

GODLY FRIENDSHIP—1

Why 'Godly Friendship'?

'A friend loves at all times' (Prov. 17:17). But in these days many struggle to know what true friendship is, and what such love entails:

- Friendship has become debased and cheapened: when we can have 250 'friends' on facebook, what is friendship really, and what is such 'friendship' worth?
- There are stages in life, particularly at times of transition, that we need to make sure that we have friends, and are not left without them. So making friends is a vital skill to exercise.
- Friendship has become misconstrued: with the widespread sexualisation of relationships, it has become more difficult to have plain, straightforward friendships between men and men, women and women, and women and men, and to know what such friendships involve.¹
- Many of us may have experience of friendships that have gone wrong: we would do well to see what the Bible says about this, and about the elements of true friendship.
- Is it possible to have friendship with God? What might that mean, and what implications might that have for our friendships with each other?

This series will focus on what the Bible and Christian writing can teach us about friendship. The five sessions will be:

1. Mainly from the Old Testament, focussing particularly on David, king of Israel (about 1,000 BC), and friendship in the book of Proverbs and other wisdom writings.
2. A study of the book *Spiritual Friendship* by Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167 AD).
3. The possibility of friendship with God, looking particularly at God's saving acts in Jesus.
4. Friendship in the church, and in the life of the apostle Paul.
5. Personal reflections, from myself and others, on friendship today.

David and Friendship

David from his earlier days knew the importance of having friends and relying on them:

And some of the men of Benjamin and Judah came to the stronghold to David. David went out to meet them and said to them, "If you have come to me in friendship to help me, my heart will be joined to you; but if to betray me to my adversaries, although there is no wrong in my hands, then may the God of our fathers see and rebuke you." Then the Spirit clothed Amasai, chief of the thirty, and he said,

"We are yours, O David,
and with you, O son of Jesse!
Peace, peace to you,
and peace to your helpers!
For your God helps you."

Then David received them and made them officers of his troops. (1 Chron. 12:16–18)

Here is a readiness to help, a joining of hearts, mutual peace, and honouring with responsibility. But note the setting: 'the God of our fathers', and being clothed by the Spirit.

David also knew to keep safe a friend in a dangerous situation, when Abiathar escaped from Saul's massacre of the priests of Nob:

Stay with me; do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safekeeping (1 Sam. 22:23).

¹ Former gay rights activist James Parker, contrasting his earlier experience of a longterm same-sex relationship over against his later marriage with his wife, says the two are radically different from each other. He says the former was not the same as marriage but rather an 'eroticised best friendship' (see <http://www.whyvoteno.org.au/bigdeal/>).

In turn, David readily accepted the friendship and loyalty of others, including foreigners, when he was in a desperate situation, as when he was fleeing from adversaries:

Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, “Why are you also coming with us? . . . you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, while I go wherever I can? Go back, and take your kinsfolk with you; and may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.” But Ittai answered the king, “As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.” David said to Ittai, “Go then, march on” (2 Sam. 15:21).

Here Ittai recognises that friendship is to be with someone ‘for death or for life’ (compare later Paul in 2 Cor. 7:3).

David’s friendships extended across international borders, and from one generation to another (even though, as in the first instance, it wasn’t always reciprocated):

After this the king of the Ammonites died, and Hanun his son reigned in his place. And David said, “I will deal loyally with Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father dealt loyally with me” (2 Sam. 10:2).

Now King Hiram of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon, when he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father; for Hiram had always been a friend to David (1 Kings 5:1).

David looked to receive advice from friends:

Ahithophel was the king’s counselor, and Hushai the Archite was the king’s friend (1 Chron. 27:33).

Ahitophel in the end turned against David, but Hushai remained faithful, and aided David’s cause (see 2 Sam. 15:32–37; 16:15–17:16). In politics, you do need to have friends.

David and Jonathan

Jonathan, the princely son of Saul, was first drawn to David, the handsome sheep-keeping youngest son of Jesse, after David had just defeated Goliath (see 1 Sam. 16:12; 17:1–58):

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt (1 Sam. 18:1–4).

Again here is the binding of soul to soul—Jonathan loves David ‘as his own soul’ (in keeping with Lev. 19:18)—sealed with a ‘covenant’, witnessed before God (see 1 Sam. 20:8; ‘a sacred covenant’; lit. ‘a covenant of the LORD’), with a practical gift to David of Jonathan’s robe, armour and weapon, signifying a bestowal of his own person. We are told ‘Saul’s son Jonathan took great delight in David’ (1 Sam. 19:2), and took David’s part against Saul, risking his father’s anger and scorn (see 1 Sam. 20:30–34). Under pressure of this situation Jonathan and David reaffirmed their sacred covenant, Jonathan being willing to do for David whatever David says (see 1 Sam. 20:4):

Jonathan said to David, “By the LORD, the God of Israel! . . . if my father intends to do you harm, the Lord do so to Jonathan, and more also, if I do not disclose it to you, and send you away, so that you may go in safety. May the LORD be with you, as he has been with my father. If I am still alive, show me the faithful love of the LORD; but if I die, never cut off your faithful love from my house, even if the LORD were to cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.” Thus Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the LORD seek out the enemies of David.” Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life (1 Sam. 20:12–17).

The 'faithful love of the LORD' is to characterise their relationship. The terms of their covenant are particularly notable:

David . . . bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, '*The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever*'" (1 Sam. 20:41–42, emphasis added).

This could be taken to say that they relate with each other only through, and never apart from, God. David keeps this covenant with Jonathan and his family, after Jonathan's death (see 2 Sam. 9:1–13; 21:7), even though the antagonism with the family of Saul continued. David's own devotion is expressed in David's grievous lament after Jonathan has been killed in battle:

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
In life and in death they were not divided;
they were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions . . .

