



FROM YOUTH TO MANHOOD

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

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1 Samuel 20:24-42
Ninth Message
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The lack of mature men is part of the crisis we face today in society. The popular television show "Home Improvement" portrays Tim Taylor, the classic male figure of the '90's. He is good looking, cute, and extremely funny. But he has a serious problem: He is still a child; he has never grown up. He is inept at common household skills, and he is irresponsible and unreliable with commitments. He is so afraid of confrontation he will compromise the truth to keep the peace. His only consolation resides in his faceless neighbor, Wilson, who freely dispenses wisdom across the fence. But then, when the newly motivated hero tries to apply wisdom, he is so gauche that everything ends up in disaster. Who is this man of the 1990's? He is a fool in everyone's court. An audience at work laughs at him; his buddy Al feels put down by him; his wife puts up with him; his children manipulate him. But it doesn't matter, we say, because he makes us laugh. The tragedy is, we're laughing at ourselves. I want to say to this hero, "Grow up, Tim!"

No wonder many of today's recovery groups use the words "adult children of..." to describe themselves. Even in adult life, people are still operating on the survival skills that got them through their traumatic childhood. They are trying to get at the root of their behavior, to expose it and confront it and learn to grow up. The apostles never settled for immaturity in any realm of life. Paul often rebuked young Christians for immature, childlike behavior. It's time we grew up.

In our text this morning on the life of David we will discover what growing up is all about. Two key players in this story from 1 Samuel 20, Jonathan and David, leave behind their youth and graduate into manhood, with all that that entails. In his youthful naiveté, Jonathan thought he could maintain loyalty both to his father Saul, the displaced king, and to his friend David, the newly anointed king. At the first sign of any dissonance between the two, Jonathan's response was to become a placater, a peacemaker. He felt responsible to keep everyone happy because he loved all the players. Many of us live that way. Our self-appointed task in life is to maintain peace and keep everyone happy. But trying to serve competing loyalties only creates more tension. Many a young bride has discovered this as she sought to design her wedding plans to please both her mother and mother-in-law. So Jonathan will learn that as his loyalties begin to conflict, maintaining peace is beyond his powers.

All of this begins to unfold at a family feast, as we will see today in the second half of the account in 1 Samuel 20.

I. Blowing Up the Family Feast: Jonathan Becomes A Man (20:24-34)

(a) The Table Is Set (20:24-27)

So David hid in the field; and when the new moon came, the king sat down to eat food. And the king sat on his seat as usual, the seat by the wall; then Jonathan rose up and Abner sat down by Saul's side, but David's place was **empty**. Nevertheless Saul did not speak anything that day, for he thought, "It is an accident, he is **not clean**, surely he is **not clean**." And it came about the next day, the second day of the new moon, that David's place was **empty**; so Saul said to Jonathan his son, "Why has the son of Jesse not come to the meal, either yesterday or today?" (NASB)

Family feasts are excellent opportunities to discover the hidden feelings people have towards one another. On the surface, things might appear normal and friendly, but a seemingly insignificant incident can set off a volcano of emotions. Have you ever attended a family gathering, hoping to enjoy a relaxed time with food and fellowship, but to your amazement discovered that others had personal agendas you knew nothing about? So it is here at this feast in Saul's house. David, a master at getting at the truth, knows this in advance, and so he uses the occasion of this family feast to uncover Saul's hidden emotions before the eyes of Jonathan. Jesus, too, was a master at cutting through hypocrisy and getting at the truth. He loved to go to feasts and uncover the evil intentions of men.

At first, everything at the dinner seems normal. Saul takes his *usual* seat (opposite the wall that is riddled with spear holes!). Then, as Saul's right hand man, Abner, arrives, Jonathan rises in honor to give the seat of preference to his father's general. The hierarchical order is carefully followed. First, there is Saul; then the crown prince, Jonathan; then, Abner; and finally, David. Notice the contrast: Saul, who doesn't want to lose his throne, and Abner, who with his permanent appointment doesn't want to lose his influence, are both *seated*; while Jonathan stands between them; in David's absence, his place is empty.

Initially, Saul is able to maintain his cool. Suppressing his anger over David's absence for one evening at least, he reasons to himself "*He is unclean, surely he is unclean.*" But the thought reverberates deeper and deeper inside him, betraying the fact that he can't let go of the reality that David is absent. Interestingly, it is David's conscience that is "clean," while Saul, with his murderous intentions, is sitting in the midst of his "*uncleanness*". The same issue surfaced in the gospels when Jesus was accused by the Pharisees of being *unclean*, because he had failed to wash. But Jesus turned the tables on them, accusing them of being *unclean*, because they had murder in their hearts. (Mark 7:5, 21). By the second evening, Saul is unable to hold his emotions in check any longer. He blurts out the angry question to his son, "Why has the son of Jesse not come to the meal?" At this point the king can't even bring himself

to utter David's name.

