



# DAVID AND JONATHAN: THE BELOVED GIFT OF GOD

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 18:1-5  
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Occasionally when I'm reading a Bible story, suddenly a particular event will become flooded with light, just as a stage set is illuminated when a spotlight is shone upon it. It is then that I feel beckoned to come on-stage myself. Time stands still as eternity, in a sense, seems to transcend history. I can almost hear angels sing. The power of such scenes lies in the fact that they are cameos of true spirituality in its purest form. At times like these we need to pause and savor the moment in all its glory.

The Old Testament story of Jonathan and David is just such a scene. It is one of the golden moments in the Bible, a holy cameo of human love and spiritual devotion. For me, this account evokes many personal memories. It brings to mind the first Christian brother I really trusted and became vulnerable with. He called me his *Jonathan*; I called him my *David*. We were best men in each other's weddings. My wife Emily and I named our firstborn son David Jonathan (*"the beloved gift of God"*). My grief over losing this precious gift was even more heartfelt as a result. One year later to the day, another PBC pastor lost his son. His son's name was Jonathan David.

The story of Jonathan and David also evokes memories of times I spent in Romania. In the summer of 1988, I was in the Retezot Mountains in that country, at an altitude of seven thousand feet, preparing to teach a group of Romanians I had never met before. I was concerned, because they seemed a bit distant. Then a sister who was a member of our team said to me, "Why don't you tell them the story of your children? Perhaps they will be able to identify with your suffering." So I shared my story. Before long, the wall between us came down. It had been undermined in a flood of tears. Later I was to learn that in the crowd were two brothers. Their names were David and Jonathan. Another Jonathan became my translator, and yet another Jonathan my mountain guide. The following year, all of these men put their lives on the line for me when I was being pursued by the security police — an experience that had a profound effect on my life and ministry. Finally, in the summer of 1992, I was present at a wedding in a little Romanian village when our own Jim Foster married Nelly, the sister of David and Jonathan.

The Jonathan and David story, therefore, recalls wonderful memories and intense emotions for me. I pray that the saga of these two Biblical heroes will become your story also.

In our last study, David, the newly-anointed boy-king, slew the great giant Goliath with a sling-stone. His victory over Israel's enemy astonished King Saul. As we take up our text today in 1 Samuel 17:55, we begin with the king's incredulous question to his commander, Abner, "Who on earth is this young man?"

## I. The Presentation of David the Warrior (17:55-58)

Now when Saul saw David going out against the Philistine, he said to Abner the commander of the army, "Abner, whose **son** is this **young man**?" And Abner said, "By your life, O King, I do not know." And the king said, "You inquire whose **son** the **youth** is." So when David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the Philistine's head 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." (NASB)

How ironic is Saul's question. Even after David's great victory, he is still a stranger to the king. Saul wanted a hero on his side, but neither he nor his commander, Abner, are aware of David's origins. This text, says J.P. Fokkelman, "suggests a process in Saul, a shift from growing amazement to bewilderment to uneasiness: who on earth is this young man?" To Saul's question, Abner responds, "By your life (literally: soul), I don't know." It is chastening to think that this youth, David, will cost Saul his life.

How odd, that the decisive battle in Israel was fought by a stranger, a mere *youth* (a word used two times in the text), a *young man* (a term used once in the text), who is a *son* (used four times) of unknown origin. When the battle is over, David still does not reveal his name to Saul. So it will be with Israel's future king, another Bethlehemite. "*Whose son is this?*" is the ringing question in the gospels among the Jews. "From whence are his origins? Galilee? Bethlehem? Heaven itself?" (John 6:42)

As Saul and Abner are speaking, the king's son, Jonathan, is listening. In the next verses, the response of his heart is set in dramatic contrast to that of his father.

Before we examine the text, it will be helpful to look at a little of the history of these two men.

## II. First Glimpses of Jonathan (1 Samuel 13-14)

We first meet with Jonathan in 1 Samuel 13. He had led a raid on a Philistine garrison and smote them, but when he got home, it was Saul who blew the trumpet and claimed the victory. When the main camp of the Philistines heard about the raid, they organized a huge counter-offensive. With thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, they set out to go up against the Israelite army, which numbered only three thousand men. The terrified Israelites began looking for cover, fleeing into caves, thickets, cliffs and cellars. Meanwhile, back at headquarters in Gilgal, Saul was desperately trying to hold his army together long enough for the prophet Samuel to arrive and offer the burnt offering for the LORD's authorization for battle. But while Saul was waiting, the people began to scatter. So he took things into his own hands and offered

the sacrifice himself, an action that only the priest was authorized to do. At that point Samuel told Saul, "Now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:14). Jonathan overheard these words of Samuel.

