

GODLY FRIENDSHIP—3

God and Friendship

We hinted in the first study at a possible ‘third party in true friendship’.¹ This was borne out by the terms of the ‘sacred covenant’ made between Jonathan and David: ‘The LORD shall be between me and you’ (1 Sam. 20:42).² It was picked up by Aelred of Rievaulx when he began his dissertation on *Spiritual Friendship* by saying: ‘You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third’, referring to what Jesus said in Matthew 18:20: ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’.³

If Jonathan and David is the classic Old Testament friendship between men, Naomi and Ruth is the classic Old Testament friendship between women, where Ruth’s choice to stay with Naomi is as much a choice to belong to Israel’s God YHWH and His people:

Ruth said,
“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!” (Ruth 1:16–17).

Thus God is very much a part of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship, and their role together in the over-all plan of God is highlighted at the end of the book when Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of David, and is nominated in the family tree of Jesus (see Ruth 4:17–22; Matt. 1:5).

In the law of Moses, the absence of God, or any attempt to draw one away from God, signals the end of true friendship:

If anyone secretly entices you—even if it is . . . your most intimate friend—saying, “Let us go worship other gods” . . . you must not yield to or heed any such persons. Show them no pity or compassion and do not shield them (Deut. 13:6–8).

Friendship with God

Is it conceivable that human persons can have friendship with God, the creator of the universe? Given that friendship implies some level of equality, it would scarcely seem possible. If this were to be the case, surely it would require willingness on God’s part to be on the same footing with us, or a lofty elevation of us to some kind of parity with God, or both. For some religions, a great gulf remains fixed between the two. But, remarkably, not in our Scriptures:

For thus says the high and lofty one
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,

¹ ‘Godly Friendship—1’, p. 6.

² See ‘Godly Friendship—1’, pp. 2–3.

³ See ‘Godly Friendship—2’, p. 3.

and to revive the heart of the contrite (Isa. 57:15).

So we find in the Psalms:

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them (Psa. 25:14).

Abraham (2,000 BC) was regarded as God's friend. Jehoshaphat king of Israel (872–848 BC) prayed regarding both the greatness of God and God's friendship with Abraham:

O LORD, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you. Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? (2 Chron. 20:6–7).

In Isaiah God personally addresses Israel as:

Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend (Isaiah 41:8).

James tells us something of the basis on which this could be claimed:

“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God (Jas. 2:23).

This is a reference to Genesis 15:5–6, where Abraham by faith aligns himself with God's revealed purpose, and God undertakes to invest Abraham with the righteousness of God (see how the apostle Paul links this justifying righteousness from God with the blessing promised to all the nations, and the gift of the Spirit, fulfilled through Christ, in Gal. 3:6–16; compare Gen. 12:3; Phil. 3:8–9; 2 Cor. 5:21). On this footing, God sees fit to disclose to Abraham what God is doing, to include him in on it:

The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:17–19).

God then lets Abraham engage with God regarding Lot and Sodom, and to prevail on God (see Gen. 18:22–33). God shows Abraham the countless number of his descendants (see Gen. 15:5), four hundred years of future history (see Gen. 15:13–16, 18–21), the coming birth of Isaac (see Gen. 18:1–15), and what is going to happen to Sodom (see Gen. 18:16–33). In the sacrifices of Genesis 15:7–12, 17–18 and 22:1–19, God inducts Abraham into knowledge and experience of what God is going to do in Christ, sufficient for Jesus to be able to say: ‘Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad’ (John 8:56). This is friendship indeed!

Similarly God befriended Moses (around 1450 BC):

When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses . . . Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend (Exod. 33:9, 11).

God revealed His nature to Moses in the Ten Commandments (see Exod. 19:17; 20:1–21—a meeting with God), and in the many other statutes and ordinances of the Law. Fittingly between God and sinners, however, there are some things about God that remain inaccessible to Moses:

Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:18–23).

On the basis of this, Moses later says: ‘The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law’ (Deut. 29:29). God does reveal Himself to Moses in words of mercy, steadfast love, forgiveness, and seriously dealing with sin, and allows Moses to prevail upon God in prayer (see Exod. 34:5–9), such that Jesus could later say: ‘Moses . . . wrote about me’ (John 5:46). ‘Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face’ (Deut. 34:10).