Jonathan, having been well rehearsed by David, now lights the fuse.

(b) The Fuse Is Lit (20:28-29)

Jonathan then answered Saul, "David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem, for he said, 'Please let me go, since our family has a sacrifice in the city, and my **brother** has commanded me to attend. And now, if I have found favor in your sight, please let me get away (lit. *escape*) that I may see my **brothers**.' For this reason he has not come to the table of king."

As we have already seen, every word in Jonathan's response is designed to provoke Saul's emotions. He even adds a few choice words of his own. The phrase "*If I have found favor in your sight*" is crafted to provoke Saul's jealousy. David's words "*My brother has commanded me to attend*" imply that his brothers have more authority over him than the king. Then Jonathan attributes to David the words "*let me escape*" (to Bethlehem). That is why David has not come to the *table of the king*. Jonathan is learning to become a man. Rather than allowing his father to use a dinner party to advance his cause, Jonathan makes a preemptive strike and uses the occasion to expose Saul's evil motives. Real men don't stand by while the powerful plot evil.

So the fuse is lit...and Saul explodes.

(c) The King Explodes (20:30-34)

Then Saul's **anger** burned against Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not **know** that you are choosing the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Therefore now, send and bring him to me, for he must surely **die**." But Jonathan answered Saul his father and said to him, "**Why** should he be put to **death**? **What** has he done?" Then Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him down; so Jonathan **knew** that his father had decided to put David to **death**. Then Jonathan **arose** from the table in **fierce anger**, and did not eat food on the second day of the new moon, for he was **grieved** over David because his father had dishonored him.

With the first words out of his mouth, Saul disowns Jonathan, calling him a bastard. For Saul, the issue is quite clear: Jonathan could not maintain his status as his son while he maintained loyalty to *that* son of Jesse. Saul reasons that if David has a future, Jonathan would not. He is saying, in effect, "I'm doing all this for you, for your future, you fool!"

At this point, Jonathan steps up to the plate and asks *the* question: "*Why should he be put to death? What has he done?*" Jonathan doesn't react to abuse with direct force; he unravels it with penetrating questions. This was the very question David asked of Jonathan in verse 1: "What have I done? What is my iniquity?" Now Jonathan is willing to stand in David's place and become his advocate. This is the center-line (verse 32) of the scene; here the drama turns.

Jonathan's searching questions bring Saul's anger to the boiling point. He is so angry he can't even speak. He hurls

his spear, that famous, impotent spear (an apt symbol of his leadership), at his own son. As the spear hurls past him into the wall, Jonathan finally comes to see things from David's point of view. Saul is incorrigible. Death is irrevocable.

Last year, I attended a party at which one individual had a hidden agenda. I went there on behalf of my daughter, whom I felt was caught in an abusive situation. Before long, that controlling, angry individual took over. After a while, I realized that I had to say something. I asked two questions — and then came the spear. In his response, this individual revealed for all to see what he had long been doing privately. When I got home, my daughter hugged me and said, "Daddy, I love you." Love is willing to take the other's place and see life from his point of view. And sometimes, as we have seen, this takes blowing up a party.

Jonathan now takes his stand.

(d) Jonathan Takes His Stand as a Man (20:34)

What do you do with a father who has disowned you in both speech and action? Jonathan, who rose up at the beginning of the feast to honor his father's general, now rises up in fierce anger, breaking fellowship with Saul, because his father has dishonored David. The break in relationship between father and son is now completed, while the loyalty between David and Jonathan is perfected.

Becoming an adult means giving up trying to serve competing loyalties. Serving Christ is a liberating, exhilarating calling. No longer will you have to labor under the burden of competing loyalties. Making peace is no longer your goal. Being at peace while serving the one Master is your goal now that you are free to serve but one.

Having just graduated, Jonathan leaves the family party and goes out to the field to fulfill his commitment to David..

