalker, who chooses the dark side of the force and becomes Darth Vader. Most of the first three movies are leading up to that choice in a dramatic scene.

Anakin walks in on Mace Windu, a Jedi master, confronting Chancellor Palpatine. The Jedi has discovered that the Chancellor is in fact an evil Sith lord trying to take over the galaxy. But Palpatine has made a powerful promise to young Anakin. Anakin has discovered that the lives of his wife and child are in danger. Palpatine has said that the dark side has the power to save them. With that power, Anakin could cheat death and save the lives of his loved ones.

So when Anakin comes in, he is faced with a choice: Will he be loyal to the Jedi? Or, will he choose the dark side? He is caught between two conflicting loyalties. This is his defining moment. In this moment, Anakin becomes Darth Vader.

We're currently in the middle of ten month series on the life of David. We started at the end of August and will conclude next June. After seeing Saul fail as king, we've been introduced to David. Gradually, we've seen David go from being the harpist in the king's court, and his most powerful general, to an enemy. Envy and jealousy have turned Saul against David.

This morning we see the conclusion of that process where it becomes absolutely clear that Saul is out to get David. We've divided David's story into some large sections to help us follow along. Today is the last day of David as shepherd. At the end of our story today, David becomes a fugitive.

The tension between David and Saul has been a major storyline so far. Saul is still sitting on the throne, but David has already been anointed by Samuel to take his place. We've already lost faith in Saul, but it remains to be seen what kind of a king David will be. Is he going to be better than Saul?

In ancient times, kings constantly rose and fell. If you were in that world, you had to decide where to put your loyalty. What better person to demonstrate that tension than someone who had strong reasons to be loyal to both Saul and David.

This morning, we experience that tension through the eyes of Jonathan: the son of the king and David's best friend. We will see how Jonathan is forced to make a choice between two conflicting loyalties. And in the end, we'll see how choosing one side will cause him to betray another. Through Jonathan, we'll explore the loyalty of a traitor.

This is an important dilemma for us as well. We live in a world of promises. Every advertisement convinces us that we'll be better off if we hand over some money. Every product promises something. And even more than that, companies and schools and communities all promise something else: a better life, the good life, peace and security.

How do we decide whom to be loyal to?

Jonathan will be a great help to us because he is a lot like us. In the beginning, he wants to be loyal to both Saul and David. He doesn't want to make a decision. He doesn't even want to believe that a decision is necessary. But over the course of the story, he learns the truth. And the truth means that he has to choose.

This is a lesson that many of us need to learn as well. Do we think that we can trust everyone? Do we believe all the promises that are made to us? Are we trying to have it all? Most importantly, what do we really think that following Jesus in Silicon Valley means? Is Jesus one more thing fighting for our attention and our loyalty? Or does he help us to see what is really true about the world around us and offer us something far superior?

Let's let Jonathan be our guide as we wrestle with these questions.

Loyalty is questioned

Our story picks up with David running for his life from Saul. In the last chapter, David fled to the prophet Samuel to find safety. Saul came and tried to kill David, but was overcome by the Spirit of God and unable to proceed. David is understandably scared by these events, so he runs again.

1 Samuel 20:1-2:

Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?"² And he said to him, "Far from it! You shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. And why should my father hide this from me? It is not so."

David does what most of us do when we're in trouble: He runs to a close and trusted friend. He doesn't know what to do. So he finds Jonathan and talks about this situation and that his father is trying to kill him.

Notice what David asks. His main question is whether he deserves the treatment he is receiving. All three of his questions have to do with whether there is any reason that David should be executed. He feels that he is being treated unfairly and wants to make that clear.

This sets up the main plot of the story: Saul is trying to kill David. Who is in the right here? Does Saul have a good reason? Is David guilty or is he being unreasonable? The question of this story is whether David is innocent.

That's an important question because it determines who deserves loyalty. If we're going to be loyal to David as the next king, we need to be convinced that he is innocent. We need to know that he doesn't somehow deserve the angry treatment he is receiving from Saul.

Jonathan will be the judge who helps us to answer this question.