Not only these great leaders, but the whole of Israel could claim friendship with God, as when Deborah and Barak sang, ‘O LORD . . . may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might’ (Judges 5:31). In his song of the vineyard of Israel, Isaiah the prophet refers to God as ‘my beloved’ (Isa. 5:1)—the same Hebrew word as for ‘friend’. Not that Israel always responded faithfully, as when God says:

Have you not just now called to me,
“My Father, you are the friend of my youth . . .”
This is how you have spoken,
but you have done all the evil that you could (Jer. 3:4–5).

Outside of Israel, for all that the Book of Job has to say about the power and transcendence of God, Job can still speak warmly of days ‘when the friendship of God was upon my tent’ (Job 29:4).

Jesus and Human Friendship

Jesus knew and valued human friendship. There was a special relationship between Jesus and his relative John the Baptist.⁴ It appears John first recognised Jesus from the womb (see Luke 1:39–45). John later called himself ‘the friend of the bridegroom, who . . . rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice’ (John 3:29).

Mary and Martha of Bethany sent a message to Jesus referring to their brother Lazarus as ‘he whom you love’; Jesus spoke of him as ‘our friend Lazarus’; and when Jesus wept over Lazarus’s grave the Judeans said, ‘See how he loved him!’ Jesus brought Lazarus back from death (John 11:3, 11, 35–36, 43–44).

There was something special also in the relationship between Jesus and Mary of Magdala, whom he delivered from seven demons. She with a number of other wealthy women became one of his supporters, and travelled with him and the disciples (See Luke 8:1–3). Some say that those women travelling with the disciples in that cultural setting would necessarily have been married to them, and there have been suggestions that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. This is nowhere in the text, and it could be that Jesus and his disciples were modelling a new way for single and married women and men to relate with each other in respectful honour and safety and purity,⁵ as has continued more or less in Christian settings since. Whether the woman who anointed Jesus (Luke 7:36–50; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–7) was Mary Magdalene or not, Jesus was not embarrassed to receive her effusive and affectionate

⁴ Designated now at his birthplace En Karim, south of Jerusalem, as ‘the Precursor’.

⁵ As was the case in the field of Boaz; see Ruth 2:8–9. For cultural restrictions on meetings between women and men see Song 8:1.

ministrations. Mary Magdalene stood by Jesus at the time of his execution (see John 19:25; Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1). After his resurrection from death, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, let her know that their relationship was now on a new footing in view of his coming ascension, and gave her the responsibility of making this known to the other disciples (see John 20:11–18).

The writer of John's gospel never refers to himself by name, but rather designates himself as 'the one whom Jesus loved', who at the Last Supper was 'reclining next to him' (John 13:23). This expression is literally 'on the bosom' of Jesus. John uses an almost identical expression to describe the position of Jesus as Son in relationship with the God the Father (see John 1:18). So he may be saying that Jesus loves John with the same love that Jesus knows in his relationship with the Father. Indeed, as he goes to the cross Jesus prays for his disciples and all who believe in him: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world . . . I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:24, 26).

Jesus and Friendship with God

Jesus addressed his disciples as 'friends' (Luke 12:4). A key to this whole matter of friendship lies in what Jesus said to his disciples the night before he died:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (John 15:12–15).

There are five things to note from this significant saying:

1. This rests Jesus' understanding and practice of friendship on the saving action of his going to the cross: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends . . .'
2. It involves letting friends in on all that one is engaged with: 'I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father'. This is a wonderful opening out and embrace. Jesus had said earlier:

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing (John 5:19–20).

And Jesus goes on to say of the Holy Spirit:

He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:14–15).

Nothing less than all of this is what Jesus is admitting his friends into! Geoffrey Bingham comments: 'If we then work on the basis of friendship with God, then we will know all things that He is doing'.⁶

3. Jesus is admitting his friends into what the Father, Son and Spirit are doing so that these friends might participate fully in all of that action:

friendship is not simply a matter of affection, mateship and good feeling, but is being and working together in a project which is primarily in the hands of the one making the friend, stimulating the friendship.⁷

⁶ G. C. Bingham, 'The Pastoral Power of Friendship', NCTM Pastors Study Group 6th April 1992, p. 5, <http://www.newcreationlibrary.net/studies/pdf/PSG1992.pdf>
Compare Gen. 18:17–19 on Abraham, above p. 2.

