

“Jonathan: The Power of a Friend”

Introduction: The writer of Hebrews offers a poignant comment regarding the sometimes gritty challenge of living the Christian life. He says: “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (3:12f). Though written almost 2,000 years ago, the gritty challenge of Christian living hasn’t changed! We are always, it seems, on the edge of having our hearts become hardened by the often hard circumstances of life. In the face of such challenges we are reminded by this text that, as God has said from the beginning, it is not good for us to be alone (Ge. 2:18). To that end, and so that such challenges don’t cause us to turn away from the living God, one of the gifts God has given us is one we can easily overlook or take for granted. It is the gift of friendship.

We see this gift played out in the life of David as he experiences a remarkable friendship with Saul’s son Jonathan. We’ll see how God used friendship with Jonathan to help keep David’s heart from becoming hardened by the hostility and challenging circumstances that he faced from King Saul. Jonathan, we’ll also want to observe, not only teaches us about what it means to be a friend. In addition, he shows us what it means to be a follower of the one who has come to be king, the one to whom David points, Jesus. So today we’ll consider the power of friendship that Jonathan reveals. Next week we’ll consider the model of a follower that he provides.

I. David in Hot and Hostile Waters

A. Fresh off his victory over the Philistine giant Goliath, and the consequent bailout of the Israelite army, well might we expect life for David to hum along beautifully. He was like the guy who hit a walk off home run in the final and deciding game of the World Series. It doesn’t get any better! Time for the duck boats and a parade! Well indeed, we read that many did praise David for his incredible victory as the army returned home. But it turned out to be too many from the perspective of King Saul. “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands,” the women who had gathered along the parade route sang. Although the women may have just been celebrating an overall victory, Saul takes it personally and become insanely jealous.

B. Such jealousy, as the text goes on, quickly puts David into hot water. Six times, as recorded in chs. 18-20, Saul attempts to take David’s life. Three times he threw his spear at David while David was playing his harp to soothe the king. Twice he used his daughters, offering to give them to David in marriage if David would go out and keep killing Philistines, reasoning that the Philistines would do David in before any marriage took place. Failing in all of these plots, Saul finally sends a hit squad to David’s house in the wee hours of the morning, which forces David to flee. Life, to say the least, was not the least bit comfortable for David at this time. And it’s not because David was doing anything bad. David was doing good things. David had stood tall for the Lord. David was serving the king. And yet, David was facing hostility. How tempted David must have been to give up, to strike out at Saul, or to go back to his sheep?

C. Where might hostility be making your life uncomfortable, or tempting you to give up? As he reflects on the hostility we can face, Eugene Peterson says this: “Enmity is the actual condition in which, more often than not, we find ourselves. We’re criticized, teased,

avoided, attacked, abandoned, cursed, hunted down, snubbed, stabbed in the back, treated like a doormat, and damned with faint praise. Not all of those things, and not all the time, but enough of them and often enough to realize that not everyone shares God's excellent attitude toward us!" [*Leap Over a Wall*, 48] Does the hostility you face ever cause your heart to begin to harden, to throw your hands up and declare, "What's the use, Lord? This Christian thing just isn't working the way I thought it would!" Where might those around you not be sharing God's excellent attitude toward you, but instead, be criticizing, teasing, avoiding, gossiping, snubbing, or stabbing you in the back? Maybe it's the school playground or cafeteria, where all too easily classmates can be mean to you or isolate you. Maybe it's your college dormitory where you refuse to go along with the fun and so are made fun of. Maybe it's on a business trip where you choose to head back to your hotel room instead of carousing with your associates and lose the deal because of it. Maybe it's your family where you've taken a Godly stand on an issue and are no longer invited to a party or gathering.

Whatever it might be, Jesus is pretty clear that the decision to follow him, while it's the best decision we can ever make, does not mean living a life of comfort and ease! And so we need one another, we need friends who, when things get gritty along the way, love us and encourage us to persevere so that our hearts do not become hard or formed in unhealthy ways.

II. What a Friend David Had in Jonathan

A. David had such a friend in Jonathan. At the beginning, at the end, and interwoven throughout these three chapters of hostility from Saul is a friendship with Jonathan, Saul's son, that encouraged David, and prevented not only Saul's spear but Saul's hatred from entering David's heart. Before we consider the nature of this friendship, let's first understand a couple of things it was not.