We can see the tension that Jonathan feels. At first, he doesn't want to believe that his father is actually trying to kill David. In the last chapter, Jonathan tried to convince Saul to let up and Saul agreed. Jonathan wants so badly to believe that his father meant what he said. He wants to think that his father is reasonable. He wants things to keep going the way they were. He wants his father and his best friend to get along.

We might criticize Jonathan for being naïve here. It seems pretty clear that Saul is trying to kill David. But let's try to be sympathetic. Think about the situation that Jonathan is in. He is the son of the king of Israel. The *first* king of Israel. If we're going to talk about loyalty, consider all of the claims that Saul has on his loyalty. He is the king. He is his father. He has provided for him. He is the head of his clan.

We live in a culture where loyalty to family obligations are somewhat muted. But this is an ancient Near Eastern culture. Family loyalty was everything. How could Jonathan possibly believe that his father would murder David?

David asks something huge of Jonathan. He asks him to choose his friend over his father. David is asking Jonathan to betray his dad. To become a traitor.

1 Samuel 20:8

Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you. But if there is guilt in me, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father?"

David is making a huge request of Jonathan. He reminds him of how deep their friendship runs. He's probably referring to 1 Sam 18:3 which reads, "Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul." Because of that covenant, David asks him for loyalty.

David knows this is very significant, so he suggests a test. David will skip a huge royal festival that he's supposed to attend. Jonathan will cover for him with a story about a family feast. If Saul gets really mad and overreacts, then they will know that he wants to kill David.

It might seem like they are trying to figure out together whether Saul really wants to kill David. But that probably isn't the case. David already knows this for sure. We know it for sure. Everyone knows it except for Jonathan.

The point of this test is for Jonathan to see clearly who his father really is. The test will make it clear that Jonathan has to make a choice. He can't be loyal to his father and loyal to David at the same time. That has worked up until now, but no longer. It is time for a choice.

Jonathan sees what is going on and he understands all the implications. So before he agrees to this, he wants to make sure of one thing. Read his request in verses 14–17.

1 Samuel 20:14–17:

If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord, that I may not die;¹⁵ and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.”¹⁶ And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the Lord take vengeance on David’s enemies.”¹⁷ And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul.

Jonathan acknowledges that they are in dangerous territory. He is putting his life on the line, “if I am still alive.” Before Jonathan does this, he wants to know for certain that if he chooses David, David is worth it. Jonathan asks David to pledge that even if he dies, his descendants will be taken care of.

So Jonathan re-affirms his covenant with David. He asks David to re-affirm his love for him. Jonathan is willing to go through with this plan, but he knows there will be no turning back. He wants to know that if it turns out that David is right about Saul, that he will be okay. If Jonathan really does betray his father and choose David, he wants to know that David will take care of him.

In short, if Jonathan chooses to be loyal to David, he wants to make sure that David will be loyal to Jonathan.

Isn't this what concerns us when we're faced with a test of our loyalty? We don't to burn our bridges. We'd like to keep our options open. Choosing one means betraying another. What happens if we make the wrong choice? That's what makes these choices so difficult. This is why we pulled in two different directions—literally torn.

Do you know that feeling? Have you felt like this? Do you feel like this now? Where are you torn?

What do you do when two of your friends have a conflict and you're caught between them? What do you do when your spouse comes to you and says, “Your mother is driving me crazy? Why do you always pick her side against me?” What do you when your boss says you need to stay late and finish the project, but your family is waiting for you at home?

If you pick one friend, what if they turn their back on you? If you pick your spouse, what if they leave? If you pick your family over your career, what happens if you lose your job?

I know I resonate a lot with Jonathan. I want to keep everyone happy. I don't want to have to betray anyone. Choosing means I could make a mistake. And how do I know that the choice I make will be there for me? How can I be sure of who deserves my loyalty?

Up until now, Jonathan has been able to be a loyal friend and a faithful son. But the moment of truth is nearing. What decision will he make?

Loyalty is tested

So David and Jonathan have agreed on a loyalty test. Jonathan has to figure out what is really true about his father. The big day arrives. Read what happens on the first evening.