How the mighty have fallen
in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women (2 Sam. 1:23, 25–26)

Some have taken it from this that David and Jonathan had some kind of sexual relationship. This is nowhere in the text, and we can take it that a relationship sealed in a covenant before YHWH would have been consistent with YHWH's commandments (as in Lev. 18:32). Given that David's relationships with women made his life rather complicated, in that he had at least nine wives and a number of concubines (see 1 Chron. 3:1–9; 14:3–7), to say nothing of his adultery with Bathsheba (see 2 Sam. 11:1–12:25), it may not be surprising that David found Jonathan's single-hearted love for him to be 'passing the love of women'. Men, and women, can be in strong and close friendship with each other without it being sexual.

David and False Friends

We have already sensed that David also experienced friendships that went sour. He gives vivid expression to these experiences in some of the Psalms 'of David'. David was ready to play the part of a friend, and those who abide with God 'do no evil to their friends' (Psa. 15:3), but this was not always reciprocated:

They repay me evil for good;
my soul is forlorn.
But as for me, when they were sick,
I wore sackcloth;
I afflicted myself with fasting.
I prayed with head bowed on my bosom,
as though I grieved for a friend or a brother;
I went about as one who laments for a mother,
bowed down and in mourning.
But at my stumbling they gathered in glee,
they gathered together against me (Psa. 35:12–15).

The closer the relationship, the more distressing it is when it breaks down:

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me (Psa. 41:9).

Most troubling, and inexplicable, and sometimes most bitter, is when this happens among the people of God:

It is not enemies who taunt me—
I could bear that;
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—
I could hide from them.
But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the throng (Psa. 55:12–14).

Perhaps it is relationships among the people of God that are at greatest risk of disruption by ‘the father of lies’ (John 8:44).

In the most bleak of all Psalms, ‘A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite’, one of the most painful trials is the loss of friends:

You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them . . .
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness (Psa. 88:8, 18).

Friendship in Proverbs

Passages on friendship in the book of Proverbs reinforce much of what we have observed in the friendship of Jonathan and David. ‘A friend loves at all times’ (Prov. 17:17), and true friendship is a life-long commitment, sometimes across generations:

Do not forsake your friend or the friend of your parent (Prov. 27:10).

Friendship is a heart-to-heart affair:

Just as water reflects the face,
so one human heart reflects another (Prov. 27:19).

A friend can be trusted not to gossip, and is one that does not easily take offence—these are God-like characteristics:

A gossip goes about telling secrets,
but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence (Prov. 11:3).

One who forgives an affront fosters friendship,
but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend (Prov. 17:9).

Since all friendship between persons on this earth is between sinners, we may take it that forgiveness is an essential element if friendship is to endure.

A strong friendship is robust enough to take the knocks, and to call each other to account:

Iron sharpens iron,
and one person sharpens the wits [Heb. *face*] of another (Prov. 27:17).

Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts,
but profuse are the kisses of an enemy (Prov. 27:6).

There is an awareness of false as well as true friendship:

Some friends play at friendship
but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin (Prov. 18:24).

There are also some warnings as to what could potentially damage friendship, such as being faithless, or insensitive:

Like a bad tooth or a lame foot
is trust in a faithless person in time of trouble.
Like vinegar on a wound
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. (Prov. 25:19–20).

As we would say, this just rubs salt into the wound. Another example of insensitivity:

Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice,
rising early in the morning,
will be counted as cursing (Prov. 27:14).

This reminds us of the story Jesus told of knocking up a friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8), where annoyance rather than friendship determines the outcome.

It is good to be wary of those whose default position is to be angry about many things:

Make no friends with those given to anger,
and do not associate with hotheads,
or you may learn their ways
and entangle yourself in a snare (Prov. 22:24–25).

And it is best not to overdo it, by living constantly in each other's pockets:

Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,
otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and hate you (Prov. 25:17).

Job and Friendship

Job knew what it was both to have friends, and to have those friends let him down. In his adverse circumstances, Job found that a number of his acquaintances were fairweather friends (as in Prov. 14:20, 'The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends'):

All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me (Job 19:19).

He has even become 'a laughing-stock to my friends' (Job 12:4). Job does have some friends who stayed with him:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great (Job 2:11–13).

That was the best thing they could have done for Job under the circumstances. The problem began when they opened their mouths to pass judgement on Job's predicament. They were all competent theologians, but they used their theology to type-cast Job, to define themselves over against him, and so to render themselves incapable of hearing and receiving what Job was

saying, and to end up misrepresenting God (see Job 42:7–9). Thus for Job they became ‘treacherous’ companions, who ‘withhold kindness from a friend’ and so ‘forsake the fear of the Almighty’ (Job 6: 15, 14); those for whom a friend is someone they ‘bargain over’ like some object (Job 6:27), ‘miserable comforters’ whose scornful advice amounts to ‘windy words’ (Job 16:2, 20).

In Conclusion

Friendship can operate in the context of other close relationships: can engaged and married couples also be friends? One would hope so, and the Song of Songs confirms this. After the bride has given a fulsome and appreciative description of her bridegroom she exclaims to her companions:

This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem (Song 5:16).

After all, God had said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’ (Gen. 2:18).

Ecclesiastes points out the practical advantages of companionable friendship:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken (Eccles. 4:9–12).

It is interesting that after talking about ‘two’ it mentions a cord that is ‘threefold’. Even though we say ‘Two’s company; three’s a crowd’, is there a hint here of a third party in true friendship, even a trinitarian-like reference? To this we shall return.