

Jonathan and David, Resolute Friends

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 27:6, 10–11, 17, 19

Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 19:1–7; 20:1–42; 2 Samuel 1:17–27

1 Samuel 18:1–4

¹ After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. ² From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. ³ And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴ Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

1 Samuel 20:16–17, 32–34, 42

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

³² “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” Jonathan asked his father. ³³ But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David.

³⁴ Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the feast he did

not eat, because he was grieved at his father’s shameful treatment of David.

⁴² Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

2 Samuel 1:26–27

²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.

²⁷ “How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!”

2 Samuel 21:7

⁷ The king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the oath before the LORD between David and Jonathan son of Saul.

Key Text

Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town. —1 Samuel 20:42

Introduction

A. Rivals Turned Friends

C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien's friendship is no secret to their readers. Each was an English professor at Merton College in Oxford during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. They met during a faculty meeting in 1926 and went on to enjoy 40 years of mutual encouragement and support. Tolkien played a vital role in Lewis's Christian conversion, and Lewis pressed Tolkien to finish several important writing projects.

Although they each held literary aspirations, their initial impression of one another was sour. Their different interests and personalities—combined with initially contradictory religious beliefs—made conflict and rivalry seem inevitable. But over time, the two set aside their differences and recognized their shared passions for curriculum, language, and creative writing. The pair developed such a strong bond that Tolkien would later refer to Lewis's death as leaving a permanent wound in his heart.

Today's lesson considers another famous friendship. Their relationship shows loyalty to one another and God.

B. Lesson Context

The books of 1 & 2 Samuel introduce three key figures: Samuel, Saul, and David. The boy Samuel grew up to be an important transitional figure, taking Israel from the era of judges to the time of Israel's united monarchy (see lesson 2). He first anointed Saul, then David as king (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13). Kings at this time (eleventh century BC) were seen especially as military protectors, able to lead their subjects in battle (example: 8:11–12).

Before Saul's disastrous rule ended, God prepared David to take over as leader in Saul's place. The secret anointing of David and plan to make him king created a potential conflict with Saul and his household, especially with Saul's firstborn son and heir, Jonathan. Jonathan had the most to lose and could have easily rejected God's choice of king.

Jonathan is first mentioned in 1 Samuel 13–14, where he proves to be an impressive captain of fighting men. In one exploit, Jonathan and his armor-

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 1: Faithful Witnesses Model God's Fidelity

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the ways David and Jonathan show loyalty to one another.
2. Explain the significance of the covenant between David and Jonathan.
3. Plan a way to show love and loyalty to a friend or community member in the week ahead.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

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- B. Lesson Context

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- A. In Saul's Household (vv. 1–2)
- B. Saul's Heir (vv. 3–4)
Productive Friendships

II. Unwavering Alliance

(1 Samuel 20:16–17, 32–34, 42)

- A. Expanded Covenant (vv. 16–17)
- B. Honorable Defense (vv. 32–34)
Your Cultivation Record
- C. Permanent Peace (v. 42)

III. Unbroken Promise (2 Samuel 1:26–27; 21:7)

- A. Lament for the Dead (1:26–27)
- B. Compassion for the Living (21:7)

Conclusion

- A. New Covenant Loyalty
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

bearer manage to single-handedly defeat about twenty Philistines, turning the tide in favor of the Israelites (1 Samuel 14:1–14). Jonathan speaks like a virtuous leader, one who knows “nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” (14:6; compare 17:45).

But God’s choice of David, “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), interrupts the dynastic rule and demonstrates that God is in charge. Both then and in the future, the rise and fall of rulers and empires is subject to God’s control (see Daniel 7:27).

I. Unexpected Friend

(1 Samuel 18:1–4)

This chapter begins right after David has defeated Goliath and proved himself a heroic fighter willing to defend the reputation of God. King Saul responds by inviting the young shepherd boy to meet with him while David still holds the head of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:57)!

A. In Saul’s Household (vv. 1–2)

1. After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.

After *David* introduces himself (1 Samuel 17:58), this verse leaves the impression that more is said—perhaps an account of the duel with Goliath and David’s victory. These words are enough to win over the heart of Jonathan who is with Saul and listening. The phrase *became one* translates a Hebrew verb describing things bound together—in this case, the joining of Jonathan’s *spirit* to the spirit of David. This refers to Jonathan’s love for the man, who has just taken it upon himself to fight a Philistine champion. Saul was willing to arm David and give him the traditional means to fight, but his armor and weapons proved useless (1 Samuel 17:38–39). Saul showed no willingness to lead or to fight for God’s people, which confirms David’s superiority as the future king.

