

# The Covenant

*Series on 1 Samuel*

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Do take your Bibles and turn with me to 1 Samuel 20. If there is one word that we need to take out of a kind of mental drawer that we put it in and where it lies wrapped up in theological jargon and display it very visibly and prominently in our life so that wherever we are, wherever we're going out or coming in, wherever we meet obstacles or hurdles, that word is there to remind us of certainties in the midst of uncertainty and security in the midst of insecurity, I wonder if you could guess what that word might be? Well, just so that you don't shout out, you haven't started doing that yet but I might get you there one day. I'm thinking of the word "covenant." The word covenant which, okay, isn't the best introduction to a sermon that you've heard. It wasn't particularly humorous this morning. It wasn't grabbing your attention. It didn't immediately connect with your day job or your night terrors or your past failures or your future fears but there it is. There's the word that I want to talk about today because that's what this section of the Bible is all about. This is the word "covenant." What I want to say is that when your life is cast into uncertainty and when there is insecurity and when things start rearing their ugly head and you don't really know where the center of gravity is in your life and it seems as if all the parts are beginning to fall apart, you need to understand what covenant stands for because that's where you'll retreat to. That's where you'll go to in those times.

Now, of course, this is a story, isn't it, about a human covenant between 2 people. In other words, it's a covenant of friendship, you might say. Certainly in the Bible it represents one of the great friendships of the Bible. Two people who looked after each other's interests and who were able to support one another in a whole variety of levels. That's a very significant thing. The Bible says a lot about human friendship. Human friendship is a treasure. Hard to come by. We don't often in our lives find people that we can actually be ourselves with or be honest with or have the courage to be honest back. That's often where the rubber hits the road.

But this is not a kind of sentimental reflection on human friendship, good though that is and it has a lot to teach us about that. This is nonetheless, I think, teaching us something of the underlying method of thinking which is going to shape David's later views of the covenant relationship that exists between people and God. So without diminishing in any way their relationship, do you notice this lies at the very heart of the passage? For example, if you look at verse 8, David says, "Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for

you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you." You have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you. There's the beginning of their friendship formalized in the shape of a covenant. He's still talking in those terms. He's using covenantal language in verses 12 through 17 where they talk about the provisions and the oaths of the covenant. He uses the same language in verse 23, "And as for the matter of which you and I have spoken, behold, the LORD is between you and me." The Lord is between me and you forever. Then in verse 42, it winds up the whole chapter, again, reflecting on the covenant, "Then Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, "The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.'""

So what do we see about a covenant? A covenant here is obviously an interpersonal relationship. It has a vertical dimension in that God is involved in the relationship; it's between us and the Lord. It's interpersonal and obviously makes provision for a kind of formalizing of the relationship. That's a significant part of it. It's a formal relationship between a superior in this case, Jonathan, who is the crown prince and an inferior, David, who has no particular standing as yet in the kingdom. But it also makes enough room not just for a kind of legal or formal kind of relationship but enough room for the kind of emotional outpourings that you find later on in the chapter where these 2 men connect emotionally. There is this emotional attachment. They understand what each other are going through and they're not afraid to recognize that in their relationship of friendship that they have.

But here's what I want us to learn from their relationship and from what their relationship teaches us about our relationship with God and hopefully what our relationship could be with some other people that God may send into our lives to have this kind of relationship with. I want to say that there is security here, loyalty here, and there's peace here in this covenant relationship. First of all, there's security. You see, the last thing that David is feeling at the beginning of this chapter is secure. It seems as if all hell is out to get him. The opening words tell you that David has fled. In fact, that's really what's being said in chapter 19. David is on the run. He is an outcast. He is an outlaw. He is under the death sentence. The king and the king's hitmen are looking for him. Life is not easy for David at this point in his experience.

There is a lot that's happened since Jonathan last saw his father. Jonathan appears in verse 1 and a lot has happened since Jonathan last saw his father. Last time Jonathan saw his father, his father had conspired with his cabinet to kill David and Jonathan had interceded with his father and pleaded David's case and his father apparently had relented and with his hand on the Bible, had sworn an oath to Almighty God that he wouldn't harm a hair on David's head. Jonathan then went off on his tour of duty or whatever and so his memory as he thinks back to what has happened is: David is off the hook now. David is okay now. David has accepted Jonathan's word for that.

