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 1 Samuel 17:5–18:5
 Thirtieth Message
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TWO FACES OF LOVE

SERIES: *THE CROSSING FATES*

Today we will look at one of the most celebrated friendships in the Bible, that of David and Jonathan. In today's world of instant communication, it seems like everyone wants to be your friend, but if we are honest, the art of friendship has fallen on hard times, especially among men. The vast majority of men in our culture are isolated, lonely and sorely lacking genuine friendships. Every day we swim through a sea of acquaintances, but rarely do we have a lengthy encounter with a spiritual peer who energizes us and loves us for who we are with no ulterior motives.

Elie Wiesel, a poignant and powerful voice in the era of post-Holocaust literature, stresses the absolute necessity of friendship in his memoirs, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. He writes, "I stress the role of friendship and its place in my life as an essential component of everything I do. I can work only in an atmosphere of understanding – in other words, of friendship." In his novel, *The Gates of the Forest*, he wrote:

What is a friend? More than a brother, more than a father: a traveling companion with whom we rebuild the route and strive to conquer the impossible even if only to sacrifice it later. Friendship stamps a life as deeply as—more deeply even—than love. Love can degenerate into obsession, but friendship never means anything but sharing.

It is with friends that we share the awakening of desire, the birth of a vision or a fear. It is to friends that we communicate our anguish at the setting of the sun or the lack of order and justice: Is the soul immortal, and if so, why does fear sap our strength? If God exists, how can we lay claim to freedom, since He is its origin and its end? And what, exactly, is death? The mere closing of a parenthesis? And life?

Among philosophers such questions often ring false, but raised among friends during adolescence they trigger a change of being: the glance begins to burn, the everyday gesture strives to reach beyond itself. What is a friend? The person who first makes you aware of your own solitude and his, and helps you escape it so that you, in turn, may help him. It is thanks to him that you can fall silent without shame, and unburden yourself without loss of face.¹

David and Jonathan were sons from two different families, chosen for two different destinies, united for one cause. Today we will discover that when there is a deep and abiding spiritual undertone in a relationship, it makes ordinary friendship divine.

The final episode of the David/Goliath story is made up of two scenes that are framed with David's "going out" to war. The first, vv. 17:55–58, is a flashback of a telling conversation Saul had with his general after David left the king to fight Goliath. In the second, vv. 18:1–5, David has just returned as Israel's champion and portrays for us the contrasting responses to David by the king and his son, Jonathan. Both father and son "love" David but, as many painfully have experienced, love can have very different faces. As we are drawn into

this compelling drama, the Spirit behind the text will be holding up two alternating mirrors as if to say, "Which face is yours?"

I. "Whose Son is This?" (1 Sam 17:55–58)

A. Saul's anxiety about the "son" (vv. 55–56)

As soon as Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is this youth?" And Abner said, "As your soul lives, O king, I do not know." And the king said, "Inquire whose son the boy is." (1 Sam 17:55–56 ESV)

The last scene of this long chapter gives us a flashback that occurs immediately after David's interview with Saul. Flashbacks are often used to reveal information or motives of a character that were previously hidden by the narrator. You'll recall how David's unrelenting faith and zeal for God's name coerced a reluctant king to grant the youth permission to fight Goliath. Then when Saul tried to clothe him in his armor, the boy flatly refused. Putting them off, he grabbed his shepherd's staff, sling and five smooth stones and headed off to the Valley of Elah to confront the Philistine.

Once the youth is out of sight, the king turns to his general and asks, "Whose son is this?" The question strikes us as strange, since we already know who David is both in terms of his family of origin and his destiny. But how can Saul be so clueless? Earlier he was told by one of his servants that he was "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite" (16:8), and later David personally served the king as court musician and armor bearer. Of all the characters in the story, we would think that Saul would be most knowledgeable about David's origin, and yet we hear the question expressed three times in four verses, as if the boy's origin now haunts him.

And Saul's general, who ought to know where true military strength in Israel lies, is equally in the dark. Sensing Saul's growing anxiety, Abner responds with an oath, "By your life, I don't know." Little does he know that the ascendancy of this youth will cost Saul his life! The decisive battle in Israel was fought by a stranger, an inexperienced *youth* who is a son of unknown origin. Addressing this tension, Bruce Waltke writes,

The resolution of the tension between Saul's earlier awareness of Jesse and his later unawareness of him lies in the fact that Saul is not asking for a label but for David's true identity. In ancient Israel it was more important to learn of the tribe and clan to which someone belonged than that person's individuality. Saul, appreciating David as a gifted singer who comforts him, is indifferent to David's family pedigree. But the king cannot be indifferent to the family of a warrior who saves the nation and to what the future might hold for him; he even offered to make the hero his son-in-law. Moreover, Saul is aware of the prophet's forecast that he will be replaced by a better man than he, a man after God's own heart. David has proved himself greater than both Saul and Jonathan, and David testifies he is a man after God's heart.²