In Hebrew, the term for *love* is broad and flexible enough to apply to numerous human relationships: father and son (Genesis 22:2), mother and son (25:28), mother and daughter-in-law (Ruth

4:15), husband and wife (Hosea 3:1), and people for their leader (1 Samuel 18:16). The last example is particularly relevant in this context, as it describes the general sentiment already growing in Israel and Judah, as the people acclaim the leadership potential of David.

What makes this expression of devotion for David unique is its source: Saul’s own son from the royal household! If David can win the support of Jonathan, he must be a charismatic and compelling figure, capable of winning people over with the wisdom of his words.

2. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family.

Saul knows his kingship is ending, as God has chosen a different person to lead Israel (1 Samuel 13:14; 15:26–28). His realization colors how we read this text and provides at least two reasons for Saul’s keeping David from returning *home* to Bethlehem, only a few miles away (15:34).

On the one hand, Saul’s hospitality gives the impression of graciousness—he treats David as if he is becoming one of the king’s advisors by rewarding and consulting him. On the other hand, this hospitality gives Saul time to assess David’s growing popularity (see 1 Samuel 18:7). Keeping David close enables Saul to control him and prevent his reputation from growing. Ultimately, Saul tries to entrap and eliminate David by sending him into battle (18:17).

B. Saul’s Heir (vv. 3–4)

3. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.

The word *covenant* appears hundreds of times in the Old Testament. It refers to a formalized agreement between two parties, usually with obligations for each to fulfill. The most famous covenants of the Bible are between God and his people (examples: Genesis 9:9–11; 15:17–19; Exodus 19:5–6; 24:7–8). Covenants can also occur between two groups of people and serve as treaties of mutual benefit (example: Genesis 21:22–24, 32). In some cases, a weaker side may be forced to promise obedience and military support in exchange for safety (example: Ezekiel 17:13–14).

What stands out from the exchange between

Jonathan and *David* is that Jonathan appears to be the stronger party, given that he is the heir to the throne. Typically, one would expect a king's son to demand support from others, perhaps pressuring a national hero to back his future kingship. Instead, the words of this verse repeat the same wording of 1 Samuel 18:1 (above): Jonathan *loved* David *as himself*. Jonathan is the subject, and it leaves the impression that he is the one who initiates an alliance, seemingly with little concern for his own future.

The same impression—that Jonathan was the one to initiate a covenant against self-interests—emerges from later retellings of this event (1 Samuel 20:8, 16–17). Saul will eventually hear of this and grow incensed, describing it as a conspiracy against him (22:8). In fact, Jonathan's choice to support David places him in agreement with God's call (see 16:12). The biblical text does not tell us how God worked on the heart of Jonathan, whether he learned of David's secret anointing or whether God simply gave David favor in his eyes (compare Exodus 12:36). Perhaps Jonathan perceived that the Spirit of God was upon David, empowering him for his future role as king (1 Samuel 16:13).

4. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

Jonathan's gifts hold significant meaning. In ancient times, royals were identified by their fine

robes, a stark contrast to David's shepherd garments. By wearing royal robes, *David* would be associated with the royal entourage, foreshadowing his later ascension. If Jonathan's garments identified him as the prince of Israel and successor to the throne, then giving them away is like giving up his ambition to rule.

What Do You Think?

What could be some modern equivalents of the way Jonathan expressed friendship with David? Why?

Digging Deeper

Consider both non-material things and tangible objects. Be prepared to explain the nature of the equivalence.

Productive Friendships

Years ago, we lived next door to a professional tennis doubles player. We saw her returning from practice each day, and she would frequently share insights about the rigor of training. She emphasized that finding the right partner was crucial, as well as recognizing the potential for a powerful partnership after more practice. Speed, technique, and strategy all had to align—or at least be complementary—for the pair to be effective.

Players spend hours training together to perfect their game and to learn how to anticipate a partner's moves. They learn to communicate effectively and to cover each other's weaknesses. Furthermore, partners need to be compatible off the court, willing to have one another's backs.

This prompts me to think about friendships in general and what it means to be committed to another person's success as if it were your own. What criteria are important to you in a productive friendship?

—N. V.