1 Samuel 20:25–26:

The king sat on his seat, as at other times, on the seat by the wall. Jonathan sat opposite, and Abner sat by Saul’s side, but David’s place was empty.

²⁶ Yet Saul did not say anything that day, for he thought, “Something has happened to him. He is not clean; surely he is not clean.”

Every detail in Hebrew narrative is important. The king sits down at his seat by the wall. This is a man who is protective. He's careful. You might even say he's paranoid. Saul is very worried about someone harming him. David didn't show up for this meal, but Saul keeps his cool. You can almost feel him trying so hard not to react. There must be another explanation. Saul is trying really hard not to get upset.

Then the next night arrives.

1 Samuel 20:27

But on the second day, the day after the new moon, David’s place was empty. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, “Why has not the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?”

Saul is still trying to play it cool. He's churning inside, but he controls himself and asks a reasonable question: “David wasn't here yesterday or today. What's going on?”

Do you recognize this feeling? You're really upset inside, but you're trying to keep it cool. So you ask what sounds like a simple question, “Do you have to work late

tonight” or “Did you get a chance to look at our vacation plans” or “What’s for dinner?” It’s a simple question, but there is more underneath the surface.

In reply to this reasonable question, Jonathan gives a reasonable answer in verses 28–29.

1 Samuel 20:28–29

Jonathan answered Saul, “David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem.²⁹ He said, ‘Let me go, for our clan holds a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to be there. So now, if I have found favor in your eyes, let me get away and see my brothers.’ For this reason he has not come to the king’s table.”

This is very normal. Nothing is out of the ordinary here. A reasonable question and a reasonable answer. Everything is fine, except it isn’t. Saul has controlled himself long enough. He’s been working so hard to keep his cool, but now the lid blows off. Read his response in verses 30–31.

1 Samuel 20:30–31:

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, and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness? ³¹ For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die.”

Wow. All of a sudden, Saul flies off the handle. Everything gets blown out of proportion. He goes ballistic. Saul insults Jonathan and insults Jonathan’s mother, using profanity in reference to her. He issues a curse against Jonathan and he demands that David be brought to him immediately so that he may be put to death.

This is the moment where everything becomes clear. Saul has lost it. He thinks that David wants to steal the throne. He’s completely paranoid. He blew up at a simple situation. But Jonathan tries one more time to smooth things over. He really doesn’t want to have to choose. Read verse 32

1 Samuel 20:32:

Then Jonathan answered Saul his father, “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?”

But there is no way to calm down Saul. He will not be appeased. In fact, it’s almost as if the innocence of David makes him angrier. It reminds me of Jesus standing before the high priest. When Pontius Pilate returns to the Jewish leaders after questioning Jesus, he tells them “I find no guilt in this man” (John 18:38). That’s the point where the crowd goes crazy, screaming to release Barrabas and crucify Jesus.

Innocence has a way of infuriating those bent on evil. So Jonathan’s last ditch attempt only enrages Saul even more. The last straw comes in verse 33.

1 Samuel 20:33:

But Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him. So Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death.

We’ve known it for a while, but now Jonathan sees it clearly. Saul has descended into a paranoid, senseless, murderous rage. He’s so mad that he even tries to kill Jonathan, the son who he says he is trying to protect.

Imagine what Jonathan feels. He didn’t want to believe it was true. He wanted to think that he could go on being Saul’s son and David’s friend. He wanted so badly to think that his father wasn’t crazy, that the world made sense, that everyone could just be happy. But now he knows for certain. He has learned the true nature of his father. And there is no going back.

Why are we so surprised when we lose our jobs? Have our companies promised to be loyal to us? Why are we shocked when our government makes decisions that we don’t agree with? Are they obligated to be loyal to us? Why are we stunned when our children don’t call us or our friends don’t remember us or our spouses don’t pay attention to us?

Have you experienced this? A moment when your eyes were opened to who someone really is? A friend or a spouse or a parent? Or you realize what your company is really capable of? You thought people were better. You thought the world was nicer. Now you know the truth. Have your eyes been opened?