4. This participation in all that God is doing is nonetheless under Jesus' direction: 'You are my friends if you do what I command you'. In this Jesus also serves his friends, as when he says:

Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them (Luke 12:37).

Jesus also promises: 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you' (John 15:7). This constitutes 'a form of hierarchy' between the two within the parity of the friendship:⁸

'You are my friends if you do whatever I command you,' tells us that at any given moment one may command the other. Jesus said the servant does not know what his master is doing and this is true, but the servant who is the friend of the master—the master being friend to him—does know what his master is doing, and is glad to be in the doing of it, even as a servant.⁹

5. This friendship with God and in God's action is to be extended to others: 'love one another as I have loved you'.

Friendship and Forgiveness

Jesus said to the paralysed man, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you' (Luke 5:20). Jesus' linking of friendship with his death (see on John 15:13–14 above, p. 4), as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), makes him the 'friend of . . . sinners' (Luke 7:34; Matt. 11:19):

This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2).

So there is hope for us all. In stories Jesus told we find addressed as 'friend' those who fall far short of expectations: workers who complain at their employer's generosity to others, or a guest at a banquet who did not see fit to come dressed appropriately (see Matt. 20:13; 22:12). Whether the 'friend' accepts or rejects that offer of friendship is their responsibility. Jesus gave Judas plenty of warning and opportunity to repent (see Matt. 26:20–25; Luke 22:21–22; John 13:21–30). Jesus still addressed Judas as 'Friend', even as Judas came to betray him (Matt. 26:50). Here Jesus was practising what he had preached: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt. 5:44). Even so, Judas ended up fulfilling the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me' (John 13:18, quoting Psa. 41:9; see 'Godly Friendship—1' p. 4).

Not to grasp Jesus' extended hand of friendship and forgiveness is to leave oneself turned in on self, and to short-circuit any opportunity for true and full friendship. Bingham comments on 2 Timothy 3:2–5:

The individualist's love turns in on himself. He loves himself, he loves pleasure and does not love God. He is wholly friendless, entirely alone when it comes to the ultimate. His existential anguish in life is indescribable, even though he is planning pleasure. His evil is not less describable. In a word, the self-lover has denied the original love God has showed him in creation, and spurned it for an inner 'circuit of love' which is a ridiculous resistance to the love he ontologically needs.¹⁰

But to embrace this forgiveness and friendship is to find oneself in a circle of rejoicing friends—see the shepherd who has gone after the lost sheep (see Luke 15:3–10, 32).

What a friend we have in Jesus

⁷ Bingham, 'Friendship', p. 3.

⁸ As there is between the Father and the Son: compare 'the Father is greater than I' with 'The Father and I are one' (John 14:28; 10:30).

⁹ Bingham, 'Friendship', p. 13.

¹⁰ Bingham, 'Friendship', p. 6.

All our sins and grief's to bear!¹¹

—as God 'yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us' (Jas. 4:5; referring to Gen. 2:7; Isa. 42:5).

Every relationship between human persons is a relationship between sinners. There will always be a tendency to use the relationship to bring pressure to bear on the other person for one's own advantage. This may be a prime characteristic of a number of relationships. Because of this, no friendship can operate rightly without the total forgiveness of sins we have in Jesus Christ. The vital importance of having Jesus as a third party in any friendship is emphasised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*:

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ . . . Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them. As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others, too, can be saved only by Christ himself. This means that I must release the other person from every attempt to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain his independence of me; to be loved for what he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ brought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for my brother, before I could begin to act, I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him only as the person he already is in Christ's eyes. This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ. Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognises the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.¹²

It is as we meet each other in Christ, by his saving and ennobling grace, that we most truly meet each other, safe from harm, and benefitting all.

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there.

Blessed Saviour, Thou hast promised
Thou wilt all our burdens bear;
May we ever, Lord, be bringing
All to Thee in earnest prayer.
Soon in glory bright, unclouded,
There will be no need for prayer—
Rapture, praise, and endless worship
Will be our sweet portion there.

¹¹ Joseph Scriven (1819–1896). Sung not sentimentally, but as Australian aboriginal people love to sing it—from the heart, and out of deep suffering.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, 1954, pp. 11, 25–26. First published 1939 under the title of *Gemeinsames Leben*, Translated from the fifth edition (1949) by John W. Doberstein.