II. Unwavering Alliance

(1 Samuel 20:16–17, 32–34, 42)

Saul tries to manipulate David by inviting him to marry into the family. David is nonetheless able to escape, and he proves fearsome to Israel's enemies (1 Samuel 18:22–30). Meanwhile, Jon-



Visual for Lesson 3. Display this visual as you ask participants to spend one minute in silent prayer of thanksgiving for a loyal friend.

athan stands up for David until Saul swears an oath that he shall not harm the man (19:1–7). However, Saul breaks his oath and again tries to kill David, sending him on the run (19:9–12). David is now at the mercy of Jonathan, who could easily reveal his location and help Saul’s men find him.

A. Expanded Covenant (vv. 16–17)

16. So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the LORD call David’s enemies to account.”

The word that begins this verse, *so*, refers to Jonathan’s request in 1 Samuel 20:14–15, where he looks forward to a time when David will be without enemies. In exchange for helping David, Jonathan requests future kindness for his own family (1 Samuel 20:15). To solidify the commitment between the two men, Jonathan expands the scope of their initial bond.

This time, the *covenant* is between Jonathan and *the house of David*. The Hebrew word translated as “house” can mean more than just the physical structure; it also refers to the people who inhabit a home—residents of the entire household, including immediate and extended family (example: Joshua 24:15). Additionally, in the context of royal dynasties, a “house” includes future descendants and those who will rule as king (examples: 1 Kings 12:26; Isaiah 7:2). Jonathan’s request acknowledges the significance of David’s lineage, as it was common practice to eliminate the family of rivals after defeating or removing them (example: 2 Kings 10:11; compare Matthew 2:16–18).

To signify the seriousness of his commitment, Jonathan invokes the Lord’s authority and oversight. For other oaths that anticipate God’s intervention, see Genesis 24:3; 50:25; 1 Samuel 14:28; and Nehemiah 5:12.

17. And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.

This verse concludes the narrative that began in 1 Samuel 18:1. *Jonathan* receives a commitment from *David*, and each man promises to protect the other’s family. Jonathan loves David as he

loves *himself*, demonstrating Jonathan’s commitment to protecting this person who is favored by God, even at personal risk.

What Do You Think?

When have you experienced a friendship like that of David and Jonathan?

Digging Deeper

In what ways did your friendship demonstrate unity and love?

B. Honorable Defense (vv. 32–34)

32. “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” Jonathan asked his father.

Saul is concerned that David is a threat to the king’s throne and dynastic lineage. Jonathan’s words here are a response to Saul’s desperate threat: as long as David lives, *Jonathan* will not inherit the throne (1 Samuel 20:31).

33. But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David.

This attempt on Jonathan’s life mirrors Saul’s earlier attempt to kill David (1 Samuel 19:10). To this point, *Jonathan* was still holding out hope that *Saul* would not try to *kill David*. He did not think his father had wicked intentions (20:2). However, this attempted murder exposes Saul’s anger and paranoia after Samuel had proclaimed that Saul’s kingdom would be torn away (13:14; 15:26).

34. Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the feast he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father’s shameful treatment of David.

Now aware that his father is capable of murder, *Jonathan* grieves instead of eating and celebrating at the New Moon feast (1 Samuel 20:5, 18, 24; compare Numbers 28:11–15). Saul has

How to Say It

Bethlehem	Beth-lih-hem.
Goliath	Go-lye-uth.
Mephibosheth	Meh-fib-o-sheth.
Philistines	Fuh-lliss-teenz or Fill-us-teenz.

crossed a line of no return, bringing *shame* upon the family.

What Do You Think?

Have you ever had to choose between loyalty to a friend and loyalty to someone else? How did you handle it?

Digging Deeper

When have you been on the receiving end of a friend's loyalty and love? How did you respond?

Your Cultivation Record

I'll never forget that scorching summer day in northern California. Our group of four friends was relaxing on the bank of the Sacramento River. Seeking relief from the heat, we decided it would be fun to use our small inflatables to float the river. The first part was slow and peaceful, but the current picked up speed as water from the mountain joined the flow. The river tossed us around, hurled us over rocks, and made us fear for our lives. Before we knew it, we were thrown upon the bank with our inflatables nowhere in sight.

To our collective horror, we had lost sight of one person: my (now) husband, Ryan. Before I could call out his name, his best friend Mark spotted him and was already swimming upstream to rescue him. I remember the look on Mark's face. He battled the current and ducked under branches to reach his friend, who was clinging to a tree near the riverbank. Mark didn't think twice about the danger to himself.

Without a doubt, Mark saved Ryan's life that day. But sacrifices in friendship don't just happen when someone is in deadly peril. Even when we aren't risking life and limb, we often have to set our personal needs aside. Are you willing to sacrifice for others, or do you think first of your own comfort and safety? —N. V.

