

“Why Not Jonathan?”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2021 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

Not everyone plays the lead, but everyone has a part.

1 Samuel 20:1-17

October 24, 2021

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

The covenant is cut

If you're looking for a biblical example on friendship, it's hard to beat Jonathan and David. The story reaches its height and depth here in 1 Samuel 20.

Years later, David melts into a puddle of tears when both Jonathan and his father Saul die in battle. David's lament in tribute says both father and son were "loved and admired." Of Jonathan David says, "I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother. Your love for me was more wonderful than the love of women" (2 Samuel 1).

Even later, when David's rule was firmly established, David inquired whether there was anyone left of the house of Saul to whom he could show kindness (don't miss that word) for Jonathan's sake. Jonathan's son Mephibosheth had been disabled in both feet since the age of 5. David transfers ownership of all of Saul's inheritance to Mephibosheth, inviting him to eat at the king's table the rest of his life (2 Samuel 9).

That's the rest of the story, but what's even more helpful as we study chapter 20 is the beginning of the story. We first met Jonathan when he initiated a heroic assault on a platoon of Philistines. We learn he's an exemplary and courageous warrior, and he's also very loyal to his father who can be unpredictable even during his better years. When David kills Goliath, Jonathan is among the onlookers in Saul's terrified and intimidated army that had waited six weeks without a willing challenger.

Jonathan greatly admired David after he killed Goliath. There was so much of David to admire – musician, poet, warrior, and most of all, deeply loyal to the Lord.

As David rose in fame for his exploits, Saul became more jealous of David, but Jonathan grew closer to David. They “cut a covenant” (18:3), a formal if private ceremony that created an unbreakable loyalty to one another. David married Jonathan’s sister Michal after doubling Saul’s bride price of 100 Philistine foreskins. Saul’s insecurity led to ever more intense efforts to eliminate David, but the most direct attempts at assassination were done out of sight from Jonathan.

Kindness requested and received

1 – *“Then David fled from Naioth at Ramah and went to Jonathan and asked, “What have I done? What is my crime? How have I wronged your father, that he is trying to kill me?”* David’s tone is desperate, fearful, and accusatory.

David has been fleeing from Saul for some time now, most recently after he left his honeymoon cottage and Saul threatened to kill his own daughter for allowing her husband to escape. David travels a few miles to Ramah, which is Samuel’s hometown. Samuel has retired from political life but not spiritual. Samuel has been training other prophets in Ramah. David goes there to seek refuge with the man who had anointed him. Modern archaeology has unearthed what we would call a set of condominiums or apartments in Naioth which is a suburb of Samuel’s hometown of Ramah.

Saul finds out where David is. He is now so determined that he quietly commissions an elite posse to capture David. God places the equivalent of a spiritual defense shield over David. When Saul’s men arrive, the Holy Spirit turns them into prophets! Saul sends a second and a third posse, and the same thing happens. Saul finally says, “I’ll go do it myself.” The same thing happens to him!

Saul has stooped so low that he would even invade the spiritual center of the nation in order to eradicate the person he thinks is the greatest threat to his rule. You and I know the greatest threat to Saul is not David. It’s Saul.

David realizes how serious this threat is to his life. With Saul trapped among the prophets it is temporarily safe for David to return to Saul’s home base. He runs and finds Jonathan. The David we’re about to meet again doesn’t seem like the same David who defied Goliath in the name of the LORD, calmed Saul with his harp, and found his peace in waiting on the Lord. What follows is a conversation between the two men.

2 – *Jonathan: “Never! You are not going to die! Look, my father doesn’t do anything, great or small, without letting me know. Why would he hide this from me? It isn’t so!”*

Jonathan is both defensive and naïve, exclaiming, “Hell, no!” Feel the passion between these two. Jonathan still gives the benefit of the doubt to his father. Don’t imagine Jonathan telling his therapist, “My father was abusive and distant when I grew up, but now that I’m older we have reconciled.” Quite the opposite. Jonathan became

close to his father and deeply admired him as a personal and military mentor. Jonathan either doesn't know or doesn't believe Saul's intent to kill is serious.

3 – But David took an oath and said, “Your father knows very well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he has said to himself, ‘Jonathan must not know this or he will be grieved.’ Yet as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death.”

