



# THE REVELATION OF DEATH AND THE LOVE OF LIFE

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 20:1-17  
Eighth Message  
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A couple of weeks ago, a friend telephoned me to say that a mutual friend of ours had just been killed by a drunk driver. The following week, a neighbor stopped by my house to tell me that her mother had died suddenly. Then at our men's Bible study the following Wednesday, one of the men had difficulty holding back his tears as his mother had just died. Death is certainly part of the Christian curriculum, especially when it comes before its time. What do you do when the phone rings and you hear the word "cancer," "brain tumor," "leukemia," or "auto accident"?

I have had the privilege of walking with many in this congregation through that valley of weeping, and I have found that something mysterious happens there, as the psalmist says,

*Passing through the valley of Baca ("weeping"),  
They make it a spring.  
The early rain also covers it with blessings.  
They go from strength to strength,  
Every one of them appears before God in Zion. (Ps 84:6-7)*

On occasion I have seen hospitals strangely transformed into gardens, holy places of the soul where the soil, having been deeply plowed, and watered with tears, blossoms into a fertile Eden of love. In a mysterious way, the advent of death gives birth to holy love. Death even becomes a powerful means of evangelism. As God's people weep together in holy love the world watches longingly, keen to become part of that holy family.

Death is very much the subject matter of our study today in the life of David. Here we are brought face to face with Jonathan's agony of soul as he comes to grips with the fact that David, his close friend, has been sentenced to death by Saul. Death has a way of intensifying the emotions. In 1 Samuel 20, our text this morning, we will see that this is what happens with these two friends. The narrator depicts this intensifying of the emotions of both Jonathan and David by a doubling of the Hebrew verbs, nouns and adjectives in order to create a strong echo or resonance within the soul. Commonly in biblical narrative, this technique is used perhaps once in a chapter, but here in chapter 20 it is used thirteen different times. The chapter begins (v 3) and ends (vv 34, 41) with the emotion of grief. In between comes the emotion of love, with its display of undying loyalty. This is why I have given this chapter the title *The Revelation of Death and the Love of Life*.

Four scenes make up the chapter, as follows:

- A. Scene 1: *In the Court* — The Revelation of Death (20:1-11)  
David reveals Saul's intentions of death to Jonathan
- B. Scene 2: *In the Field* — The Revelation of Loyal-love (20:12-23)  
Jonathan reveals his loyal-love to David
- A'. Scene 3: *In the Court* — The Revelation of Death (20:24-34)  
Saul reveals his intentions of death to Jonathan
- B'. Scene 4: *In the Field* — The Revelation of Loyal-love (20:35-42)  
Jonathan reveals his loyal-love to David

In the opening two scenes (verses 1-17), which we will take today, we will learn how to minister to someone who is facing death. In these verses, Jonathan reveals just what we need to know. Verses 1-4:

## I. Scene 1: The Revelation of Death (20:1-11)

### (a) Breaking Through the Emotional Barriers

Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and came and said to Jonathan, "**What** have I done? **What** is my iniquity? And **what** is my sin before your father, that he is seeking my life (soul)?" And he said to him, "**Far from it**, you shall not die! Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without **revealing** it to my ears. So why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!" Yet David vowed again, saying, "Your father knows well that I have found favor in your sight, and he has said, 'Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved (see v 34).' But truly as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is hardly a step **between me and death**." Then Jonathan said to David, "Whatever you (lit. "your soul") say, I will do for you." (20:1-4, NASB)

In chapter 19, David escaped death at the hand of Saul four different times. Here in chapter 20 he flees from Naioth (the dormitories of the prophets) in Ramah and returns to the royal court to present his case to Jonathan. Under sentence of death by Saul, Jonathan's father, he asks his friend, "What have I done? "What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before your father?"

Jonathan's response is very emotional. "Far from it, you shall not die!" he cries. The term "far from it" comes from the Hebrew root which means "to pollute, profane, dishonor." The noun form means that the thing or thought is so profane or reprehensible, it evokes deep emotions. Abraham attributed these words to God in Genesis 18:17 when he asked whether God would destroy Sodom if fifty righteous men were found in the city. The patriarch answers his own question: "Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (For other uses see 1 Sam 2:30; 14:45; 22:15; 26:11; 2 Sam 20:20; 23:17; here the word frames the passage in verses 2 and 9.)

Jonathan can't believe what he is hearing from the lips of David. He is a little naive. He always wants to think the best about people. His relationship with his father was open and transparent, and Saul had taken an oath before him that David would not die, so both logic and experience assured him that everything was fine between his father and David. I confess I am a lot like Jonathan. I, too, tend to think the best about people. I'm a bit naive when it comes to evil. Years ago I was betrayed and greatly wronged by a friend. When another friend began to investigate this man's story and his character, I was shocked. Everything in my emotional makeup protested his innocence. But, like Jonathan in this story, I was wrong.