My family and I recently saw the musical *Into The Woods*³. One of the songs is called “I Know Things Now.”⁴ It’s sung by Little Red Riding Hood, who has been devoured by a wolf who seemed very charming and saved from the wolf’s stomach by a baker. She says, “And I know things now // Many valuable things, // That I

hadn't known before" and goes on to recount the lessons she has learned. She concludes, "Isn't it nice to know a lot! // And a little bit not..."

We might think we'd rather not know these realizations. These moments are painful. But the truth is that they are a gift. You'd rather know that your father is capable of this than be unaware, wouldn't you? Of course, you'd rather it not be true at all. But if it is true, you want to know about. It's better to know than to be ignorant.

We need to know the truth if we're going to figure out where to put our loyalty. As difficult as it is, we can't know where to put our loyalty if we don't know who really deserves it.

The painful choice of loyalty

Jonathan has discovered the truth: His father is not who he thought he was. As painful as this discovery is, it allows him to move forward and make his decision. Read how he turns his back on Saul to choose David in verses 34–36.

1 Samuel 20:34–36:

And Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, because his father had disgraced him.

³⁵ **In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him a little boy.** ³⁶ **And he said to his boy, "Run and find the arrows that I shoot." As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him.**

Jonathan and David had established this method of communication involving practice bow and arrow shots that Jonathan then implements. He turns his back on his dad and tells David that he was right. It was a message that David knew was coming. Remember that he had no doubts about Saul's intentions. The point was just for Jonathan to have his eyes opened. That has happened. And Jonathan betrays his father.

This is truly significant. Jonathan is a traitor. He is a traitor to the throne. He has betrayed the king of Israel. He is a traitor to his father. Jonathan has realized that you have to betray one side in order to be loyal to another. You can't stay in the middle.

Real loyalty is like that. It is painful because it involves choosing. That's why communicating through this code of arrows isn't enough for Jonathan and David. They have

to meet to deal with this newfound reality. Read about the emotion that they go through in verses 41–42a.

1 Samuel 20:41–42a:

And as soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap[a] and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times. And they kissed one another and wept with one another, David weeping the most. ⁴² **Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.'"**

They wept and they embraced because what had just happened was painful.

Incidentally, this passage often leads to the question of whether the relationship between David and Jonathan was sexual in nature. That suggestion is extremely unlikely for several reasons. Male affection was much more accepted in the ancient near east. Homosexual relationships were not, so it is virtually impossible that King David would have been presented this way. Finally, it says more about our own culture that we read sexuality into David and Jonathan's friendship than it says about their actual relationship.

The point is that Jonathan had made an incredibly difficult decision after a painful realization. So he mourned that with his friend David and he brought some closure to the situation. Once again, the covenant is affirmed. Jonathan reminds David, "The LORD shall be between me and you." They only see each other once more before Jonathan's death, but the covenant between them is made before God, not simply before each other.

Loyalty is painful because true loyalty means you pick a side.

What about us? A lot of us don't really want to make a choice. Part of our problem is that we don't realize there is a conflict occurring. It's OK to drink Coke today and Pepsi tomorrow because they are just two options that are available. But if Coke and Pepsi go to war, you have to pick a side.

We live in such a materialistic culture that it is really hard to remember that we are in the midst of a spiritual battle. This is why the New Testament author James writes the following in **James 4:4**:

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

The things of this world are at war with the things of God. We can't be loyal to them both. Just like Jonathan, we have to make a choice. Will you choose loyalty to the world or to Christ? Whom will you choose?

Now, before we get confused, we have to make a few things clear. The author James doesn't say that friendship with the people of the world is enmity with God. Choosing Christ doesn't mean abandoning your family or your coworkers or your friends. You're not betraying the people of this world. You're betraying the systems of the world—the self-centered, materialistic, ego-driven systems that are the only option for living life without God.

And choosing Christ will look different for each of us. You're not choosing to look like what other Christians look like or to talk the way they talk, listen to the same music, dress the same way, and have the same hobbies. You're not choosing the Christian culture over the culture of the world: you are choosing Christ himself.

