

# Jonathan: Love's Promise

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First and Second Samuel

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Would we all have a friend like Jonathan!

We have reached the third and last part of the series: Those Who Loved David. If you want the complete series, the first two are outside at our Welcome Table. In this summer series I have sought to encourage you to hear well the stories, trusting God to form you through them as God has done throughout the ages. In this I am following my hero, Brevard Child's, advice: to get out of the way so that you can make your own connections with the scripture.

Thanks for going on this journey with me. A few of you have been moved to read 1 and 2 Samuel again...Mildred Nilsson is one. A few have shared your own connections to the story...Doreen and Kip and Tim. Remember there is no test, though I suspect those of you who have been with me these past Sundays know a lot more about David, Michal, Phalti, Saul, the ghostwife of Endor than you had before.

We have heard some poignant stories of gifts given, of love given, without the hope of reciprocity. Phalti follows Michal, cries, because he loves her. She cannot turn back and kiss away his tears. The ghostwife of Endor gives the best she has to a dying man. And David, who Michal and Saul had once loved, stands outside of these scenes of grace. In a way, he is responsible for the demise of both of them. Even as God's chosen, maybe because he is God's chosen, he cannot give them what they need. He, after all, is the king whose lineage will replace that of Saul. David has to play his part and play it well. He doesn't dare say to anyone, while Saul is still alive, that he will be the next king, even though it has been made plain to him. He has battles to fight, songs to sing, and a king's hand to stay.

How tightly strung he must have been that day when Michal upbraided him, the day he exiled her from his bed! How secretive he needed to be when he was with Saul or the king of Philistine, patiently waiting for the right time to rise up and defeat them both. How showy he needed to be the day he brought the ark into Jerusalem. Everything a political moment, everything staged, everything done right.

For such a person, there's not much room for matters of the heart.

But there is one who found him; one whose love for him

never wavered. He is Saul's son, he is the heir to Saul's throne--he is a young man, named Jonathan. Upon first meeting, it is said that Jonathan loved David as himself, and so he sealed a pact with David (1 Samuel 18:3). David has not done a thing for Jonathan. In the beginning this is not a two way promise. It is one man deciding to give himself to another...for better or worse.

For what happens next, it may help us to remember the day when David was about to battle the giant Philistine, Goliath. Remember when David entered Saul's tent. He was a small shepherd boy with a mighty belief that he could slay the giant. There is an exchange of words. Then Saul gives to David his battle gear. But it doesn't fit. It is too heavy. He can't walk and he looks ridiculous. So David goes into battle without protection forged by human hand.

Well, we know that David wins. After this, Saul takes him into his court, has him play harp to calm him, and sends him out to battle.

But on the day when Jonathan first lays eyes on David and "seals a pact" with David, scripture says, "Jonathan took off the cloak that was on him and gave it to David, and his battle garb, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. And David would sally forth, wherever Saul sent him, and he would succeed."

Jonathan, he who would inherit the throne, he who had saved Israel through his guile in battle, he who is Saul's son, he who should be David's rival battling for what is rightfully his, gives away his battle gear. His gear, his love, protects David...throughout Jonathan's life.

I wonder how remarkable that love would have been for the warrior David, who became used to meeting men in battle. I wonder how remarkable the memory of Jonathan would have been for the politician David, who often needed to put on a show so that people would follow him. I wonder how it was for the soon to be king David, to have the one who should have fought for the succession of the throne to instead give to him his battle gear.

It is disarming. It makes me stop. Phalti...Ghost wife of Endor...Jonathan, what have you to gain by your love?! Through the political mire, reach out to these moments of grace freely given. The law-locked Old Testament opens to reveal its true heart...it is a book of grace.

I'm reminded of a conversation I recently had about

John Calvin--the one who is credited with a doctrine of predestination. People are rightly upset about the idea that God has chosen some and not chosen others. But for Calvin, it was all about grace. He wanted people to stop worrying about whether or not they could earn their way into heaven. Oh, I can hear him preaching, if you are trying to be on God's side, and you are not the Pope, you most likely are-- so stop worrying and live within the knowledge that you are part of the chosen people.