So there is a lot that has happened since Jonathan last saw his father and there's a lot that's happened since David last saw Jonathan for in Jonathan's absence, David has gone back to court, started playing his lyre or whatever you do with a lyre in order to console

King Saul and King Saul has on 2 occasions, this time it isn't just that he is being depressed or he is kind of taking his frustration out on the nearest person but this time he has actually deliberately aimed with his night sights, his javelin in David's direction. David knows for sure now. He knows for sure that Saul is against him. Then that's followed up by 3 hit squads sent to his home, then to where Samuel lives. It winds up at the end of chapter 19 with Saul himself coming to eliminate David himself.

Now, David's been protected throughout all of this. But we read in chapter 20, verse 1, now that he's on the run, again, he's running from Saul. He fled from Saul and it's at this point, I think, that we take up our story. Well, what does David do when everything is going against him? And the answer of the chapter is: he goes looking for Jonathan. Actually, he goes back into enemy territory. He risks his life to find Jonathan again. Why does he want to find Jonathan? Well, apparently there are all kinds of questions bubbling in his mind. Things, in many ways, you say, "Well, David, you know the answer to these questions." But you know, sometimes in our lives, we need a friend to actually tell us what we already know in order to put perspective back into our lives. Have you ever found that? Do you need someone to tell you what you already know but getting it from someone else helps to put things back into perspective.

Because David is at a loss for words. His history is and we know this from reading the story that he's actually been innocent of any crime. He hasn't done anything to merit the hostility of Saul. Now, if you've been reading the story, you may say to me, "Well, that's a bit disingenuous because actually David knows that he's been anointed by Samuel," but the rejoinder to that is that nobody else knows that. Saul doesn't know that. Jonathan doesn't know that and at no point has David ever nor will he ever during Saul's lifetime made a play for the throne. Rather, David has been absolutely devoted, intentionally committed to serving the Lord's anointed. Even though Saul is a man that you and I wouldn't invite for a barbecue, nonetheless he has been the anointed of God and David recognizes that. He recognizes Saul as the Lord's anointed so he will not threaten the reign of Saul and you can see that even in the way he approaches Jonathan here. It says that he came before Jonathan in verse 1. In other words, he comes as a subject before the crown prince. In fact, twice in verse 7 and 8 he calls himself Jonathan's servant. He has never ceased to be this, a loyal subject and servant of the Saulite dynasty.

So he comes asking his questions. "What have I done? What is my guilt? What is my sin before your father that he seeks my life?" He has questions. Have you ever been in a position in your life where you have a whole series of questions going on? Things are happening in your life and you wonder why are these happening? Why are these things happening to me? Have you ever been in that position? Is there somewhere you can go in days like that where you can pour out your questions? Do you have a friend that you can speak to in days like that? Is there a safe place to go and a safe person to speak to on days like that? Above all, do you know the place that you can go in days like that? The place then you can go and pour out your soul? Later on, David is going to take us to that place when he writes so many of our Psalms that are in the Bible and in those Psalms he talks about pouring out his soul to God. He goes to God with his questions. He goes to God with his frustrations, even his anger when he pours out his questions to God.

Well, as you read the story, you discover that Jonathan has not known, hasn't heard what's been happening to David. He's been away. In those days, there were no cell phones so you couldn't phone and tell somebody what was going on. Probably no newspapers so you couldn't read in the newspaper if there had been one or 2 attempts on the life of David. He hadn't heard any of this stuff so he hears about it from David, as it were, from the horse's mouth. So Jonathan, he doesn't really believe it. The last time he saw his dad, his dad had made a solemn oath to Almighty God that he wouldn't hurt David and so Jonathan doesn't really believe it to begin with. He is concerned that maybe David has taken this all too much to heart.

Interestingly that Jonathan should take his father's part here. Maybe it's that kind of softness, that niceness that sometimes prevents somebody from seeing a harsh reality. Some of us are so nice that we're absolutely useless when it comes to making tough decisions. When we see evil in someone, we're hesitant to actually deal with evil in someone because we'd rather think the best than face the facts. Maybe Jonathan is a bit like that. He's not perfect. No human relationship is. No human person is perfect.

So David reinforces the seriousness of it in verse 3, he tells him, "Look, I'm a step away from death," he says. "I feel as if death is following me, that I'm only ever one step ahead of it. These powers that are out to destroy me are just there. I can't hesitate or stop or be calm at any point in my life because at any moment it's going to strike me." That's the way David was feeling. Have you ever felt you were just a step away from destruction? A step away from despair? A step away from losing it altogether? A step away from death? David felt like that.