II. An Archery Lesson: David Becomes A Man (20:35-42)

(a) The Method of the Arrows (20:18-24)

Jonathan's task is to communicate faithfully what he knows about Saul's intentions for death. The method that he and David selected in advance for their secret communication was the symbol of archery, where arrows would be sought after by a youth. This was explained earlier in this chapter, in verses 18-23:

Then Jonathan said to him, "Tomorrow is the new moon, and you will be missed because your seat will be empty. When you have stayed for three days, you shall go down quickly and come to the place where you hid yourself on that eventful day, and you shall remain by the stone Ezel. And I will shoot three **arrows** to the side, as though I shot at a target. And behold, I will send the **youth**, saying, 'Go, find the **arrows**.' If I specifically say to the **youth**, 'Behold, the **arrows** are on this side of you, get them,' then come; for there is safety for you and no harm, as the **LORD** lives. But if I say to the **youth**, 'Behold, the **arrows** are beyond you,' go, for the **LORD** has **sent** you away. As for the agreement of which you and I have spoken, behold, **the LORD is between you and me forever**."

In Hebrew, the verb "to shoot" has the same root as the

verb “to teach.” (The noun form of the word is “Torah.”) The Hebrews regarded teaching as anything but random and casual. To them, teaching was to be specific and directive (like shooting an arrow at a target) and penetrating (it should go deep). Thus, through the symbol of archery, Jonathan acts out the role of spiritual director for David, communicating with him directly but secretly.

Notice that Jonathan has changed from being the naive peacemaker to being the spiritual director, imparting a vision for David that presses home the deep implications of the truth.

(b) The Message in the Arrows (20:35-40)

Now it came about in the morning that Jonathan went out into the **field** for the appointment with David, and a little **youth** was with him. And he said to his **youth**, “Run, find now the **arrows** which I am about to shoot.” As the **youth** was running, he shot an arrow past him. When the **youth** reached the place of the arrow which Jonathan had shot, Jonathan called after the **youth**, and said, “Is not the **arrow** beyond you?” And Jonathan called after the **youth**, “Hurry, be quick, do not stay!” And Jonathan’s **youth** picked up the arrow and came to his master. But the **youth** did not **know** anything; only Jonathan and David **knew** about the matter. Then Jonathan gave his **weapons** to his youth and said to him, “Go, bring them to the **city**.”

When David hears Jonathan’s words “*Is not the arrow beyond you?*” he learns that his destiny lies down the uncertain road of exile. The cry, “Hurry, be quick, do not stay!” conveys that the situation is extremely dangerous. David must depart without further delay. Then comes the center-line: “*But the youth did not know anything; only Jonathan and David knew about the matter.*” The text is a whirl of activity and movement, but the stillness of this verse, the center-line, speaks volumes. Here the innocence of youth gives way to the manhood of weighty revelation. At last, Jonathan is united with David in his full understanding of Saul’s intent on death.

“*Then Jonathan gave his weapons to the youth.*” Again, as he did in chapter 18, Jonathan strips before David, thereby renouncing his right to the throne. Jonathan adds, “*Go take them to the city,*” meaning, “David, go to your destiny.” Purified by his stay in the wilderness, David will one day return as king to this city.

All that is left for the friends is a last good-bye.

(c) The Impact of the Arrows

When the **youth was gone**, David rose from the south side and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed three times. And they kissed each other and wept together, but David more. And Jonathan said to David, “Go in safety (*shalom* - peace), inasmuch as we have sworn to each other in the name of the **LORD**, saying, ‘The **LORD will be between me and you**, and between my descendants and your descendants forever.’” Then he rose and departed, while Jonathan went into the **city**.

Notice the plaintive message of verse 41: “*When the youth was gone.*” The time of innocence is over. These two youths, Jonathan and David, have become men. David realizes that Jonathan is willing to die for him, while Jonathan realizes that David must be banished to the wilderness. Yet, in this moment of painful parting, they hold on

to the one thing that is eternal, their covenantal love and loyalty: “*The LORD will be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants forever.*” Each will go his chosen, separate way. Ironically, the one banished to the wilderness will find safety, while the one consigned to the city will find death.

This poignant scene will be played out again in the Upper Room as the disciples learn that their King David must die. There, in the inauguration of the new covenant, love is born as the bread is broken and the wine is poured: The Lord will be in their midst forever. The switch in the story is that Jesus so loves the disciples, he becomes the Jonathan who will die for them, while they take the Messiah’s stage. Oh, the enormity of it. Christ died for us that we may get to play his role in the Kingdom.

Reflecting on these two scenes, George Herbert (1593-1671) penned these lines in *The Church Porch*:

*Thy friend put in thy bosom: wear his eyes
Still in thy heart, that he may see what’s there.
If cause require, thou art his sacrifice;
Thy drops of blood must pay down all his fear:
But love is lost; the way of friendship’s gone,
Though David had his Jonathan, Christ his John.*

As we conclude this morning, I have four reflections I want to share with you about growing up.