David swears on a stack of Bibles, “Your father is not telling you this because he knows about our friendship.” David is loud and emotional. And he's terrified. If you think this is unlike David, go back and read his psalms. He's often terrified until he processes his emotions in prayer and trusts God. He hasn't done that. We're hearing the unfiltered David. “Jonathan, I am *this close* to having my head cut off. God knows it. If you don't know it, that's your father's intent.”

4 – Jonathan: “Whatever you want me to do, I'll do for you.” In other words, “It seems like you have a plan, David.” David does.

5 – So David said, “Look, tomorrow is the New Moon feast, and I am supposed to dine with the king; but let me go and hide in the field until the evening of the day after tomorrow.” Whenever the New Moon was full, Saul would host a two-day gathering for his family and officials. David has not only been his armor bearer and court musician, but is now his son-in-law. If he is not there, his absence will be conspicuous. David knows if he does show up, he's risking his life. He continues,

6 – “If your father misses me at all, tell him, ‘David earnestly asked my permission to hurry to Bethlehem, his hometown, because an annual sacrifice is being made there for his whole clan.’” David is asking his covenant friend not only to cover for him, but to lie for him. His excuse is that there is an annual feast for Jesse's clan that trumps the monthly feast in Saul's palace. But it's not true. David's not going anywhere except out in the field to hide.

7 – “If (Saul) says, ‘Very well,’ then your servant is safe. But if he loses his temper, you can be sure that he is determined to harm me.” David knows what's going to happen. He's been on the receiving end of Saul's spear three times. This is to prove to Jonathan what David already knows. If Saul goes ballistic, Jonathan will see it for himself.

*8 – “As for you, show **kindness** to your servant, for you have brought him into a covenant with you before the LORD. If I am guilty, then kill me yourself! Why hand me over to your father?”* David's insecurity takes over. He has to remind Jonathan, “We made a deal, dude!”

When David pleads for “kindness,” he uses arguably the most important words in the Old Testament. I'll come back to it. More importantly, he seems to imply that

Jonathan may actually be hiding from David what his father had told him. Jonathan may be protecting both David's feelings and Saul's reputation. David is saying, "If you've been told that I deserve death – and you believe it – I will not resist. Kill me now."

David's only mention of God in four verses is reminding Jonathan that they made their covenant before the Lord. He's not very focused on God at this moment – more taking matters into his own hands with his fears. David is intense and pleading.

9 – *"Never!" Jonathan said. "If I had the least inkling that my father was determined to harm you, wouldn't I tell you?"* Jonathan again explodes with emotion. "Hell no!" He's offended at David's suggestion that he's not being honest. Would I not tell you if it were true?

10 – *David: "Who will tell me if your father answers you harshly?"* David finally believes Jonathan. "OK, then, but how will I know what happens?" David knows if this New Moon banquet goes badly, Saul will feel betrayed by Jonathan.

11 – *Jonathan: "Come, let's go out into the field." So they went there together.* It's Jonathan's turn to offer a plan.

12 – *Jonathan: "I swear by the LORD, the God of Israel, that I will surely sound out my father by this time the day after tomorrow! If he is favorably disposed toward you, will I not send you word and let you know?"* He's assuring David he won't leave him hiding in the field and wondering.

13 – *"But if my father intends to harm you, may the LORD deal with Jonathan, be it ever so severely, if I do not let you know and send you away in peace. May the LORD be with you as he has been with my father."* That's powerful language from Jonathan. Notice the past tense. The Lord *was* with Saul, and Jonathan knew it. He's not *now*, and Jonathan knows it. Every story about Jonathan shows his confidence in a personal, interactive God.

14-15 – *"But show me unfailing **kindness** like that of the LORD as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, and do not ever cut off your **kindness** from my family—not even when the LORD has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth."*

This is the most dramatic turning point of the conversation. Whether he just realized it at this moment or he's known it since David killed Goliath and Jonathan gave David his military tunic and royal robe (18:4), Jonathan now reveals that he knows David, not he, will follow Saul as king. Jonathan also knows what usually happens to every relative of the dethroned king or severed dynasty. They die so they're not an ongoing threat.