So he comes to Jonathan. Now I ask you, what is it that gives him the boldness, the courage, to go to the son of the man who is out to destroy him? To go to the crown prince and heir apparent of the throne when you're the one, you're the one God wants to have the throne and you are the biggest threat to the throne and dynasty of the man that you're going to? What takes David to Jonathan? The answer is, of course, the covenant, the covenant that had been formed between Jonathan and David, Jonathan taking the initiative back in chapter 18. If you look at verse 8, you can see this. David says to Jonathan, "Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you."

So he goes right into enemy territory. He approaches his enemy's son and he does so boldly because of the covenant of the Lord. That word "covenant" there it means "an agreement or an obligation between 2 parties that structures a relationship." And that covenant can be both human and divine. Here it's a human relationship. Jonathan, who is the greater, had acted in loving kindness toward David, the lesser. The king's son for the shepherd boy and it established this relationship between them. David was always conscious that he was the lesser party. He calls, as I say, Jonathan 3 times, he calls himself Jonathan's servant.

And do you notice that this is a covenant they have concluded like the Lord's covenant with them? It's a covenant in the Lord or of the Lord, like the Lord. David is coming to Jonathan because he says, "You know, you promised to me, you gave yourself in this relationship to me and you made it like the Lord. The Lord is dependable. The Lord is my security and if you're in a covenant relationship with me, I trust that I can be secure with you as well." He comes in these personal terms to Jonathan.

We look at the relationship between these 2 men and we have a glimpse into what is possible between 2 human beings in terms of friendship but beyond that, we have a glimpse into the fact that the Triune God created us to share in his great drama, the drama of salvation. The drama of redemption. And that the drama of my life is part of the storyline of the great drama that is taking place in which God is overwhelming all the powers, all the authorities in the world and he takes me, as it were, into the story. He gives me a part. He feeds me my lines week by week as I come as we are this morning to hear the word of God so that I may go out and live out the drama there in the world as part of the bigger story of God's purposes. That's what's going on here. It's a covenant like the Lord and do you see how he goes right to the very heart of the covenant idea? He asks Jonathan to deal kindly with him, to show loving kindness to him or steadfast love to him or mercy towards him. It's one of the key words of the Bible, *chesed*, a word that means steadfast love, loving kindness, great kindness from God. It combines the warmth of God's fellowship with the security of God's faithfulness.

In the book of Exodus, Exodus 34, remember the story of Moses? He's come down from the mountain with the 10 Commandments written by the finger of God and he has broken them in judgment because he discovers the people of Israel down at the foot of the mountain and they have made their golden calf idol and they've been worshiping their golden calf idol and so Moses has to go back up again to the mountain and get the 10 Commandments from God again. When he goes up to the mountain, he is getting into conversation with God and he's feeling quite laid-back and you know that way you are when the cobwebs fill your head at the end of an evening and you're really comfortable with someone and he thinks, "Well, I think I'll try my hand here," and he says to God, "God, would you give me the ultimate religious experience? Would you let me see you? I just don't want to see the outside. I mean, telling me to look at the stars in the heavens and the wonderful things of nature, everybody can do that. I want to see you as you are in yourself. I want to see the essence of God." And you remember God's reply to Moses, God says to Moses, "Absolutely not. Moses, this is non-negotiable. Nobody sees God and lives. Nobody does that. But I'm going to give you something more precious than a sight of me. I'm going to hide you in the cleft of the rock." So he hides him in the cleft of the rock and he causes the glory of God to pass by. The splendor of God goes shooting by as Moses is hidden there and only after the glory has passed does God remember to take him out, allow him out of the cleft of the rock so that he can see the afterburner of God's glory. Just the afterburner. But even the afterburner of the glory of God is an amazing thing to see. But what is really important in the story is this: God says, "I've got something more precious than that for you." And the Lord, do you remember, he proclaims his name. What does the Lord do? What is the more precious thing? It's this: God preaches to Moses. He proclaims his name, "The Lord. The Lord. A God merciful

and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Here's our word.  
"Abounding in steadfast love, keeping steadfast love for thousands. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

God says to Moses, "Here is something better than a vision of what God looks like. Here is God's firm word. I am a steadfast, loving God to my people." He is firm. He is secure. You can be absolutely sure God is saying to Moses that, "When one of my children come to me, when one of my people approaches me, they will find in my heart for them steadfast love." What is steadfast? It is constant. It is unchanging. It is unrelenting love. Steadfast, constant. Unrelenting love for my people. That isn't alterable by circumstances. That doesn't go the way our affections and emotions often go, up and down in the ebb and flow of life. It is constant. Secure. Firm. What a place to be. You know, you can have that kind of relationship on a human level to some degree, by analogy to some degree and it's wonderful. But you have that relationship permanently and in its fullness with God.