Just as it is easy to misinterpret Calvin's intent, in each of the stories that surround David it would be easy to get caught up in the ugly political world and call God to trial. You don't have to fight. You don't have to earn your way in. You don't have to fit into gear that is for another to wear. But you do have to look for grace.

The relationship between Jonathan and David is one of the most tender in all of the Old Testament. The one that I can think of that compares is between Ruth and Naomi, where Ruth speaks her promise, "I will go where you go." The Bible lifts up those who make and keep their promises. In particular, 1 and 2 Samuel, lifts up those who give without getting, those who are moved by a love unseen. In the case of Jonathan, he, moved by love, chooses to leave the palace and become part of David's song.

*A poem by Thomas W. Shapcott  
From "Portrait of Saul"*

*Jonathan and David  
Yes, but to remember them for their love  
is to remember them for their youth: laughter,  
not covert whispering; the noisy clatter  
of playingfield and bodies so alike they move  
in a teamwork: do not suppose that what they give  
each other is theirs to hold or withhold. Bitter  
and old I watch how they embrace each other  
free with the one gift I no longer have.*

*The strings of David's harp are bars of a cage,  
a sour taste corrodes through his sweet song.  
I am afraid. The desires of a King  
are comfortless: my Palace holds me hostage.  
And, if I had him, what then could I, Saul,  
do but mortify, condemn, despoil?*

To remember them for their love is to remember them for their youth...is this drop everything for another type of love only possible before we've created kingdoms of our own to protect?

Laughter, not covert whispering...they are guileless, there

is no need to hide.

The noisy clatter of playingfield and bodies so alike they move in a teamwork...effortless games, movement, that wonderful feeling of playing outside, making the basket, scoring the touchdown, because of an inspired pass.

Do not suppose that what they give each other is theirs to hold or withhold... perhaps a spirit, a power beyond them, perhaps that which God gives to us that we are meant to give to another unspoiled by longing.

Bitter and old I watch how they embrace each other free with the one gift I no longer have... We are often more like Saul than David, so how haunting then are these words of Saul who believes he no longer has the gift of love. Citing age as the cause, he stands outside of the embrace.

Again Saul reveals what haunts our human soul. Are we not afraid to be left behind? Are we not afraid that we will be left outside of human love? Are we not, at times, afraid that there will be a time when there is no place for us, no love for us, no longer love in us?

And, if I had him, what then could I, Saul, do but mortify, condemn, despoil?

Even my little 9 year old daughter will, when frustrated, say "I just ruin everything I try to do." I didn't plant that in her heart, nor did God. It is the human soul, feeling displaced, feeling unable to contribute, crying out!

I think of the story of Peter Pan, who is finally able to defeat Captain Hook with a chant the kids take up...old, unloved, alone. Hook gives up and falls into the waiting crocodile.

Without love, without connection, we die. David was David because of the love of Jonathan.

Last week a number of us went to Mineral King. On the way up the hill, the river flows mightily and is deep enough for a group of 4 sixteen year old boys to play in. I'm told they did back flips from a boulder into the river. They told a tale about a rattlesnake nearby that was eating a squirrel. They went by the dead squirrel without seeing the rattler. Then, when they saw the snake come to claim his dinner, one of them went near to get a good picture. At that moment, they weren't concerned with mortality or despoiling or condemning.

Yes, but to remember them for their love  
is to remember them for their youth: laughter,  
not covert whispering; the noisy clatter  
of playingfield and bodies so alike they move  
in a teamwork

There are people in this world who disarm us. They are the ones with whom we share moments when we fully enter into the wonder of life. They are the ones, when we are with them, who inspire us to happily perform back flips of our own. They inspire in us the ability to love.

Would we all have a friend like Jonathan!

The next scene with Jonathan and David is of their goodbye. It is clear that Saul will kill David if given the chance. Again, Jonathan chooses David over the throne, for he won't allow Saul to get David out of the way. There's this torturous arrow shooting scene, which frustrates those who enjoy more direct ways of speaking. Why have the lad there at all? Well, someone needs to carry Jonathan's gear to the city. This time Jonathan doesn't give away his gear to David. David has kept his first set. Still, Jonathan once again strips himself of all battle garb so he might come nearer to David.