1. First, it was not a matter of just being friendly, like saying hello to a co-worker on a Monday morning and sharing how your weekend was, or going out for a beverage with the gang after work on a Friday and looking forward to what the coming weekend might hold. Neither are bad, just not deep enough.

2. Nor, secondly, was this friendship easy, accomplished with the click of a button, as our friendships in this digital age can be. Now, "friending" someone on Facebook is not bad. Certainly, it can help you keep up with what others are doing. But, as someone recently put it to Rama, in a focus group she was holding in Cambridge on Millennial spirituality, in this digital age, where even friendships have become digital, "we have become spectators of each other's lives, but we do not know each other's inner reality." That is, whether we "friend" "follow" or "like" another, whether we use Facebook, Instagram, or snapchat, we are simply relating to others through a screen, on which it is easy to hide what is really going on and instead, put out there our most attractive, together, edited version of our selves. We never really get to know people, nor they us. "Instead of entering the messiness of having real friends, we settle for having (and being) followers and fans" (Scott Sauls, *Befriend*, 1-2). And the result is usually just more isolation and loneliness, not less.

3. Nor, thirdly, was this a "friends with benefits" kind of relationship, that is, a sexual relationship, which some would like to find here. Not only is there no evidence of homosexuality in the text, but such a conclusion fails to recognize that a deep friendship between men, or women, can truly be had without it having to also be sexual in nature.

B. What, then, was the nature of this friendship? 18:1 describes it in two ways. First, Jonathan and David were “one in spirit.” That is, their lives were closely bound up with each other and there was therefore a level of transparency between them. The same word is used to describe Joseph’s relationship with his son Benjamin (Ge. 44:30). In other words, David and Jonathan got to know each other, and cared for each other, like family, much like an older and younger brother (Jonathan was at least 20 years older than David). Second, Jonathan loved David “as himself,” just like Jesus calls us to love our neighbor. Jonathan sought, in other words, the good of David, even ahead of his own.

So, we see Jonathan taking active steps to protect David. And, we also see Jonathan helping David to become all that God had called him to be. During one of David’s darkest periods, when Saul had really become unhinged, Jonathan did not seek to downplay David’s problem but turned David’s heart and mind to God: “And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David and helped him find strength in God” (23:16). It’s where we need to look when facing any giant, and often we need the help of others to turn there. As well, we see Jonathan unselfishly encouraging David’s advancement, even to the point of assuming the throne. Not only do we see this when Jonathan hands over his robe and other kingly paraphernalia to David—all visible symbols that would have marked him out as the king’s son—but a bit later Jonathan describes it in this way: “You will be king over Israel and I will be second to you” (23:17). It’s a remarkable humility that we see in Jonathan, and a remarkable way of seeing and encouraging what God is doing in another, keys to any good friendship.

C. How is Jonathan able to offer such a selfless friendship to David? I think it’s because he had first been befriended by the Lord. His identity, therefore, was grounded in God’s love for him, not in his need to become king. In 20:14, when asking for David’s care and protection after David has been made king, Jonathan puts it this way: “But show me unfailing kindness like the LORD’s kindness as long as I live . . .” Kindness here translates the Hebrew term that is used to describe the steadfast love, loyalty, and faithfulness of God. Most of the time it is used to describe God’s covenant relationship to us, which then calls for a faithful loving response on our part. But it is also used to describe the relationship between humans, either nations, or a marriage, or a friendship. In contrast to a contract, which guarantees what we can get, and ends when its terms are not met, a covenant depicts a mutual commitment between parties that calls them to give, whether their needs have been met or not. Jonathan’s life, in fact, often became very difficult because of his friendship with David, but he never abandons him, no matter how hard things got. He was able to offer himself to David in this way because he had first received the kindness of the Lord, which he then offered to another.

This is an amazing friendship. It is someone who will stick with you through thick and thin, encouraging you to persevere. It’s someone who will not exploit your weaknesses but who will affirm your strengths and gently help you address your flaws. It is someone who desires to help you grow into all God has called you to be. In practice, it looks like the “one another” commands of the NT (see attached). It should certainly include Jesus, who is the best friend you will ever have, as we will sing in a moment, but should also be someone who can put flesh and blood on Jesus for you, in a face to face kind of way. It certainly could include your spouse, but there should also be someone beyond your spouse because sometimes it is your spouse who is the challenging issue!

So when the storms of life blow hard, may we know and rest in the powerful friendship of Jesus, and may we both see, and be, the power of a friend for another.