Next, David counters Jonathan's logic with a little of his own. He says to his friend, "Your father knows well that you

love me. If he had been open with you about the matter, you would be grieved" (the appropriate emotion for death). Then David backs his logic with a vow: "As the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is hardly a step between me and death." David brings the living Lord into the equation. Though Jonathan doesn't yet see the matter as David sees it, this vow presses the seriousness of the circumstances deep into Jonathan's heart and brings him to a place where at least he is willing to listen. Because he loves David he responds by saying, "Whatever your soul says, this I will do." This is the turning point of the scene. Jonathan at last is willing to view things differently.

This is the first step that love must take: Even when everything in you says that the other person can't be right, love demands that we be open to listen to another point of view. We must be willing to bypass our emotions and listen to the other side of things. This is where Jonathan has arrived at last. So he asks David, "What do you want me to do for you?"

### (b) Stand In My Place

So David said to Jonathan, "Behold, tomorrow is the new moon, and I ought to sit down to eat with the king. But let me go, that I may hide myself in the field until the third evening. "If your father misses me at all, then say, 'David earnestly asked leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city, because it is the yearly sacrifice there for the whole family.' If he says, 'It is good,' your servant shall be safe; but if he is very angry, know that he has decided on evil. (20:5-7)

David asks Jonathan to allow him to leave, and to stand in his place so that he could see for himself. Here is love's second step: We must take the other person's journey and see life from his perspective. David would remove himself from the scene and have Jonathan take his place; then his friend could see things from his viewpoint — a much better solution than merely arguing conclusions. At times I find that this is the only way to break through an impasse in relationships. Have them exchange places and try to see things from each other's perspective. When Peter discovered that the gospel had gone out to the Gentiles and he actually sat down and ate in a tanner's house, he didn't argue conclusions when he reported back to his brothers in Jerusalem. What he did instead was report on the visions he had, how he had preached at this man's house and before he had finished his listeners began speaking in tongues. What would his brothers have done had they been in his place? Before arguing conclusions, it is a loving thing to allow others to tell their stories.

Now that Jonathan is going to take David's place he must find a way to get Saul to open up and reveal his true emotions. Here we have an example of David's genius. First, he comes up with an idea to get Saul's attention by making a radical break with routine — not showing up when he was supposed to. When Saul inquires as to his whereabouts, David primes Jonathan to offer the excuse, "David earnestly asked of me to run to Bethlehem his city, because it is the yearly sacrifice there for the whole family."

David's genius for skillful speech shines through in these words. He carefully chooses every word so that what Jonathan says will provoke Saul's emotions. Jonathan's first words to his father, "David earnestly asked," is the Hebrew word (which rhymes with "Saul") uttered twice, "shaul, shaul." Then David's words "leave of me," are not put to Saul, but to Jonathan, because he knows Jonathan loves him. And David asks leave of him "to run to Bethlehem his city." Why would he need to run if he were not in danger? (In fact, Jonathan adds the word "escape," as we will see in verse 29.) Then the words, "it is the yearly sacrifice for the whole family," would be a

reminder to Saul of the time when David's whole family was present for another sacrifice, at which time David was anointed as king. Every word of David's which Jonathan would relate to Saul is designed to provoke the king's hidden emotions. We call this "pushing someone's buttons": light the fuse, stand back, and watch. This entire scenario is designed to help Jonathan learn that his father has decided to do evil to David.

In verses 8-11, David asks for Jonathan's loyalty.

### (c) Are You Prepared for the Worst?

"Therefore show **loyal-love** with your servant, for you have **brought** your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you. But if there is iniquity in me, put me to **death** yourself; for why then should you **bring** me to your father?" And Jonathan said, "**Far be it from you!** For if I should indeed come to **know** that evil has been decided by my father to come upon you, then would I not tell you about it?" Then David said to Jonathan, "Who will tell me if your father answers you harshly?" And Jonathan said to David, "Come, and let us go out into the **field**." So both of them went out to the **field**. (20:8-11)

David pleads with Jonathan to be faithful to the covenant he had made with him. "You brought me into a covenant of life," he says, in effect, "why would you bring me to your father for death? If I have sinned, kill me yourself!" David is testing the waters to make sure his friend is loyal. He is a master at eliciting the truth from others. He thinks Jonathan is either woefully naive or that he is a spy. His statement evokes the same emotional response in Jonathan as his original statement at the beginning of the chapter: "Far from it, you shall not die!" It is impossible for Jonathan to consider killing David. His statement reassures his friend of his loyalty. He is not a spy, but a faithful revealer of the truth.