C. Permanent Peace (v. 42)

42. Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is

witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’ ” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

Jonathan carries out a plan to communicate secretly with *David* (1 Samuel 20:5–8, 18–23). Now that he has become aware of Saul's murderous rage, Jonathan takes steps to ensure David's escape. He leaves his friend with a greeting of *peace*—the Hebrew word *shalom*—and recalls their commitments. The phrase *between your descendants and my descendants forever* repeats the terms of their promise to seek the safety of each respective family (compare Genesis 9:12; 17:7–10). After this meeting, David would remain separated from Jonathan until Jonathan's death.

III. Unbroken Promise

(2 Samuel 1:26–27, 21:7)

The remaining chapters of 1 Samuel record Saul's pursuit of David, David's sparing of Saul's life (twice), the death of Samuel, David's hiding among the Philistines, and the eventual death of Saul and his sons in battle—including Jonathan (1 Samuel 31:1–2). The book of 2 Samuel covers David's forty-year reign, but it begins with a time of mourning.

A. Lament for the Dead (1:26–27)

26. “I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.

After Jonathan's death, David composes a lament for both the fallen prince and his father, Saul (2 Samuel 1:19–27). A lament is a song that expresses pain, loss, and uncertainty (compare Psalm 6). This response is consistent with David's honorable treatment of God's anointed—even when the king tried to kill David (1 Samuel 24:6; 26:11).

The poetic expression of *love* in this verse can easily be misconstrued. As noted in the comments on 1 Samuel 18:1, loving relationships are often nonsexual. Although this verse compares David's love for Jonathan to the love of

women—meaning romantic love—the point is that David and Jonathan’s bond is either unlike or even stronger than the bonds of a romantic relationship. The English idiom describing close friends as “thick as thieves” expresses a similar idea. It does not mean that two friends have literally become partners in thievery, but rather that their friendship is very close.

David calls Jonathan *my brother*, which is more than just artistic expression. Their families were united when David married Saul’s daughter Michal (1 Samuel 18:20–27).

27. “How the mighty have fallen! The weapons of war have perished!”

This concludes the lament. The phrase *weapons of war* is a reference to Saul and Jonathan, who have fallen in battle. This is an especially poignant metaphor after Saul was killed by falling upon his own sword (1 Samuel 31:4–6).

David’s second anointing follows (2 Samuel 2:1–7; compare 1 Samuel 16:13; 1 Chronicles 11:1–3), but there is little room for triumph.

What Do You Think?

What line from David’s song of lament in 2 Samuel 1:19–27 stands out to you? Why?

Digging Deeper

What steps can a believer take to process the grief that comes from losing a close friend?

B. Compassion for the Living (21:7)

7. The king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the oath before the LORD between David and Jonathan son of Saul.

After ascending to the throne, David, *the king*, honors his covenant with his now-deceased friend. Details of David’s kindness to *Mephibosheth son of Jonathan* are recounted in 2 Samuel 9. This graciousness toward Jonathan’s disabled son is even more remarkable given that the rest of Saul’s house has been at war with David (2 Samuel 3:1). Even after Jonathan’s death, David remembers and honors his commitments.

Conclusion

A. New Covenant Loyalty

Friendship like that between David and Jonathan doesn’t just happen—it must be cultivated. The world has a way of predisposing people toward self-gain and narcissism, leaving us disinclined to connect with one another, much less show the kind of loyalty that Jonathan shows at his own expense.

But the church can become a place where people are willing to serve one another sacrificially. It begins with individuals who look beyond their own needs. Simple acts of friendship and loyalty can make a difference: inviting someone to coffee, checking in with a friend, sharing a meal, and keeping confidences are just a few examples. These simple actions can open the door to a deeper relationship wherein both people recognize the dignity of the other and serve one another under Christ.

This is not a foolproof strategy; some will not reciprocate. But Christians are called to hospitality (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2; 3 John 8; see lesson 13), even generosity and love for enemies (Proverbs 25:21; Matthew 5:43–44). If kindness goes unreciprocated, it remains kindness well-spent.

What Do You Think?

In what ways has this study of David and Jonathan inspired you to develop friendships that are like family (compare Proverbs 18:24)?

Digging Deeper

What actions will you take to develop such friendships?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, lead us to create unshakable bonds of friendship like we see between David and Jonathan. Help us to be faithful and loyal to one another, even when it is difficult. Build us into healthy communities through which you carry out your work. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Honor God in your friendships.