Jonathan then slipped out of the camp of terrified soldiers and with the help of his shield-bearer, crawled into the crags near Michmash. From these crags the narrator gives us a glimpse into Jonathan's soul by means of a little aside which he made to his armor bearer. "Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the LORD will work for us, for the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few" (1 Sam 14:6). Jonathan then attacked the Philistines and slew about 20 men within the first acre of land. As the battle raged, an earthquake sent from the LORD began to reverberate in the camp of the Philistines so that they panicked and began killing one another.

With chaos spreading in the Philistine camp, Saul immediately took charge and arbitrarily imposed a fast until "he" had avenged "himself" of "his" enemies. Jonathan, unaware of the king's egotistical edict, found a large quantity of honey. The sustenance he gained from it enabled him to pursue the enemy while the rest of the Israelite army languished in hunger and fatigue. By the time they plundered the Philistine cities, they were so famished they ate meat without draining the blood and cooking it thoroughly — a violation of dietary laws. Saul then inquired of the Lord as to whether or not he should continue the offensive, but God did not answer. Assuming that there must be sin in the camp, Saul drew lots to find the "Achan" in their midst. To testify to his resolve, he invoked another impetuous oath: "Even if it is my own son Jonathan, he must die." The lot fell to Jonathan. We are reminded of Jephthah's impulsive vow which proved so costly to his daughter (Judg 11:35). But the people objected: "Shall he who brought us salvation die?" It was unthinkable that their savior should be put to death. The people's common sense prevailed over Saul's rigid impetuosity, overruling the king's impulsive vow, and Jonathan's life was spared.

This then is Jonathan, a young man with a discerning mind, an exquisite faith, a man of courageous initiative. He is forced to live under the rule of an oppressive father whose outlook is vain, his will arbitrary, and his demeanor controlling.

Armed with this information, we take up our text now in 1 Samuel 18, prepared for the contrasting responses of these two men, Saul and Jonathan, to the news that Goliath has been slain by David.

### III. Jonathan's Spontaneous Affections (18:1-5)

Now it came about when he had finished speaking to Saul, that the **soul** of **Jonathan** was knit to the **soul** of David, for **Jonathan loved** him as his own **soul**. But **Saul took** him that day; and did **not** allow (literally: **give**) him to return to his father's house. Then **Jonathan** made a covenant with David; because he **loved** him as his own **soul**. And **Jonathan** stripped himself of the robe that was on him and **gave** it to David; with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt. So David went out wherever **Saul sent** him, and pros-

pered; and Saul **set** him over the men of war; And it was pleasing in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of the servants of **Saul**.

#### (a) A Day of Deep Affections

Witnessing the battle, Jonathan's soul is *knit* with the soul of David. The Hebrew word means "bind together as one." Ironically, the noun means "a conspiracy" — which is how Saul will interpret the relationship between his son and David (20:30-31). The term evokes the memory of the story of Joseph, when Judah spoke to Joseph concerning Jacob's love for Benjamin, saying "his life (soul) is **bound up with his life (soul)**" (Gen 44:30). No stronger human affection is possible. Pleading for the safe return of his daughter, Polly Klass's father said, "She is my life." This is the same kind of bonding that mothers feel with their newborns.

As Jonathan watches the battle, something deeply profound occurs in his soul: his life is mysteriously bound up with David's. Far from feeling threatened by David's success, he is very much moved by it, and a strange, deep, mystical love for David is generated in his soul. Instead of feeling jealous and displaced, he loves this kindred spirit even as his own soul. How utterly generous of Jonathan! "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," says Leviticus 19:18b. This text is not saying, "You shall love your neighbor *and* yourself." What it means is we must see the other person as he or she really is, quite apart from our own expectations and desires. For Jonathan, the day that David battled Goliath was a day of spontaneous affections, a time when a deep, mystical love for David was born in his heart.

Aelred of Rievaulx in his *De Spirituali Amicitia* observes that "the sacred bond of friendship between David and Jonathan...was consecrated not through hope of future advantage, but from contemplation of virtue...Jonathan was found a victor over nature, a despiser of glory and of power, one who preferred the honor of his friend to his own."<sup>1</sup>

#### (b) A Day For Giving

Notice that these deep affections culminate in commitment. As Jonathan's life is bound up inextricably with David's, he makes a covenant with him. David Roper, my old college pastor, used to tell us, "Don't ever say to a woman, 'I love you,' until you're ready to say, 'Will you marry me?'" It was obvious to us that if we would do this, every future display of affection and service would have a commitment of loyalty as its foundation.

