

A COVENANT OF LOVE

1 Samuel 17:55-18:6

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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“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” (1 Sam (11:1)).

Some time ago I saw an interview with a professional golfer who had won his first U. S. Open. He was talking about how this one event had changed his life forever. Suddenly he was known by thousands of people and the product endorsements were rolling in. At the same time, he found his privacy slipping away, and his life taking a course all its own.

David’s victory over Goliath was like this, only more so. By removing this threat to the nation and setting such a remarkable example of valor, the shepherd youth captured the nation’s heart with one stone’s throw. No longer would he enjoy quiet nights tending the sheep; David’s pasture would be growing rapidly, bringing both opportunity and danger, joy and sorrow. As is so often the case for those who achieve sudden fame, David found success quite a bit harder to swallow than hardship. David’s great victory did not lead him beside still waters, but sent him swinging into the rapids of intrigue and deceit.

One immediate result of David’s triumph, however, was that it got him into contact with Jonathan, King Saul’s son and heir apparent to the throne. Jonathan was one of those rare individuals who stand out in his or her own time. As a fully grown man, Jonathan was quite a bit older than the teenage youth, and as a great hero to the nation he may have been a personal hero to David. Jonathan was a man of courage and vision, whose bold leadership and faith had previously

saved the nation (1 Sam. 14:1-23). Perhaps the best result for David of his victory over Goliath was that he not only got to meet Jonathan but that Jonathan “loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:3) and entered with David into a covenant league of friendship and brotherly love.

SAUL’S PUZZLING QUERY

Before telling us about Jonathan’s love for David, the Bible first reveals a conversation between Saul and his calculating lieutenant, Abner. 1 Samuel 17:55 takes us back before David’s victory, as David was going forth from Saul to meet the Philistine. King Saul “said to Abner, the commander of the army, ‘Abner, whose son is this youth?’” (1 Sam. 17:55-58).

Liberal scholars have argued that Saul’s question represents a “discrepancy” in the Bible, presenting an second tradition “concerning David’s debut at court.”¹ They point out that another passage, 1 Samuel 16:18, presents Saul earlier learning of David and his family background, prior to his summon to play the lyre. Here, they argue, we have an alternative version about how David first came to Saul’s court. The problem with this approach is not only its low view of biblical inspiration but that this reading is not the best understanding of Saul’s question to Abner. Saul did not ask Abner who David was, since David had just presented himself to the king. He asked “whose son is this youth?”

Saul had promised high rank to the man who slew the giant Goliath, along with marriage to his daughter, so it is understandable that he would inquire about David’s family background and social status. What was David’s pedigree and family upbringing? Moreover, if David succeeded, Saul’s promised reward would involve David joining the king’s court on a permanent basis. This is, in fact, precisely what Saul arranged after David’s life-changing victory. 1 Samuel 18:2 says that “Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house.” Moreover, part of Saul’s promised reward was an exemption from taxes for the victor’s whole family.

¹ R. P. Gordon, cited by David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 470.

All this would require some arrangements with David's father, and it is understandable that Saul could not remember who this was.

Since Abner did not know the answer to Saul's questions, he fetched David to stand before the king. The scene may have been both startling and amusing since the blood-splattered David was holding Goliath's great head in his hand. Saul offered no word of thanks or praise but only the question, "Whose son are you, young man?" David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite" (1 Sam. 17:58).

One point in showing this "backstage" conversation between Saul and Abner is to contrast the king's calculating spirit with the warm spiritual fervor of his son, Jonathan. 1 Samuel, like the Bible's historical narratives in general, often makes a point by means of comparison and contrast. Instead of thanks and a joyful embrace for David, and blinded by his lack of faith, Saul sizes David up, looking upon the hero as little more than a piece on a chess board. How different was his son, whose heart burned with a fervent faith, a love for God's people, and a zeal for the Lord's glory. Jonathan's soul, rejoicing in David's victory over Israel's enemy, whom he and Saul's other champions had trembled to face, leapt up at the sight of young David and saw not a political asset or threat but a fellow believer who was worthy of his highest love and devotion.

JONATHAN'S SHINING SPIRIT

In considering Jonathan's remarkable expression of love for David, we should examine both his attitude and his actions. Considering his attitude, we can first observe the spiritual priorities that governed Jonathan's response. 1 Samuel 18:1 says that "as soon as [David] had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."