But David presses the issue. He knows what the outcome is going to be, and he wants to make sure Jonathan is prepared for the worst. So he asks, "Who will tell me if your father answers you harshly? What will you do when your father turns on you?" Now the truth is beginning to hit home for Jonathan. He escorts David into the privacy of the field where they can make their plans without fear of being overheard.

## II. Scene 2: The Revelation of Loyal-love (20:12-23)

In his book *Fear No Evil*, Natan Sharansky, a dissident Russian Jew, told the story of his imprisonment by the KGB. There, in the loneliness of his captivity, Sharansky, a chess master, mapped out in his mind every possible move his captors could make, then he countered every move with his own to ensure that no matter what happened to him, he would not compromise his moral ethics. He played this mental chess game all the way to his own death.

This is what David and Jonathan are doing now as we begin Scene II. In each of the three movements here, an element of uncertainty is carefully plotted out and then juxtaposed with what is certain. In the first movement it is the intentions of Saul that are uncertain; in the second, life itself; and in the third, David's destiny. But in the midst of life's greatest uncertainties, David finds there are two things he can count on: Jonathan's love and God's faithfulness. In the face of Saul's death threats, these virtues are put through the fire and found to be pure, steadfast, and eternal. It is this precious love that anchors David's soul.

Verse 12:

### (a) Love Which Does Not Hold Back the Truth

Then Jonathan said to David, “The **LORD**, the God of Israel, be witness! When I have searched out my father about this time tomorrow, or the third day, behold, **if** there is good feeling toward David, shall I not then send to you and **reveal** it to your ears? **If** it please my father to do you harm, may the **LORD** do so to Jonathan and more also, **if** I do not reveal it to your ears and send you away, that you may go in safety. And may the **LORD** be with you as He has been with my father. (20:12-13)

Love does not hold back the truth whether the news is good or bad.

Three weeks ago, as I stood beside my father’s bed in a Palm Springs hospital, I thought he was going to die. His doctor was very frank and forthright with me. He said my father could die that day from viral pneumonia. Then he told me that he was going to do a lung biopsy, and the moment they found out anything, he would tell me. The doctor did not hide things from me. His promise to me to be a revealer of the truth greatly helped me during a deeply emotional time.

This is what Jonathan does for David here in Scene II. David can count on two things. First, Jonathan vows before the Living God to do whatever it takes to “search out” his father. The word means to search for hidden things in a thorough manner. It is the word used of the LORD in Psalm 139:1. He “searches” our minds and hearts. Jonathan will search out his father and whatever he finds, whether good or bad, he promises to reveal to David. “No matter what Saul does,” says Jonathan, “you can count on my loyalty.”

And secondly, David could count on the LORD’s love. God had made a covenant with David, and he was with him. If Saul intended to harm him, Jonathan would stand between him and father. And the Lord would be between both of these friends. Even if Jonathan, the first line of defense, were to die, the LORD never dies. So David could go in peace. He could endure anything because he had these two: God, and one friend.

As Jonathan begins to plot the course of history, the possibility of his own death begins to sink in for him.

### (b) Love Which Counts the Cost

“And **if** I am still alive, will you not show me the **loyal-love** of the LORD, that I may not **die**? And you shall not **cut off** your **loyal-love** from my house forever, not even when the LORD **cuts off** every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.” So Jonathan made (literally: **cut**) a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the **LORD** require it at the hands of David’s enemies.” And Jonathan made David vow again because of his **love** for him, because he **loved** him as he **loved** his own life.

David forces Jonathan to plot out every move of the game right to the very end. Jonathan at last comes to the realization that his loyalty to David may very well cost him his life, so he makes provision by making what is essentially his last will and testament. Now he needs David to show him loyal-love in return by caring for his household. Even in the midst of the ultimate uncertainty, death itself, love does not fail. It does not hold back the truth, and it does not hold back commitment; rather it is embraced, enhanced and established. Jonathan solicits David’s loyal-love, asking him not to “cut off” his faithfulness when the LORD “cuts off” his enemies (“cut” is also the word used for establishing a covenant, verse 16.) The vow is sealed in pathos and deep emotion. Jonathan loves David as his own soul.

There is a school of thought that says this text and a text at the end of 2 Samuel 1:26 gives evidence that Jonathan and David’s relationship was homosexual in nature. I dislike commenting on this, but I have to say that I think that is the grid of those who would seek to denigrate the holy love of these men and advance their own agenda in the process. Clearly, the context of this chapter is death. Anyone who has experienced the loss of loved ones, as I have, knows that this love, which springs from the context of imminent death, transcends sexual love. While the Scriptures are very frank and open about the fact that David had sexual flirtations, the love that this chapter is speaking of is holy love.