III. Reflections On Growing Up

1. Maturity Demands Undivided Loyalty *One God, One Loyalty (Deut 6:4-5)*

Being a Christian demands undivided loyalty to Jesus Christ. The great Shema of Deuteronomy 6 declares: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” To be a man means that we no longer can serve competing loyalties. We will be holding a baptism later this afternoon, and many from this congregation will be buried in the water to be raised, connected only to Christ, freed from all competing loyalties. All competing ties, with parents, mothers, bosses, coaches, will be severed. This is freedom indeed. No longer will you feel constrained to keep the peace at any cost. No longer will you feel obligated to get people to like each other.

Just before Thanksgiving last year, I noticed that one of my friends seemed depressed. She told me that she was not looking forward to the feast because every time she went home she had to put up with verbal abuse from her father. I told her she did not have to go home and face that anymore. As a Christian, she had a new family in Christ. If God was prompting her to go home, she should do so, but only on the basis that she now had different loyalties. She had been linked to Christ.

As I look at Jonathan’s single-mindedness and devotion, my prayer is, “O Lord, make me like Jonathan: willing to be a bastard for Christ’s sake, renouncing my earthly citizenship, that I might follow Christ with my whole heart” (Phil 3:2-8).

2. Maturity Demands Truth over Peace *Be Not Placaters by Truth Tellers*

Maturity demands we make truth, not peace, our primary goal. This is the correct order, as James points out, "The wisdom from above is *first* pure, *then* peaceable." We are tempted to reverse these, aren't we? We want peace first, and then truth. But if we are to be a mature people we can't stand by passively when people seek to further their evil agendas. Rather, we must act to uncover and expose evil intentions. Well crafted questions unravel abusive behavior. We can't always maintain the peace, with happy homes and neat, tranquil workplaces. We have to confront with the truth. And things will often get worse before they improve. This is what caused Jonathan to make a preemptive strike at the meal, and what moved Christ to blow up several parties with his questions. Speaking the truth in love. This is what will help us grow up, as Paul says in Ephesians: "Speaking the truth in love we grow up in all aspects into Him."

3. Maturity Demands Letting Go

"Behold, the arrows are beyond you"

Becoming adults means we don't possess people, we direct them. Children and friends alike, we must give them up, as Jonathan did with his closest friendship. This is what we must do so that each person can serve God where he or she is called. And growing up means being faithful to serve in whatever sphere we are called. Jonathan was called to the city, to face certain death, while David, who would find his destiny in a wilderness, was called to be the future leader.

I keep a photograph on my desk of the first ten men I had a Bible study with here in this church. We loved each other. We traveled to many places, at home and abroad, together. Five of them are gone now. The arrow flew beyond them, and they had to leave, to Oregon, Michigan, Coeur d'Alene, Pleasanton, and Romania. Their leaving was hard for me, and especially so the one who would be called to Romania. During communion at his wedding ceremony there, we decided that the Americans would serve the Ro-

manians, while the Romanians would serve us. We set a table, with the bread and wine, and two Bibles, one in English, the other in Romanian. When my turn to serve came, I looked up and there, across the table from me, was Jim Foster, the new Romanian son. That was the day we became men. We had to let go even in the tears. He was called there, I am called to be here. Maturity means letting go.

4. Maturity Means Finding God

"The LORD will be between me and you"

And what is out there in the wilderness? Nothing but God. That was why Jonathan directed David to the Lord. A friend of mine called this text "Alone in the knowledge of the Lord." There is something about the kingdom of God that each person must be established in some degree of isolation before he or she can become useful. We have the book of Psalms today because there, in the wilderness to which he was banished, David learned to pray.

A couple of evenings ago, Emily and I visited our elder, Don Gruelle, in the hospital. His new kidney is being rejected by his body and he is undergoing extensive anti-rejection treatment. He told me he was learning something new about God. He had known God, the Creator of the universe, he said, but he always had a hard time comprehending that the Creator loved him personally. His recent experiences, however, had taught him of that great love. By his bedside he had a paper setting out every verse in the book of Psalms that applied to him personally. He had gone through the entire Psalter and typed the verses. As he read them to us, he kept saying, "This is me." "This is me." When he read the words of Psalm 50:1, "The Mighty One, God, the LORD, has spoken," he began to weep with joy. Here is a man who is cast in the wilderness, pressed up against the breast of God.

That is where God is to be found, and that is what David will learn.

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