

1 Samuel 18:1-5, 19:1-7, 20:16-17 (NIV)

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.

⁵ Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul's officers as well.

[Later, King Saul, Jonathan's father, jealous of David's victory over Goliath and all the popularity it brings him, decides to have David killed.]

Saul told his son Jonathan and all the attendants to kill David. But Jonathan had taken a great liking to David ² and warned him, "My father Saul is looking for a chance to kill you. Be on your guard tomorrow morning; go into hiding and stay there. ³ I will go out and stand with my father in the field where you are. I'll speak to him about you and will tell you what I find out."

⁴ Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, "Let not the king do wrong to his servant David; he has not wronged you, and what he has done has benefited you greatly. ⁵ He took his life in his hands when he killed the Philistine. The LORD won a great victory for all Israel, and you saw it and were glad. Why then would you do wrong to an innocent man like David by killing him for no reason?"

⁶ Saul listened to Jonathan and took this oath: "As surely as the LORD lives, David will not be put to death."

⁷ So Jonathan called David and told him the whole conversation. He brought him to Saul, and David was with Saul as before.

[David makes a plan with Jonathan to try to return to Saul's presence, but the two young men also agree on a plan for David's escape.]

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.

Who's the best friend you ever had? How important to you was that relationship? Young David and Jonathan were true friends, their souls bound together in covenant relationship. Their bond of friendship would transcend family, tragedy, and even death.

Centuries ago, La Rochefoucauld wrote, "However rare true love may be, it is less so than true friendship. . . A true friend is the greatest of all blessings. . ." Young David and Jonathan were true friends, their souls bound together in covenant relationship. Their bonds of friendship would transcend family, tragedy, and even death.

Like father, like son?

During the time that the Israelites settled in Canaan, they had no earthly king. God was their king. But as time wore on, the people wanting to be like their neighbors, pushing harder and harder for a human king. Despite God's pointed warnings that kings are takers, the people persisted and, in the end, God gave them what they wanted. God's prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel. Saul quickly proved to be a disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul's battle orders. Only the intervention of the people saved Jonathan's life.

After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that "The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35). God told his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul's kingdom.

And Saul's heart turned against David.

The grace of friendship

Jonathan, Saul's son, first met David soon after his victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Like so many others during David's long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. We are told that Jonathan's soul was bound to David's. Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. It is important for us to see that Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan's covenantal friendship was a gift freely given. Indeed, this pretty much characterized their relationship.

Twice more, Jonathan would make a covenant with David and only on the third occasion are we explicitly told that the covenant was made mutually. In Jonathan's gift of friendship there is no quid pro quo; there is no transaction. *Such is grace.*

Reflecting a friendship based upon the bonding of souls, Jonathan always walked a tightrope between his loyalty to his father Saul and his loyalty to David.

In the second part of today's passage from 1 Samuel, Jonathan persuades his father to spare David's life and restore him to the royal court. Later, Jonathan and David would conspire in an attempt to discern Saul's true intentions toward David (chapter 20). Even then, all

The Death of Jonathan

Jonathan never broke with his father, even as he worked to ensure David's escape from Saul.

After a long time on the run, David and his men seek refuge with Achish, the king of Gath, one of the Philistine city-states. David seems prepared to do battle alongside the Philistines and against Saul. However, the Philistine lords reject David's help, fearing that he is still loyal to the Israelites, Saul or no Saul.

The Philistines and the Israelites go on to fight a great battle at Mt. Gilboa, which is southeast of Nazareth. The Philistines rout the Israelites, killing Saul and three sons, including Jonathan, who has fought alongside his father.

When David learns that Saul and Jonathan were killed, his mourning is profound for the loss of both father and son. 2 Samuel 1:17-27 records David's song of lamentation which closes with:

"O my dear brother Jonathan,
I'm crushed by your death.
Your friendship was a
miracle-wonder, love far
exceeding anything I've
known - or hope to know."

from *The Message*

that Jonathan asks of David is that, no matter what happens, David would always be faithful to Jonathan's own family. At their last meeting (chapter 23), Jonathan eagerly abdicates to David his own right to be Saul's successor. Not long after, Jonathan is killed in battle. It would be many years before David would act upon his promise to be faithful to Jonathan's descendants.

Though soul mates, the relationship of Jonathan and David is pretty one-sided; Jonathan gives far more than he ever gets. Patricia Tull writes, "Friendship often begins with the unmotivated kindness of one person toward another, a generous, uncalculated action offered simply from the joy of companionship. Jonathan's spontaneous love initiated the friendship and over the course of several episodes he continues to nourish it. He asks nothing of David in the present; all he asks for the future is to be remembered for the sake of his descendants. . . Jonathan stands in good company with the God whose love for humankind precedes and exceeds all possible returns . . . [Jonathan] is the friend few of us deserve but most of us would dearly love to have."¹

Jonathan could have acted like his father, working always to protect his own interests. Instead, Jonathan chose the path of friendship, covenant, and trust. He pledged himself to work sacrificially for David's goodwill. *Such is love.*

A last thought

A few years ago, many of us read the book, *Same Kind of Different as Me*. It is the true story of a deep and abiding friendship formed between two men in Ft. Worth. Ron is white, a rich art dealer; Denver

¹from Patricia Tull's essay. "Jonathan's Gift of Friendship," in the April 2004 issue of *Interpretation*. She is professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

is black, a homeless man who has lived on the streets for most of his life. You could hardly imagine a more unlikely pair. They meet when Ron's wife gets him to help her serve meals at a homeless shelter. She senses that God wants her to befriend the most intimidating man in the place, Denver, and she sends her husband over to sit down with him. They strike up an acquaintance and eventually Ron tells Denver that he wants to be his friend. Denver tells him: "I heard that when white folks go fishing they do something called 'catch and release.' . . . So, Mr. Ron, it occurred to me: "If you is fishin for a friend you just gon' catch and release, then I ain't got no desire to be your friend. . . . But if you is lookin for a *real* friend, then I'll be one. Forever."