Thus David's ascent from a court musician to a war hero puts a whole different spin on Saul's perception of David. We can trace in Saul's repetitive inquiries "a shift from growing amazement to bewilderment to uneasiness: who on earth is this young man?"³ And the politically conscious king fears that everyone else in Israel is going to be asking the same question. So it will be with Israel's future king, another Bethlehemite. "Whose son is this?" became the ringing question in the gospels among the Jews. "From whence are his origins? Galilee? Bethlehem? Heaven itself?" (John 6:42)

B. Saul interrogates the "son" (vv. 57-58)

And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him, and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." (vv. 57-58)

Fearing the possible wrath of the king, Abner exceeds Saul's request for mere information and brings the national hero back in person. Let the boy speak for himself (while Abner gets out of the line of fire). When David arrives, he is not alone; he has his trophy in his hand. Seeing Goliath's head in David's hand and perhaps his own headship in jeopardy, Saul does not congratulate or thank David for vanquishing the Philistine threat singlehandedly. Instead he interrogates him in denigrating tones – "*Whose son are you, young man?*" Rather than calling David by name, he reminds him that he is still a "youth," a virtual nobody, hoping to keep this young upstart in his place. Saul is not about to reevaluate the youth's status in light of the day's exploits. Saul doesn't give thanks to God or even mention the victory. And there is no indication that David and his family were ever rewarded for David's triumph.

How disappointing and painful for the triumphant youth to be virtually ignored and shut down by the king. The one who earlier "loved" him is instantly transformed into a cold, calculating politician who wants nothing to do with him. But David, being well acquainted with rejection, is surprisingly secure in his identity. He wisely holds back his disappointment and chooses his words carefully lest he arouse suspicion – "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." Though his response is accurate and respectful, it is less than forthcoming. David identifies his family, but withholds his name and creates distance between himself and the king. As Fokkeman notes, "the king-elect shrinks from calling himself the servant of the rejected king just a little longer, or at least for just this instant which involves his true identity."⁴ David is careful not to commit himself to an abuser.

Reflection: Like David, Jesus was not quick to reveal himself to people based on their initial responses (John 2:24). When he no longer served their purposes, their love quickly eroded into jealousy and culminated in crucifixion. We should expect no less in our experience. When someone enters into a relationship with Jesus, they are often welcomed by their community of family and friends, who view "religion" as an innocuous help to aid people in their problems. But when Christ asserts his Lordship in their lives and they begin to function according to their gifts and calling, their faith is often no longer viewed as a "nice religion," but as threat to those in authority.

Now we come to the second scene where the narrator gives us the contrasting responses to David's victory by Jonathan and Saul.

II. Jonathan's Devotion (1 Sam 18:1, 3-4)

A. The springs of devotion (v. 1)

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. (v. 1)

In contrast to Saul's love that was self-serving, Jonathan experienced a richer and deeper kind of love. As he gazed upon Israel's new charismatic deliverer with an unclouded ego, instead of feeling threatened or displaced, he felt a deep kinship that recognized in David the greatness of a peer. Such a perspective is remarkable given that Jonathan was much older than David (15-20 years?). What united them? As a warrior like Jonathan...

1. David grew up in an oppressive family atmosphere, where he was not affirmed or valued.
2. Despite his rejection and isolation, David delighted in serving his father's interests above his own.
3. David had a rock-firm faith and a holy zeal for God's name, that gave him a spiritual perspective to "see" what others could not.
4. David refused to allow his family or those in authority to shape him into something he was not.
5. David knew that faith in the living God plus creative initiative would grant even a *youth* victory.

The result was that Jonathan's soul became "knit" to David. The Hebrew term *qashar* means "to bind together." "In the context of human relationships it can signify either a relationship between two people that is characterized by devotion or the binding together of individuals for the sake of rebellion."⁵ The term was used in the Joseph story when Judah was poignantly pleading his case before Pharaoh's great prince (who in reality was Joseph) for the life of his younger brother Benjamin. Appealing to Joseph's compassion, Judah says that his father's "life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die" (Gen 44:30-31). There is no greater human bond possible.

Unable to comprehend true devotion, Saul will view their relationship as a "conspiracy" in political terms (22:8, 13). But for Jonathan, his bond to David springs from a love that is completely void of political or personal aspirations. In fulfillment of the great commandment (Lev 19:18), Jonathan loves David as himself, which gives him the freedom "to give him care and esteem because he does not need to use him to affirm himself."⁶ This kind of love appreciates another person for who he or she is, independently of one's expectations or desires. From this moment on Jonathan will prefer the honor of his friend to his own. In the words of John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Reflection: To love another person as oneself, first requires an appreciation of the infinite value God has given you, being made in his image. Without an abiding relationship with the Lord and knowing deep in your heart how much he loves you, authentic friendship is difficult if not impossible because...