There are several reasons why this was a most unlikely response from someone in Jonathan's position. Saul's son stood in the second position of the kingdom as the royal prince, having well earned his stature and the admiration of the people through his prior faith and valor. Moreover, he and David were of different ages, from different tribes and backgrounds, and with different past experiences. Jonathan would have understandable reasons for resentment and

jealousy towards David's sudden rise. In short, while David had much to gain, Jonathan had much to lose. In such situations, it is common for a Jonathan subtly to undermine and criticize a David, make things difficult for him, turn him a cold shoulder, or lead him astray. Yet Jonathan's attitude towards David was completely different from what we might expect. Instead of resenting David, he "loved him as his own soul." Instead of standing aloof from the upstart, his soul "was knit to the soul of David" (1 Sam. 18:1). Undoubtedly, Jonathan was simply responding to the evident grace in David's conduct. Six times in this chapter we read that someone loves David. But Jonathan's response to David's success revealed the prince's commitment to spiritual principles and values instead of worldly and self-serving priorities.

In particular, it is evident that Jonathan's passion was given to the well-being of God's people and the upholding of God's honor. He had not been fighting in Saul's army to gain a reputation for himself or to win riches and honor. Jonathan was burdened for Israel and for Israel's Lord. This had been the case in the earlier passage where Jonathan's exploits were highlighted. While Saul's erratic commands had hindered Israel's soldiers, and when Saul took credit for a victory Jonathan's faith had won, his virtuous son showed no concern for these matters. He remained faithful to his duty and freely gave himself in service to the cause that he loved. Even when Saul's foolish vow had threatened Jonathan's life (1 Sam. 14:43-45), so that the soldiers rose up in defense of Saul's son, Jonathan himself did not oppose his father's will.

The lesson is that envy, resentment, and hatred spring from worldly and selfish priorities, whereas as godly love springs from a concern for the kingdom of God and his gospel. Christians whose concern is for the glory of Christ will not oppose the labors of fellow Christians based on considerations of race, nationality, or economic class. We will avoid a party spirit that divides us from fellow believers, showing concern instead for biblical integrity, holiness, and grace. If our goal is for the lost to be reached with the gospel, we will not much worry ourselves concerning who God blesses to use, so long as God does bless the labors of his church. Rather than envying the gifts and callings of others, like Jonathan we will rejoice over all the gifts

that God gives and our souls will be knit with all others who are working in God's kingdom.

A contrary example will help us to appreciate Jonathan's priorities. On one occasion, Jesus and the disciples went into the region of the Gadarenes, and were there confronted by a man possessed by many demons. This man, who called himself "Legion" for the great number of demons within him, had been a menace to the region and the demons had afflicted him terribly. When Jesus came upon the man and cast out the demons, we would expect the people nearby to rejoice. A soul had been freed from Satan! Instead, the people were upset that Jesus had cast the demons into their herd of swine, and they demanded that the Savior of the world depart from their lands, since they valued money more than their souls (cf. Mk. 5:1-21). In contrast, Jonathan was burdened by no such concerns over his own advancement or petty concerns of any kind. In response to the power of God at work through true and saving faith, his soul rejoiced.

On a similar note, when we consider the bond of friendship that grew between Jonathan and David, there is not much of a natural basis for their close relationship. They were not close in age, background, or experiences. What was their common bond? They were bound together by their faith in the Lord. The reason Jonathan's heart was knit to David was that David embodied the things most precious in his heart. David had stood before the giant in the name of the Lord, determined to silence his blasphemies and eager for Israel to know the truth of God's power. These were themes that stoked the fires of Jonathan's admiration and drew out his love for the shepherd youth.

What we see in Jonathan is nothing less than a man who has been set free from worldly thinking and selfish concerns so as to truly love God and to love others. His treatment of David is a living embodiment of the two great commandments mentioned by Jesus: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10:27). This is what God desires of us, that we live out a chief concern for his glory and work and that we love others before ourselves. Jonathan was able to keep these commandments only because he had given himself over to the Lord and had trusted God to provide for all his own needs. "It is only those

people who, like Jonathan, have given themselves away to something greater than themselves, who possess such freedom to love.”² This is why the New Testament sees genuine love as the summation of our faith, as Paul put it: “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Trusting the Lord to meet his own needs, and offering his life in sacrificial service to God’s kingdom, Jonathan was not longer fettered by the chains of petty selfishness and pride. What a difference it would make in our lives if we were set free from a worldly attitude of greed and envy, trusting God to provide for all that we need and giving our hearts wholly to the cause of God’s kingdom and Christ’s gospel. One result from such a life of God-centered faith would be that we would find ourselves free truly to love one another and to rejoice in the achievements of those around us. Looking on Jonathan’s faith-inspired liberty to give of his soul in love, William Blaikie writes:

Is there anything so beautiful as a beautiful heart? After well-nigh three thousand years, we are still thrilled by the noble character of Jonathan, and well were it for every young man that he shared in some degree his high nobility. Self-seekers and self-pleasers, look at him – and be ashamed.³

JONATHAN’S COVENANT OF LOVE

Jonathan’s attitude inspires us, but we should also consider his actions as well. It is well-observed that love is not ultimately a feeling but an action. Love is a verb: it is something we do and bestow upon others. In this respect, Jonathan’s love for David sets an example we can follow in our love for others.