We're talking about the living Word of God. The son of David. The one who was present at creation, whose death brought about redemption and who will return to restore everything. We have the option to choose Christ.

And just like Jonathan wanted to make sure that David would have his back, we need to know that Christ will take care of us. We need to know that he is innocent. That he deserves to be king and he deserves our loyalty.

Brothers and sisters, if there is anyone who deserves your loyalty, it is Jesus Christ, the son of David. It isn't me. It isn't this church. It isn't this country. It isn't even your husband or your wife or your father or your mother. The only one who truly deserves our loyalty is the one who gave his life as a covenant to demonstrate his love to us.

The things of this world will let us down. But it's better to know that than to go on being naïve.

Jonathan chooses David. Will you choose the son of David?

There's one more thing to notice. What does Jonathan do after this incredible decision? After betraying his father and changing his life forever by choosing David the future king of Israel? Read the end of verse 42: "And he rose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city."

Jonathan had learned the hard truth about Saul. He had chosen David. He and David reaffirmed their covenant with each other and David left.

But Jonathan went back into the city, back to where his father was. He went back into everything that he had just betrayed. Jonathan went back into the world. Can you imagine? Your father had just tried to kill you, but you go back. Why? Because you're still his son and that's where you belong.

We don't hear of any more interactions between Jonathan and Saul. In fact, Jonathan only appears in the story two more times. Once when he sneaks away to see David for a last time, and then when he is killed by the Philistines, fighting faithfully for his father.

I can't imagine Jonathan was all too friendly with Saul after this incident. But he didn't completely turn his back either. Maybe treachery is too strong a word. He chose David over Saul, but he was still faithful to Saul. He just had a new perspective.

This is what we do. After we realize that the world doesn't have our back; after we grieve that no school or company or spouse or friendship will save us; after we affirm that it is only Christ who is loyal to us.

We go back into the world. Not hatefully. Not resentful that it doesn't take care of us. Not even particularly upset anymore. We have realized that we were wrong to think that the world was supposed to be loyal to us. We have learned something. We are realistic now.

We choose Christ. And we follow him back into the world. Back to our jobs and our schools and our activities and our families and our community. We go into the world because the son of David, whom we have chosen, loves that world. We choose Christ, but he leads us into the world.

Conclusion

We began this morning by thinking about a difficult choice that Anakin Skywalker had to make: the Jedi or the dark side. Of course, he made the wrong choice.

Maybe you feel that way. Maybe you regret choices that you've made in the past. Maybe you have chosen the things of the world over the things of God. Maybe you've chosen the dark side.

Three movies later, in *Return of the Jedi*⁵, Anakin was given another chance. Once again, Anakin, now known as Darth Vader, stood by while Palpatine, who was now the Emperor, was in a conflict. This time, it was his son, Luke Skywalker, who was involved. Anakin faced another choice. Another set of competing loyalties.

This time he chooses differently. This time he rejected the dark side and chose his son.

These choices of loyalty aren't one time decisions. They are made daily. We have second chances. And third chances. And more. Our God forgives and redeems and transforms us. He changes us into people who are loyal to him.

And so, this is a process that we go through repeatedly as we grow and mature and develop in learning to follow Jesus. We encounter moments of feeling trapped between two loyalties. We have to figure out what to do and whom to choose. If we are fortunate, we are given the opportunity to discover the true nature of our choices. And we make a painful choice. We betray the broken systems of the world and choose the perfect love of Christ.

And then we go back into the city. And the next day we might have to do it again. So be encouraged. Choose Christ. Choose him again. And follow him back into the world.

Endnotes

¹ *Star Wars*. Dir. George Lucas. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1977. Film

² Ibid.

³ *Into the Woods*. By James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim. Dir. Susi Damilano. San Francisco Playhouse, San Francisco. September 2015. Performance.

⁴ *I Know Things Now*. Stephen Sondheim. 1987.

⁵ *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. Dir. Richard Marquand. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1987. Film.