1. You are looking to another person to give you what only God can provide.
2. It creates inappropriate and demanding expectations of others.
3. It destroys the freedom and spontaneity in giving.
4. It causes others to respond to you out of guilt.

B. Expressions of devotion (vv. 3-4)*1. Expressed in words (v. 3)*

Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul. (v. 3)

When a man tells a woman he “loves” her, it means nothing until the day his feelings give way to that terrifying “C” word – COMMITMENT – and he gets on one knee and asks her to marry him. It is then on their wedding day, when he confirms his love with a sacred vow in the presence of God, family and witnesses, that the whole world knows he “loves” her. (This is why I encourage young men not to tell a girl that he loves her, until he is ready to ask her to marry him).

In similar fashion Jonathan feels the necessity to articulate his holy affections by means of a covenant. We don’t know what Jonathan said, but the fact that it was a formal covenant reveals that Jonathan clearly understood that Israel’s future was with David and not with his father. As a man of faith, Jonathan was able to see God at work in his newly anointed king. And his covenant reveals that his loyalties are governed by God’s Spirit, not blood relationships. To enter into a covenant with David was, in effect, surrendering his life in service to God. And the covenant bond guaranteed that nothing could break their holy, spiritual friendship.

Reflection: The spiritual dimension of friendship is vital for healthy relationships. Without the Lordship of Christ being central in our relationships, we can easily become enmeshed or controlled by others in unhealthy ways that diminish who we are. But when our commitments to serve others arise from how the Lord is working within us, our relationships do not suffocate us; instead, they expand our vision and broaden our lives. Eugene Peterson comments that “the kind of spiritual kinship energized by affection and sealed by covenant...is the least demanding and least needy of human relationships. But it is also the most necessary for realizing who we are, for becoming ourselves with no strings attached.”⁷

2. Expressed in tangible symbols (v. 4)

And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. (v. 4)

Just as a couple gives rings as tangible symbols of their vows, so Jonathan gives symbols appropriate to his commitment. In an act of renunciation, he strips himself of his robe, relinquishing his right to the throne, and then gives his arms as a sign of transferring the title of champion to David. The act of stripping off his robe is the counterbalance to the tearing of Samuel’s robe by Saul in chapter 15. On that occasion Samuel said to Saul, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you” (15:28). Now, as heir to the royal throne, Jonathan willingly gives the son of Jesse his robe, followed by his complete array of armor.

Jonathan’s surrender to one greater than himself is made even more emphatic in the Hebrew text than our English translations. The word translated “even” is used three times to show that Jonathan holds nothing back – “even his sword, and even his bow and even his belt!” In this act of sacrificial giving, Jonathan lives up to his name (“Yah has given”) and demonstrates that this day is the day for “giving.” And unlike Saul’s useless armor, Jonathan’s “...fits David like a glove. And now whenever he appears with Jonathan’s equipment he is the glorious conqueror – naturally.” Fokkeman further observes that this is not a contradiction of the narrator’s earlier critique upon weapons but, “What is involved is the spirit in which they are used:

whether one relies on the living God of Israel or on the magic of numbers and armor.”⁸

As their lives unfold, David and Jonathan will in turn protect and promote the other, living out their covenantal friendship as a powerful manifestation of covenantal love.

Reflection: What are your weapons that symbolize your commitment to serve another person? When you are the recipient of such love, you are never the same. When we made our first mission trips to Romania 1988 and 1989, the cruel dictator, Ceausescu, had been ravaging and raping an entire population for decades. To pay for the national debt, he exported most of Romania’s food supply. Flour and sugar were rationed to a bare minimum; beef became a rarity and eggs a luxury. But when we arrived as messengers of good news from another land, our friends “stripped” themselves of their “armor” and lavished us with eggs for breakfast. The following year, the Securitate (the Romanian secret police) became aware of our “illegal” activities and was seeking an opportunity to arrest me. Over a two week period of intense “spy games,” five brothers (four of whom were aptly named Jonathan, and the fifth, David)⁹ sacrificed their very lives to protect us. Had we been caught, we would have been thrown out of the country; had they been caught, they would have endured the tortures of prison. Coming home, I came to understand the significance of David’s words for his friend, “Your love to me was wonderful (a term expressing something so extraordinary it inspires amazement and awe), more wonderful than the love of women” (2 Sam 1:26).

IV. Saul’s Control (1 Sam 18:2, 5)**A. A day for taking (v. 2)**

And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. (v.2)

While Jonathan sees David’s triumph over Goliath as a day of supreme “giving,” Saul sees it as a day for “taking” – “Saul *took* him... and *did not give*.” There is a striking word play with Jonathan’s name (*yehonatan* = “yah gives”). Jonathan gives (*natan*) all that he is and has to David, while Saul “*lo natan*” does not give (i.e. “*would not allow* him to return home to his father”). Saul is incapable of appreciation or love or any emotion that relishes the glory of another because he does not love himself. And, as bespeaks his depraved character, Saul instead initiates a course of action that will advance his own aggrandizement and agenda.