"Kindness" in Hebrew, once in Jonathan's speech and twice in David's, is the Hebrew *hesed*. It's a hard word to translate. It means the commitment to be good to

someone for no other reason than the promise you made. It is God's kind of love, undeserved and unconditional. *Hesed* is the Old Testament equivalent of the Greek *agape*. I'll never, ever, stop being good to you whether or not you deserve it. Jonathan realizes if David is right about Saul's intent, the two of them they may never meet again. What's more, the power will soon shift to David's side of the ledger.

16-17 – "So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, 'May the LORD call David's enemies to account.' And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself."

Now the covenant is not only man-to-man but family-to-family. Jonathan initiates the exchange of promises and reaffirmation of love. Both breathe deeply. The rest of the story of this chapter is that David is missed at the New Moon banquet.

30 – "Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, 'You son of a perverse and rebellious woman!'" It's one of the ugliest scenes in the Bible. Saul literally says to his loyal son, "You S.O.B.!" and hurls a spear at him at the dinner.

Jonathan and David meet again, embrace, and part – never knowing if they'll see each other alive again. They both wept, but the end of the chapter says, "David wept the most."

A conversation about kindness

As I said last week, many stories in the Bible are told without interpretation or application. The biblical writer doesn't relate this conversation and then add, "Now here's what it means in your life." It's not even a story that later biblical writers – Psalms, prophets, Jesus, Paul – use as an illustration for their own teaching. The Holy Spirit is trusting us to hear him and see how God is working in Jonathan, David, and you.

One lesson you could draw is that every David needs a Jonathan. If you don't have a friend like that, find one, invest in one. But David didn't go *looking* for a Jonathan. It was God's "kindness" that brought Jonathan into his life. Here are three other lessons.

First, praise the Lord's kindness. We do learn in this conversation what friendship includes. Friends trust each other with information. If you have a friend you can trust to keep a secret, thank God. Friends trust each other with feelings. If you have a friend you can yell at or cry with, thank God. Friends trust each other with rebuke. If you have a friend who will tell you to your face when you're wrong, thank God.

Second, seek the Lord's kindness. This is clearly embedded into the story of Jonathan and David. Both of them need "kindness." Both of them plead with each other for "kindness." David's at a low point. He's afraid, insecure, and weak. Jonathan is in a position of power, close to Saul. David needs him. But during the conversation

Jonathan comes to grips with the reality that power is going to shift. He (and his family) will need the kindness of David.

In this moment it's Jonathan more than David who sees their bond through God's eyes. But he also acknowledges that power is going to shift, and he will need David's "kindness." In both cases the "kindness" they need is God's covenant love. Friends, even spouses, are always only pointers to our need for God. If you count on any human being to be for you what only the Lord can be, you will at some point be disappointed.

Both Jonathan and David were flawed – even in this one moment. Jonathan was naïve and David was fearful. Their need for each other only pointed to their need for God.

Finally, trust the Lord's kindness. Let's wrestle with the question, "Why not Jonathan?" The last three weeks we've been asking, "Why David?" One reason is his heart – "a man after God's own heart" (13:14). "Why not Saul?" He was "a king like all the other nations," and that's not the prototype God wanted.

Then why not Jonathan? Jonathan has all the qualities you would want in a king – faith, humility, courage, loyalty, even the experience of watching his father make so many mistakes. Maybe it's because he's naïve. Maybe it's because he loses his cool.

Nope. The idea that God chooses us because we perform well or rejects us because we mess up is one of the devil's most persistent lies. The conversation between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20 teaches us the "kindness" of the Lord.

Why not Jonathan? Because he's not David. God's plan all along has been that David will reign in the next generation and that his line will rule forever. Jonathan doesn't come into later books of the Bible because, I hate to say it so bluntly, he's a side story. David's the story. Not everyone gets to play the lead, but everyone has a part.

Jonathan is part of how God prepares David to be David. So is Saul. David needs a foil and a friend, or he'll never be David. In this conversation, Jonathan is how David learns to refocus on the LORD's covenant, on what God is doing.

As we grow in faith, we learn to trust the kindness of the Lord. He knows what he's doing. Every story of faith is different, but every believer can count on God keeping his part of the covenant. We can let go of our need to control when we trust his kindness. Amen.