Catch-and-release? That sure seems to describe far too much of what I hear about friendship these days. BFF? Best Friends Forever? What a joke. It's a phrase tossed around as if it is little more than "Have a good day." BFF-for-a-day is more like it. Denver and Jonathan help us to grasp what we really ought to mean by BFF. If you have such a friend in your life you are richly blessed. May you be so blessed.

Reading Bible Stories

It can be pretty hard to know what to make of some Old Testament stories. Here are a few tips from Fee and Stuart¹:

1. The stories tell us what happened, not what ought to have happened. There is not a clear moral to every story.
2. What people do in these narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Sometimes it is just the opposite!
3. All the stories are selectively told. Every writer has to pick and choose what details to include, even how the story will be told. This is true of the Bible too.
4. The stories are not written to answer all our theological questions. They may raise as many questions for you as they answer.
5. Do your best to close some of the historical and cultural distance between our world and ancient Israel. A few basic reference tools, like a Bible dictionary, will be helpful in this.

Here are two simple questions to keep in mind when you read Old Testament stories. First, what does the passage tell us about God's character, his activities, or his will? Second, what does the passage tell us about the story of Israel (the people of God)?

1. For more on this, see Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It is written for laypeople and is excellent.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Borrowing a vivid image from the story of Absalom's death (one of David's sons) in 2 Samuel, Professor Tull writes that friendships and marriages "hang between heaven and earth." They carry our loftiest ambitions in life, but also all our human limitations. Indeed, the phrase 'soul mates' is probably most often used in the context of marriage. How are marriages and deep friendships similar? How do they differ? Look back over your life and reflect on the truly deep, close soul-bonding friendships you've had . . . if you've had any. Do you feel like you chose that person or did it 'just happen'? Did you offer your friendship freely or in the hope of some immediate gain? How can we better recognize and reciprocate the gifts of friendship that are offered to us?
2. In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "For life to have personal meaning, there must be people who matter to us, and for whom we matter, unconditionally and nonsubstitutably. Ask someone what his or her greatest source of happiness is, and they are unlikely to mention their latest car, their last holiday, their new designer jeans. They are, or were, more likely to say: my marriage partner, my children, my reputation, my friends. Lose these and we lose the very concept of happiness, of a life well lived, of dedication to something larger than ourselves." Do you agree with the rabbi? How would you go about talking to one of our youth about the importance of true friends? How would you describe a true friend? What advice would you give regarding the nurturing of true friendship? What would you say if a youth asks you why so many people have so few really deep, true friends . . . soul mates?

David – musician and writer of psalms

David first comes to the royal court as a court musician, playing to soothe King Saul's spirit when he descended into periods of despair. It may have been there that David first began to compose psalms. We get the word "psalm" from the Greek for "stringed instrument" (such as a harp or lyre), for the 150 psalms in the Old Testament are Hebrew poems set to music. Hebrew poetry is built on the use of parallel thoughts, rhyming based on an idea or description rather than on the sounds of words or on the meter. 134 of the psalms have superscriptions of some kind – author, tune, circumstance for its writing, for example. It is hard to say just which psalms were actually authored by David. However, some bearing his name even state the occasion that the psalm commemorates. Psalm 59 is one and speaks to the time that David is being threatened by Saul. It is in the face of these threats that Jonathan, Saul's son, pledges his faithfulness to David.

Psalm 59 (NIV)

For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy."
Of David. A *miktam*.

When Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him.

¹ Deliver me from my enemies, O God;
be my fortress against those who
are attacking me.

² Deliver me from evildoers
and save me from those who are
after my blood.

³ See how they lie in wait for me!
Fierce men conspire against me
for no offense or sin of mine, LORD.

⁴ I have done no wrong, yet they are
ready to attack me.
Arise to help me; look on my plight!

⁵ You, LORD God Almighty,
you who are the God of Israel,
rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
show no mercy to wicked traitors.

⁶ They return at evening,
snarling like dogs,
and prowl about the city.

⁷ See what they spew from their
mouths—
the words from their lips are sharp
as swords,
and they think, "Who can hear us?"

⁸ But you laugh at them, LORD;
you scoff at all those nations.

⁹ You are my strength, I watch for you;
you, God, are my fortress,
¹⁰ my God on whom I can rely.

God will go before me
and will let me gloat over those
who slander me.

¹¹ But do not kill them, Lord our
shield,
or my people will forget.

In your might uproot them
and bring them down.

¹² For the sins of their mouths,
for the words of their lips,
let them be caught in their
pride.

For the curses and lies they utter,
¹³ consume them in your wrath,
consume them till they are no
more.

Then it will be known to the ends of
the earth
that God rules over Jacob.

¹⁴ They return at evening,
snarling like dogs,
and prowl about the city.

¹⁵ They wander about for food
and howl if not satisfied.

¹⁶ But I will sing of your strength,
in the morning I will sing of
your love;

for you are my fortress,
my refuge in times of trouble.

¹⁷ You are my strength, I sing praise
to you;
you, God, are my fortress,
my God on whom I can rely.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 1 Samuel 14:1-46 Jonathan leads the Israelites to victory but is condemned by his father.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Samuel 20 Jonathan and David hatch a plot.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 23:15-19 David and Jonathan make a covenant.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Samuel 31 The deaths of Saul and Jonathan</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Samuel 9 Many years later, David shows kindness to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth.</p>	<p>Prayer List</p>