When David served Saul’s purposes as court musician, Saul loved him and graciously asked his father for permission to retain his services. But now that David has grown in favor beyond Saul’s control, his love “rapidly perishes in the toxic fumes of the king’s jealousy leading to psychosis.”¹⁰ In order to strengthen his grip on his doomed kingdom, he simply “takes” what is his by divine right and uses it for his own advancement.

B. A day for escalating executive decrees (v. 5)

And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war. And it was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul’s servants. (v. 5)

After Saul retains David’s services, he issues executive orders, sending David out to increase his petty little kingdom. Saul is king, so wherever David is sent, that’s where he goes and, armed with God’s spirit and Jonathan’s weapons, he is supremely successful. So successful is he, that Saul promotes him to command his elite troops, further spreading his fame through the court and the kingdom. On

the surface everything is working according to Saul's egotistical plan. How delighted he must be during his reign of success. Through the repeated alliteration, assonance and rhyme (so typical of the artistry of Hebrew poetics) of three words in the opening line, we can faintly hear the king grabbing all the glory for his personal trophy case. Each word rhymes with Saul's name – *sh'aul, shalah, shakal* – it almost comes across in English equivalent – “Saul, sends, success.”

Reflection: One must be discerning about the apparent success of spiritual leaders. There is a thin line between a charismatic leader who is surrendered to Christ and one who is equally gifted, but seeks to use the glory of the Son for his own advancement. The card that will give their hand away is when they play a “king” of any color in an attempt to exercise “control” over others. It is then you should be wary, for you might be dealing with a Saul and not a David. This is why the apostles were adamant about passing on the rule given them by Jesus about the nature of authority in the church.

“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. *But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:42-45)

In the church, leaders are recognized by how they serve others; and most importantly, leadership is never to be delegated to a single individual. Churches should always have a plurality of leaders who submit one to one another.

IV. Questions to Ponder

1. How many “real” friends do you have?

In the midst of our technological revolution of Facebook, Twitter, and mobs of blogs, we would do well to consider the sage's proverb:

**One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend (lit. “lover”) who cleaves closer than a brother.**

Prov 18.24 TNIV

Jesus did not make it his goal to have myriad friends. I doubt you would have ever found him making countless connections through Facebook. Instead, he chose twelve “so that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14); out of the twelve, three were drawn into his inner circle; and out of the three, one became particularly loved by him (John 13:23). At the close of his ministry Jesus says to them, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). Friends? ...not many; but consider how those friendships changed the world!

2. Do I love Jesus and myself, or Jesus as myself?

3. Do I pause after a spiritual victory to worship God with JOY, or do I take JOY in manipulating religion to control others?

4. Have you ever felt holy love (i.e. a desire to serve another's purpose with abandon) towards another person that was not related to you?

5. If we lack the ability to give ourselves to another person, we need to step back and take a deep look at the battle our King fought on our behalf.

The pattern of friendship set by Jonathan becomes the basis for true spirituality and service for all who will follow Christ. It is not

service first and emotions later. The proper order is to first gaze upon the beauty of the Savior. Then, as you behold the cost of his sacrifice and his victory on the cross, you will find your heart strangely *knit* with the Savior, and you will love Jesus as yourself.

If we find worship too burdensome in the midst of myriad needs that press in upon us, Jesus will gently but firmly rebuke us as he did with Martha in Luke's gospel. Martha's service took precedence over her worship, so that her service was driven by duty and not by love. It all came out in the open when she became upset at her sister (and indirectly at Jesus), who had chosen to sit at the Lord's feet to listen to his teaching, rather than helping her in the kitchen. Jesus' response cuts us all to the bone, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42). Service that is not motivated by love does nothing for the King.

So let us gaze at the cross where Jesus defeated our Goliath, the devil. Let us gaze until we are melted by his love, then all of our actions will be holy. When this love strangely warms our hearts, and for a few treasured moments we see the face of Christ in these, our brothers and sisters, Jonathan's story is re-enacted once more. How privileged are we that it should be so. *Slavā Domnului!* (“Praise the Lord!”)

1 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea, Memoirs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 48-49.

2. Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 643.

3. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986), 191.

4. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 193.

5. Eugene Carpenter, Michael A. Grisanti, קָשֶׁר, *NIDOTTE* 3:1001.

6. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 643-644.

7. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 101.

8. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 199.

9. To distinguish the four Jonathans, they became affectionately known as *Big John, Little John, Middle John* and *Jonathan*.

10. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 197.

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