Just as young people in marriage give each other the gift of a ring to express their commitment, Jonathan gives a symbol of his commitment to David in the gift of his weapons. His giving away his arms is the sign of his transferring the title of champion to David, the national hero who acted in the name of the Lord of Hosts. And in the act of undressing, he renounces his right to the throne. So overcome is Jonathan at seeing the Spirit of God act in David, he strips himself of his robe. This action marks the finale to the scene of Saul's tearing of Samuel's robe (1 Sam 15:27). There 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." Now Saul's son willingly gives his robe to the son of Jesse. Saul will strip later (1 Sam 19:24; 31:8-9), but only because he is forced to do so.

And notice that Jonathan holds nothing back. The Hebrew text is more emphatic than the English translation.

The word that is translated “including,” or “even to,” is used three times in the Hebrew text. Translating the English text thus would sound redundant, so the translators use the word *only* once. But the original says, “*including his sword, and including his bow, and including his belt.*” Jonathan gives everything he has to David. Loving your neighbor as yourself is a denial of self. It is not the granting of a tip. It means you are putting everything you have at his disposal until there is no self left. In this instance, of course, what it means is that Jonathan is giving up his right to the throne. Later, as we will see, his action will cost him his life.

When people give in this way, it is a beautiful thing to behold. This is why we like to take teams of people to Third World countries where people don’t have much in the way of material comforts. Even food is scarce. But Third World peoples have a way of demonstrating their love that is foreign to us in the West.

Something happens to you when you experience love like this. We have an excellent example of this in our congregation. A few years ago, Earle and Jolyn Canty traveled to Romania, hoping to adopt an orphan. They encountered many difficulties, but a young man named Mihai, whom they met on the street, began to help them. For ten days this man did everything humanly possible to help them. He welcomed them into his home, translated the adoption documents, and spent all of his waking hours assisting them. The result was that after ten days they were successful in adopting a little boy. They named him Samuel Mihai, in remembrance of the Jonathan figure who had stripped himself of everything he owned in order to help them. Some time later it was discovered that Mihai’s wife, Veorica, needed an operation in order for her to conceive. Earle and Jolyn flew the couple to the United States for surgery. A little over nine months ago, Veorica became pregnant. As her delivery date approached, her doctor told her that the baby would have to be delivered through a Cesarean section. Once more, the Cantys flew the couple to California. Last week, Veorica gave birth to a girl, Andrea Hannah. Can there be any doubt that these two children, Samuel and Andrea, will grow up to give testimony to the holy affections of their parents?

However, in contrast to these most holy affections of Jonathan and David, Saul demonstrates no emotions. In the text, only verbs of action are attributed to this Old Testament mover and shaker. Note his two-fold response.

#### IV. Saul’s Controlling Actions (18:2, 5)

But **Saul took** him that day; and did **not** allow (literally, **give**) him to return to his father’s house.

So David went out wherever **Saul sent** him, and prospered; and Saul **set** him over the men of war; And it was pleasing in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of the servants of **Saul**.

##### (a) A Day For Taking

Saul sees the battle, but rather than sensing appreciation or love he suppresses his emotions. He responds by becoming a man of action. From his perspective, it is not a day for giving, but a day for taking. Jonathan gives, but Saul refuses to give. For the king, this is a day for opportunity, not a day worship, but one of self-advancement. He quickly seizes the initiative to further his rule. The phrase,

“Did not allow (literally, *give*) him to return to his father’s house,” is saying, in effect, “This is not your son, he’s my son!” He saw this as a day for taking, for seizing control of the situation, for taking charge of another person for his own advantage. Saul is a self-centered fruit picker who picks what others have cultivated to satisfy his own lusts.

Next, Saul issues an executive order.

##### (b) A Day For Executive Action

The king sends David out to enlarge his petty little kingdom. Saul is king, so wherever he sends David, that is where he must go, of course. And David is successful in his task. There is a very interesting play on words in the Hebrew text. Even in English, we have the alliteration: *Saul, sends, success*. In Hebrew, the alliteration is even more pronounced: all the words rhyme with the name “Saul.”