Who does that? I don't know about you, but when I have to say goodbye, that is often when I put on my protective gear.

Scripture completes the scene: "David arose from the mound and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times, and each man kissed the other and each wept for the other, though David the longer."

Jonathan will die because he allowed David to live. ...and David lives because Jonathan chose to love.

Sounds to me like a mold has been cast. Jesus will die ... we live because Jesus chose to love.

We do have a friend!

Perhaps now, we can, from time to time, drop the gear-- and be a friend.

Translation by Robert Alter,  
The David Story

1 Samuel 18: 1-5

And it happened as he finished speaking with Saul, that Jonathan's very self became bound up with David's, and Jonathan loved him as himself. And Saul took him on that day and did not let him go back to his father's house. And Jonathan, and David with him, sealed a pact because he loved him like himself. And Jonathan took off the cloak that was on him and gave it to David, and his battle garb, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. And David would sally forth, wherever Saul sent him he would succeed.

1 Samuel 20: 10 – 23

And Jonathan said, "Come, let us go out to the field." And the two of them (David and Jonathan) went out to the field. And Jonathan said to David, "Witness the LORD, God of Israel, that I will sound out my father at this hour tomorrow, (or) the day after, and whether he is well disposed to David or not, I will send to you and reveal to you...and I will send you off and you shall go safely and the LORD shall be with you as he was with my father.

....

And Jonathan once again swore to David in his love for him, for he loved him as he loved himself. And Jonathan said to him, "Tomorrow is the new moon, and your absence will be marked because your place will be vacant. The day after tomorrow you will go all the way down and come to the place where you hid on the day of the deed and stay by the Ezel stone. As for me, I shall shoot three arrows to the side of it, as though I were aiming at a target. And look, I shall send the lad, "Go, find the arrows!" If I expressly say to the lad, 'Look, the arrows are on this side of you, fetch them,' come, for it will be well with you, and nothing will be the matter, as the LORD lives. But if thus I say to the youth, 'Look, the arrows are on the far side of you,' go, for the LORD will have sent you away.

1 Samuel 20: 24 – 31

And David his in the field, and it was the new moon, and the king sat down to table to eat. And the king sat in his place as he was wont to do, in the seat by the wall, and Jonathan preceded him, and Abner sat by Saul's side, and David's place was vacant. And Saul spoke no word on that day, for he thought, "It is a mischance. He is unclean and has not been cleansed." And it happened on the day after the new moon, the second day, that David's place was still vacant. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, "Why has not the son of Jesse come to the feast either yesterday or today?"

And Jonathan said to Saul, "David has urgently asked of me to go to Bethlehem. And he said to me, 'Let me go, pray, for we have a clan sacrifice in the town, and my brother has summoned me to it. And so, If I have found favor in your eyes, let me, pray, get away that I may see my brothers.' Therefore has he not come to the king's table." And Saul was incensed with Jonathan and he said to him, "O, son of a perverse wayward woman! Don't I know you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth you and your kingship will not be unshaken! And now, send and fetch him to me, for he is a dead man!"

1 Samuel 20: 31 – 21:1

And it happened in the morning that Jonathan went out to the field for the fixed meeting with David, and a young lad was with him. And he said to his lad, "Run, find, pray, the arrows that I shoot." The lad ran, and he shot the arrow beyond him. And the lad came to the place of the arrow that Jonathan had shot, and Jonathan called after the lad and said, "Look, the arrow is on the far side of you." And Jonathan called after the lad, "Quick, hurry, don't stand still!" And Jonathan's lad gathered up the arrows and came to his master. And the lad knew nothing, but Jonathan and David knew the matter. And Jonathan gave his gear to his lad and said to him, "Go, bring them to town." Just as the lad came, David arose from by the mound and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times, and each man kissed the other and each wept for the other, though David the longer. And Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for the two of us have sworn to the name of the LORD, saying, "The LORD is witness between me and you, and between my seed and your seed, for all time." And Jonathan arose and came to the town.