The love between these men was that of companionship and brotherhood: recent attempts by liberal scholars to paint sexual overtones onto this passage are both perverse and preposterous. There are different kinds of love, with different levels of intensity and different kinds of expression: the love of a man and woman in

² Richard D. Phillips, *The Heart of an Executive* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 81.

³ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 203.

marriage, the love of parents for their children, Christian love between fellow believers, and the love of close friends. While Jonathan's love for David falls into the latter category, his actions inform the love we give to others in every category. In particular, Jonathan was a love that rejoices, a love that gives, and a love that blesses.

The manner in which Jonathan responded to David shows that his love rejoiced in David's faith and achievements. It was "as soon as [David] had finished speaking to Saul," that is, immediately after his slaying of the giant, that "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David" (1 Sam. 18:1). In the prior battles, Jonathan had stood in faith alone (except for his armor-bearer) against Israel's enemies. Now he rejoiced to see someone of like heart; indeed, a man with even greater faith, since Jonathan had not been able to stand against Goliath. It is clear that Jonathan did not feel condemned by David's superiority. Rather, he rejoiced in David's greater faith.

How do we react when someone comes along who exceeds us in ability, faith, or gifts? Do we become sour in spirit and find petty ways to undermine them? The well-regarded English preacher F. B. Meyer realized that he resented the ability and acclaim of G. Campbell Morgan, a like-minded preacher who like Meyer pastored a prominent church in London. Meyer's church was well attended, but Morgan's overflowed. Meyer and Morgan often preached together at conferences, but those who listened eagerly to Morgan's brilliant sermons sometimes were not present when Meyer took the pulpit. A godly pastor, Meyer was disturbed to realize the envy and resentment brewing in his heart for his colleague, and he noted that he had gotten into the habit of pointing out Morgan's flaws and mistakes, while minimizing his gifts and achievements. In response, Meyer determined that he would start praying for God's blessing on the ministry of Campbell Morgan, reasoning that he could not continue to envy a man for whose blessing he prayed. Soon, Meyer could be heard rejoicing in Morgan's preaching. "My did you hear Campbell Morgan preach today!" he would exult. Not only did Meyer's prayer enable him to love his colleague with the gift of rejoicing, but in answer to his prayers God so overflowed Morgan's church that many of the people had no choice but to attend where Meyer preached!

How encouraging it must have been to David to see a high-profile leader and potential enemy like Jonathan rejoicing in his victory! But Jonathan's was not only a love that rejoiced, but also a love that gave. What a remarkable scene it was when Israel's prince and captain approached David after his victory and "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" (1 Sam. 18:4). Some commentators view this as a formal abdication on Jonathan's part, although this is probably reading too much into the incident. Still, Jonathan was knowingly lending his own prestige and giving his endorsement to the only practical rival to his own success. Why would Jonathan do this? S. G. DeGraaf answers: "This deed on his part was an act of faith. Only faith makes us willing to be the lesser. Faith causes us to surrender the rights we pretend to have."⁴ In short, where sin would have made enemies, faith made brothers.

Materially, the military equipment that Jonathan gave to David was of great value, especially since it was no doubt of very high quality. What Jonathan really gave David, however, was the honor of his endorsement before the army. How easy it would have been for the soldiers to respond as David's brothers had (1 Sam. 17:28), who resented being shown up by this young upstart. Some of them, in loyalty to their hero Jonathan, may have resented the supplanting of Saul's son. Others still would have looked for flaws in David and demeaned his overall lack of military experience. But none of this would be possible once Jonathan, the darling of the army, had placed his robe, armor and weapons onto David.

Jonathan's gift to David seems to have been spontaneous, but he must also have appreciated David's predicament. Likewise, we love one another by understanding our vulnerabilities, fears, and weaknesses, and reaching out with help and strength at precisely these points. To those who are discouraged, love gives encouragement. To those who are wayward, love gives kind, biblical counsel. To those who are overworked, love gives understanding and practical help. To those who are broken in suffering, love gives compassion and tears.