So Saul’s executive orders meet with success. One could not be faulted for expecting an emotional response from the king at this time, something along the lines of “then Saul rejoiced.” But no. What we get instead is another verb of control: “*Saul placed him over men of war.*” There is only one letter of difference between the Hebrew words for “placed” and “rejoiced” (*samah, samach*). In fact, when I first translated the text, I mistranslated the verb. This is a skillful play on words by the narrator. The reader might well be expecting Saul to rejoice (as the women do in the next scene), but he is still controlling the situation. While his emotions are left suspended, however, those of all the people and those closest to him are not. The actions of David are “*pleasing in their eyes.*”

I have noticed that Christian workers often fall into the sin of Saul in their ministries. Saul wanted to remain lord in his kingdom and have others serve him. Christian workers frequently take more joy in “placing” the Son over others, sacrificing worship for management, than they experience in the victory of the Son. What they do may look spiritual, but it is religious manipulation of the worst kind. If our hearts remain unmoved is because we are like Saul: We still want to run our own lives and be lords in our puny little kingdoms. So we suppress our emotions and remain active to in order to maintain our shrinking power base.

Thus in this text we behold two radically different approaches to the spiritual life. Jonathan sees the battle and his soul is bound up with the soul of David; he loves David as himself; he makes a covenant with him, renouncing his right to the throne; and places himself at David’s disposal. Saul, on the other hand, sees the battle and takes David for himself; he places him over others; and suspends his emotions.

#### V. The Jesus Story

In the New Testament, we see the David and Jonathan story re-enacted on the stage of Israel. John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets, has a following of disciples, but when he beholds the beauty of the King, and the Spirit of God resident in him, he says, “*I must decrease, He must increase.*” He strips himself of his disciples and gives up his kingdom for the Kingdom of another. Interestingly, like Jonathan of old, his actions would cost him his life.

This example set by John becomes the basis for true spirituality and service for all who will follow Christ. It is not service first and emotions later. The goal of spirituality is

to gaze upon the beauty of the Savior. Then, as we behold his victory on the cross, we will find our hearts strangely warmed and moved.

Richard Rolle wrote this of his experience along these lines:

I was more astonished than I showed the first time I felt my heart burn with fire. The sensation was not imaginary: I felt real warmth. I was amazed at the way the fire burst up in my soul and gave me unexpected comfort, and I kept touching my breast to see if there was some physical cause, then I was assured that it was the gift of my Maker. And so I am glad to melt into a desire of greater love; and especially I rejoice at the wonderful delight and spiritual sweetness of this holy flame with so comforts my mind. Before this moment I had no idea that we exiles could know such comfortable and sweet devotion: for truly my heart was as inflamed as if a real fire were burning there.

I call it 'fervor' when the heart and the mind are ablaze with eternal love. One can feel a fire burning within. I call it 'song' when there is in the heart a spirit of everlasting praise. The soul sings in perfect harmony with heaven, and the mind is enchanted by the song. Fervor and song arise from the utmost devotion, and together they bring an indescribable sweetness...These sensations are not mere illusions, but are the most exquisite result of all our deeds. (Richard Rolle: c. 1300-1349, from *Fire of Love*.)

If this does not happen with us, if we are too busy to stop and meditate, Jesus will gently but firmly rebuke us. This was what he did with Martha in the New Testament story of the two sisters. Martha's actions took precedence over worship and she suppressed her emotions to serve the Savior. But then she became controlled by them and angrily complained about her sister Mary who had chosen the better part. Jesus was forced to remind Martha, "*One thing is needful.*"

This was his rebuke, too, to Peter following the resurrection. Peter did not worship in joy and gaze upon the victorious Christ. Once again, he returned to his occupation of fishing. But Jesus' loving rebuke pierced his heart: "*Do you love me more than these?*" "Don't you have more affections for me than these fish, Peter?"

So let us gaze at the Christ and at the cross where he 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.

O honey-sweet heat, sweeter than all delight, more delectable than all riches. My God! My Love! Come into me; thrill me with your love; wound me with your beauty. Smother me with your comfort; give your healing balm to your feeble lover, and show yourself to me. For you are all that I desire, all that I seek. My heart yearns for you, and my body thirsts for you....I know of no sweeter delight than to sing to you and praise you in my

heart, Jesus my love. I know of no greater or more plentiful joy than to feel the sweet heat of love in my mind...Come, my Savior, and comfort my soul: make me constant in my love, that I may never cease to love you.

Richard Rolle, *Fire of Love*.

*In loving memory of my son, David Jonathan,  
and in appreciation to David and the four Jonathans  
I found in Romania in 1988.*

1. David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 411.

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