David says to Jonathan, "Deal kindly with me. Show me steadfast love. Show me steadfast love." When everything else is slipping away, slipping away, sounds like a good line for a song, God's steadfast love for his people remains. It's at the heart of the covenant. There's an old hymn we used to sing when I was growing up,

"Oh, safe to the Rock that is higher than I,  
My soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly."

Another verse reads like this,

"How oft in the conflict, when pressed by the foe,  
I have fled to my Refuge and poured out my woe.  
How often, when trials like sea-billows roll,  
Have I rested in Thee, O Rock of my soul."

Where do you go? Go to the covenant. You go to find security in that relationship that is firm and secure. Ultimately, ultimately, the one relationship that will never let you down is the covenant God who is full of steadfast love.

Well, you know, they've done something since the last time I was preaching here and as I move on to the second point very briefly, they have put a clock there but you're not to look at it, okay? You're to look this way. This way.

So there's, first of all, the security of the covenant. The second thing that I'm going to run through very quickly is there's also loyalty in the covenant. Loyalty in the covenant because in verses 12 to 34, the focus shifts from David and his anxieties to Jonathan and his firm commitment to David. Jonathan goes back to his father. There is the story of how he goes and he tries to ascertain just exactly where things are with his father and his father reacts. His father doesn't argue with him. He doesn't engage in some kind of constructive conversation with him. His father is absolutely hopping mad. He yells at Jonathan. He throws things at Jonathan. Suddenly Jonathan becomes the object of his

father's anger and Jonathan goes through this little charade. "I'll tell him that you're not able to come because you're somewhere else and I'll explain that and if it goes over a few days, each day I'll give another explanation as to why you're not there," and some of us get all hung up about why it is that Jonathan tells this little tale and all I can say is this about these bits in the Bible, I say this: the Bible inerrantly reports what happened, even a fabricated story. The Bible inerrantly reports what happened but it does not recommend all that it inerrantly reports. Work that out for yourself.

So Jonathan goes. He finds out from his father that his father is really mad and he discovers what he's really mad about. It's the issue of succession. If you read the rest of the chapter we didn't read earlier, you'll discover that's it. Saul understood what Jonathan did not or actually what Jonathan did understand but his father thinks he doesn't understand, that the real issue about David is the succession. David is going to rule. Saul has worked this out, not because of anything David has done but because of things he himself has noticed about David. He said himself in his better days, "The Lord is with David. Whatever David does, the Lord is with David." David goes to battle, "The Lord is with David." There is victory. Whenever David stands up to Goliath the giant, "The Lord is with David." Saul recognized that. He didn't have to be a mathematician to work out the math here. If the Lord is with David and the Lord has withdrawn his Spirit from me, which he's been told, and if the Lord is not going to let me have descendents on the throne, then what does that mean? That means that David is a better candidate to be king than I am and if the Lord is with David, that means my future and the future of my family is under threat and he tries to press this in on Jonathan. He says, he yells at him at one point, "You and your kingdom," he screams at his son, "that's what it's about. You and your kingdom. I want you, my son, to inherit the kingdom."

It's there at that point that we discover what is in Jonathan because Jonathan's response to that is to say, "I am not interested in the kingdom. It is not about me and my kingdom. It is about the Lord's anointed. It is about David and it is about my loyalty to David and my belief that David is a man who would make a better king than you, father. I commit myself to David. Whatever it means. If it means the end of our relationship father to son, I commit myself to the Lord's anointed. If it means the end of my prospects about being king of Israel, I commit myself to David. I want to take my stand with the one the Lord is with. That's what's important. I want to be with the one the Lord is with."