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 156.

Jonathan thus declared his personal fidelity to David in friendship, a pledge that he kept to the day of his death, often at considerable risk and cost to himself. Some commentators argue that this covenant possesses the overtones of a political partnership, and we know that King Saul later took this covenant as just such a conspiracy. Jonathan freely gave what he was not obliged to give, yet he must take seriously his pledge of partnership and fidelity once it was given. No doubt, this covenant reflects the extraordinary blessing of God's Spirit on David, as the true anointed king of Israel. Walter Chantry writes of Jonathan's covenant love with David:

The crown prince of Israel made a covenant with the shepherd. He gave his clothing and weapons to David as symbols of his devoted comradeship. One day Jonathan would even express agreement with God's will that David should have the crown intended for him! It was a selfless, sacrificial, loyal love for David that would endure until death. Mutual fidelity was pledged that very day, and it proved to be a most satisfying fellowship to both men for a lifetime.⁵

Jonathan models the way a believer is knit in a bond of covenant faith with Jesus Christ. Saving faith involves not merely assenting to truths regarding Jesus, but includes the gift of our allegiance and the surrender of our will to his sovereign reign. How much more worthy is the Lord Jesus Christ of our covenant fidelity and love than David was, and how much more blessed will our fellowship with him be not merely for this life but for eternity to come.

The passage concludes with a simple statement of David's immediate success in service to Saul, which was in part the result of Jonathan's love blessing his friend: "And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war. And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants" (1 Sam. 18:5). In no small part because of Jonathan's encouragement, endorsement, and on-going loyalty, David was able to succeed in difficult demands. Our love should likewise seek to enable one another in fulfilling the calling that we all share as followers of Christ, as well as to find blessing in the fulfillment of the particular callings God has placed on our lives. Faced with many

⁵ Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007), 37.

challenges in life, what a blessing the love of such friendship is to any of us. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.

For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

WHAT A FRIEND!

Ultimately, we should see Jonathan's love for David as God's special gift to his anointed servant. As such, all Christians, but especially Christian men, should see Jonathan's example as a calling to seek such friendship and even more to give such brotherly love to one another. Chantry writes: "As the trials began, God gave [David] the precious gift of a friend. A faithful friend is a strong defence in adversity, a soothing medicine when one is deeply wounded. Men need friends well chosen from the number who love the Lord. It is clear that Jesus wants to see our love for him worked out in love for the brethren."⁶

Even more important for us is to receive the greatest friendship ever known in this world, the brotherly love of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Jonathan knit his heart to David after witnessing his awesome spectacle of triumphant faith. But Jesus loved us in our weakness, sin, and shame. Jonathan's love for David was remarkable in that a superior surrendered his devotion to a lesser citizen. But Jesus, though God's own Son, has loved us and made himself our servant on the cross, calling us to serve one another in return (Jn. 13:15). Jonathan made a covenant of faithful friendship and loyalty with David. But Jesus accepted from the father a covenant that required the shedding of his own life's blood for our sins. "Greater love has no one than this," Jesus said of his own gift of love, "that someone lays down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). Moreover, just as Jonathan kept his covenant of love for David to the end of his life, after which David was shorn of this precious friendship, John's Gospel tells us that Jesus "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13:1). For Jesus to love us to the end of his life is to bless us with his love forever, since he has

⁶ Chantry, *David*, 37.

conquered death with his power of eternal life. Thus if we accept his covenant of love through faith in him, there will never be a time in all eternity when we may not lean upon his love as it rejoices, gives, and blesses us. Hebrews 7:25 thus states: “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

Finally, while Jonathan stripped himself of royal badges of honor and office, Jesus placed upon us his own righteousness, woven by a life of perfect obedience to God’s law, that we might stand acceptably in the holy sight of God. Matthew Henry comments that “Our Lord Jesus has thus shown his love to us, that he stripped himself to clothe us, emptied himself to enrich us; nay, he did more than Jonathan, he clothed himself with our rags, whereas Jonathan did not put on David’s.”⁷ Placing our sinful rags upon himself, Jesus took our sins away to the cross. Here is the love above all others, as John the apostle declared: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10-11). If David rejoiced in Jonathan’s love with great blessing, how much more ought our hearts to be knit to Jesus in response to his covenant love for us.

As David’s victory over Goliath changed his life, so also our receipt fo victory over sin through faith in Christ will be the day that changes our lives forever. Receiving Christ's forgiveness through faith in his blood, we also gain his love that is stronger than death and secures for us his gift of eternal life.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:296