### Summary Reflections On Jonathan’s Love

#### 1. It is Teachable: “Far from it, you shall not die!”

Jonathan feels free to express his feelings, but he is not bound by them. Initially, he does not see what David sees, but he is willing to listen and learn because he loves his friend. The first thing we need when we are hurting is someone who is willing to listen to our point of view.

#### 2. It is Available: “Whatever your soul says, thus I shall do for you.”

Love makes itself available to serve others. It is Jonathan’s love for David that enables him to go into hiding, thus allowing Jonathan to sit at his place and view life from his perspective. We should not try to change others. Love listens to their story and takes their journey with them. It is this kind of love that knits us together in the Body of Christ.

#### 3. It is Truthful: “The LORD, the God of Israel, be witness...shall I not...make it known to you?”

Love does not hold back the truth. It does not cover over evil — that is not love — but rather exposes it.

#### 4. It is Unconditional in its Commitment: “If I am still alive...”

Love does not hold back from commitment. It is not blind. It counts the cost and pays what is demanded. Here, Jonathan discovers that his love for David may cost him his life, so he asks David not to withhold his loyal-love from his household after he has gone. What is so powerful about Jonathan’s love for David that makes it transcend everything else in life? It is the fact that David as the Messianic King was anointed with the Holy Spirit. His office raised the love of these friends to a higher level. Jonathan saw not just David, but the whole house of his friend up to the Messiah himself. In order to truly love, people have to be challenged with a cause that is bigger than themselves. This is why Jonathan lets go of everything in order to serve David.

#### 5. It is Expressive: “Jonathan made David vow again because of his love for him, because he loved him as he loved his own soul.”

Once Jonathan knows that his days are numbered, he relishes the memories he has of his friend. This is what happens when a sentence of death invades a home. People start appreciating and loving one another, reliving the memories, going through the photo albums.

It is fascinating to me that in the Jesus story, people fall in love with the new David the same way they fell in love with the David of old. They gave up their homes and their occupations to become part of something bigger than themselves in the work of Christ’s kingdom on earth. How hard Jesus had to work to convince his disciples that he would die. Like Jonathan, they were a bit naive. When they finally grasped it as the New Covenant was enacted in that Upper Room, they

gave free rein to their deep emotions of love. Peter took on the role of Jonathan, protesting, "I'm willing to die for you. I'll take your place." But the gospel story takes a different turn. This new David will not permit Jonathan to die for him. He becomes our Jonathan and dies for us, taking our place so that we could have his stage! So moved were the disciples by this expression of divine love that they in turn began to give up their lives for the sake of others. And this story lives on down through the generations.

To conclude our time together this morning, I have asked one of our own Jonathans, Connie David, who lost her husband to cancer last year, to read the poem which she wrote following Art's death:

## FOR WHOM THE LORD LOVES

*He disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.* (Hebrews 12:10b-11).

My heart grew cold in fear as you aged before my eyes  
haggard, weakened with pain  
no sleep, no relief - caught in a vise.  
This is too big, too hard  
I cried to the Lord.  
First my father, now my husband  
What are You doing?  
*Trust Me my child. Be still.*

The doctors sang their litany  
We're sorry, so very sorry.  
My husband is dying.  
Where are You, God?  
*I'm here my child, you can see Me in your beloved's face.*

Oh, Art - you were brave, trusting  
Accepting every blow as from the Father's hand.  
God made you ready  
I was numb  
You have the easier job.  
I know, you smiled.  
Your face radiated Christ's love as you  
prepared for heaven with grace.  
Pure love flowed through  
People flocked to your side  
learning, marveling.  
How will I live without him God?  
he is my rock.  
*I am your rock, my child. Be still.*

But Lord -  
Art taught me everything  
how to laugh  
how to trust  
how to die  
*And Who taught him?*  
*Trust me my child. Be still.*

You were meant for the outdoors  
plaid wool shirt, chain saw in hand  
huge smile, quick step  
I feel God's nearness in the mountains, you said  
His beauty takes my breath away.

What are the mountains in heaven like  
my darling?  
Does the water flow as crystal clear as  
the spring at Timbercreek?  
Does God have trees for you to chop down?  
houses to frame  
things to build and fix?  
Is everything so perfect there is nothing to repair?

Questions more than answers  
flood through my sorrowful tears  
But the answer is a Person  
comforting my fears.

Knowing You my Jesus  
is worth the heavy cost  
Your perfect love in Your good time  
will restore this loss.

While I'm waiting  
I'll be still.

Connie David  
December 14, 1993

Jonathan's love is relived with every announcement of death. As a pastor, I feel greatly privileged to see this kind of love at work here in our congregation. As the psalmist has so beautifully put it,

*Passing through the valley of Baca (weeping),  
They make it a spring,  
The early rain also covers it with blessings.  
They go from strength to strength,  
Every one of them appears before God in Zion.* (Ps 84:6-7)

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