That's still the choice today. It's still the choice. What Jonathan did in his lifetime is this, he sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He puts that kingdom above his own kingdom. We're all interested in the kingdom of me, whatever that looks like in your life or mine. The kingdom of me means: me, myself and I having center stage. Getting my own way. Doing my own thing. Having my own plants. Having my own dreams fulfilled. Having everybody, as it were, serve me. But the person who understands the kingdom of God, puts the kingdom of God above the kingdom of me. Lives for what is prior in God's purpose. I want to be with the one the Lord is with. Who is the Lord with? He is with King Jesus. I want to be on King Jesus' side. Whatever the world offers me, whatever the world teases me with or entices me with, I want to be with King Jesus. I want to be on his side. On the last day, I want to be seen with him. Someone

said to Mr. Lincoln during the late unpleasantness that they hoped the Lord was on our side. This was a northerner and Lincoln's reply was, "Madam, I hope we're on the Lord's side." Well, that's a good insight, isn't it? Are we on the Lord's side?

Well, the last thing there is in this passage is this: there is peace in the covenant. Peace in the covenant. Jonathan does David a great favor by reminding him of things that he should have known or didn't know but had forgotten or needed to be reminded of in the crisis and at the end of the chapter we find that Jonathan is the one who speaks a word of peace into David's heart. Look at verse 42. "Jonathan said to David, 'Go in peace.'" Let me tell you what was going to really happen here. David was going to go and be a fugitive. David was going to go and be an outlaw for I don't know how long. For a decade or more, he was going to be running and never be able to be at home. He was never going to sleep in his own bed, in his own house. He was going to be on the run, a wanted man with a death sentence hanging over him. He was going to be betrayed by his friends. He was going to be oppressed by his enemies. He was going to have things go wrong for him one after another for years to come. That isn't a prediction of how many sermons are still to come in the series, by the way, but that is certainly what is going to happen in the next 10 years in David's life, not in our life.

So what does he mean, "Go in peace"? Well, he tells you. Look, "Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD saying, 'The LORD shall be between me and you and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.'" There could be peace in the midst of the circumstances because there was peace between them and the Lord. In other words, what Jonathan does is he says to David, "It doesn't really matter whether there is a sea of troubles whirling all around you. I am taking you to the eye of the storm. That place of settlement in the midst of the storm which is the covenant, the covenant that we have between us and the Lord. There is the place to stand." That's why Paul can write to the Romans and say, "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," and then go on to talk about afflictions and troubles and tribulations that we suffer and even the potential of death itself. "In the midst of all of that," he says, "there is peace with God. That is the place of calm in the midst of the storm."

I want to ask you: are you in the place of calm in the midst of the storm? Are you standing on the burnt ground of Calvary, as it were? I think I've told this story before but when Andrew, our youngest, was a little boy, he and I went out to see a fire that somebody had lit in a park nearby and we went over to investigate. The fire was moving from the center and moving outward in a circle, moving outward and consuming saplings and trees. His mother wasn't there so I gave him a piece of branch and the 2 of us set about trying to put out the fire. I could get into trouble and wouldn't be allowed to do that, of course, under other circumstances. Then the smoke was too much for us so I lifted Andrew up and I jumped across the flames into the burnt area. I would really be in trouble then. But, you see, once we were there, the fire wouldn't touch us. Once the ground had been burnt, you see, the flames would never come back that way again. You were in safe ground. You and I are in safety if we go into the burnt ground of Calvary, if we come to the place of steadfast love where steadfast love was most demonstrated towards us in Christ.



This relationship that they have is a great relationship, a human relationship. May God bless us with those kinds of human friendships. But it points us to that greater relationship. When things are going wrong in your life and when everything else is like a troubled sea, will you come back to the covenant? In many ways, that's why the Lord's Supper is such an active reminder to us, kind of sacramental reminder and memory that we stimulate every time we sit at the table and we take the bread and the wine and are reminded as we should be, I think, every time we preach the word of God, we're reminded of the sacramental promises of God that are firm and sure. We're putting them in our mouths. We are holding them in our hands. We are hearing them with our ears.

God has promised steadfast love to those who come to him. We come boldly to the throne of grace. Why? Because there is a covenant there and the God of the covenant keeps steadfast love. We find loyalty in the covenant. He will never leave us or forsake us. He will be our faithful friend. And we find peace in the covenant because that's secure and let the storm swirl around us, he is our rock.

*Father, we pray that you would please write your word in our hearts today and help us to find our security in you ultimately and if it please you, Lord, give us those people in our lives who will be friends to us and to whom we can pour out our souls, as it were, and who to the limits of their ability are able to be to us what Jonathan was to David. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*