

Godly Men & Covenant Friendship



Jonathan and David's Friendship, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

W. Scott Hollander III

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GODLY MEN AND COVENANT FRIENDSHIP

Introduction

Godly men should be covenanting men. The ecclesiastical use of the term covenant is defined as “a solemn agreement between the members of a church to act together in harmony with the precepts of the gospel.”¹ The Gospel unites covenanting men. Covenanting friendship also includes vulnerability and support. Proverbs 27:17 (ESV) states, “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” Solomon also states elsewhere;

Two are better than one,
Because they have a good reward for their labor.
For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.
But woe to him who is alone when he falls,
For he has no one to help him up. (Eccl 4:9-10 NKJV)

These two passages speak to the value of friendship and companionship.

Iron does not sharpen iron without friction through deliberate motion. For men to be sharpened in mind and spirit by another, they must have deliberate contact. It often means asking hard questions and giving or receiving hard advice. No one said it would be easy, but the implication is that it is necessary. It means teaching one another while remaining teachable. It means sharing one another’s burdens and sometimes taking the beating intended for your friend. This study is designed to encourage godly men to value friendship and camaraderie among other godly men by examining covenant friendship in light of Scripture. The means will be to briefly explore the lives of Jonathan and David in their covenantal friendship as found in 1 Samuel.

¹ The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, 3rd ed. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2005), <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/covenant>.

The Background of a Troubled Nation

For one to properly understand Jonathan, David, and their covenantal friendship, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the background to a few historic points regarding Israel the nation, Saul the wayward king, and the manly exploits of these God-fearing, and fiercely loyal men. The story begins approximately 400 years after Israel's exodus from Egypt.² Following the deaths of Moses and Joshua, the tribes, while establishing themselves in the Promised Land, found it difficult to remain united as a cohesive nation, and frankly, to remain faithful to the God who brought them out of bondage. The LORD, though, is a covenanting, faithful God who hedged-in the wayward nation until the timing was right to introduce their first king.

In 1 Samuel 9, Saul is chosen to be the first king of Israel as she transitions from an unraveling confederation of tribes into an infant monarchy. In chapter 10, Saul is formally anointed and proclaimed king. There would be some turbulence early on, yet Saul's bravery in chapter 11 on behalf of the city of Gibeah seemed to strengthen the hearts of the people and begin to unite them as a nation. Samuel's speech at Saul's coronation completes chapter 12.

Rolling into chapter 13, there are a few problems with understanding the timeline according to verse one. Though the text refers to Saul living for a year and reigning for two, there seems to be a conflict.³ Commentators Keil and Delitzsch argue that the most accurate reckoning of time is that Saul had likely reigned at this point for approximately 22 years. Saul is projected to be in his early sixties while his son Jonathan, introduced in verse two as a commander of one-thousand, is presumed to be in his mid to late thirties.

² Approximately 1046 BC; the conservative date of the Exodus is 1446 BC.

³ "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel" (1 Sam 13:1 NKJV); "Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel" (1 Sam 13:1 ESV).

A Nation at War and a Foolish King

The Philistines were a people of the sea encroaching Israel's promised land from the west along the Mediterranean Sea and moving inland toward the east. They brought with them an understanding of iron and metallurgy of which they were fierce to keep as a monopoly. They not only cornered the market on iron weapons, but they also had chariots, a lot of them. When they gathered to stand off against Israel, they brought 30,000 chariots and a horse cavalry of 6,000.

Jonathan begins to prove himself quickly as a commander, not simply a puppet of his father-king. In chapter 13, Jonathan exudes the independent prerogative to wage an attack on a local stronghold of the Philistines in Geba. This action animated Saul to gather the nation for war. Saul called for Samuel to come and request the LORD's blessing, yet in haste, Saul makes the fatal mistake of his unlawful sacrifice. It is at this point, around the middle of Saul's reign, when Samuel declares,

You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.
(1 Sam 13:13-14)⁴

Jonathan, The Warrior Prince

As chapter 13 ends recounting the lack of iron weapons throughout Israel, Saul and Jonathan were likely the only two Israelites with swords and spears of iron. Yet Jonathan was a manly man, a man's man. He was strong and brave, and most importantly he was a godly man. He blended the utmost faithfulness in God with sheer courage. In his heart and mind, his one

⁴ All Scripture quotations are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

sword and spear were plenty for God to win a decisive victory over the enemies of Israel. He might have recalled the words of Moses;

When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. (Deut 20:1)

Jonathan was a go-getter, an independent starter; he exuded confidence and initiative. For a second time, without a word to his father, Jonathan would take his armorbearer (aide-de-camp), a young soldier around 17-20 years old, and he determined to spy out an opening. Jonathan found himself on one side of a rocky cliff, peering across a ravine pass in an attempt to see what the Philistine encampment was doing on the other side. Jonathan proposed to his right-hand man, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the LORD will work for us. For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam 14:6).

Even in the words that Jonathan uses in his stirring to action, he does not attempt to bind the LORD’s response. He rightly knows the LORD is capable, and yet he leaves sovereignty to the Sovereign to determine what the outcome might be. But being a man of action also meant that he could not just sit and wait for a warm, fuzzy feeling. And Jonathan’s determination and faith were infectious, as the reply came back from his armorbearer, “Do all that is in your heart. Go then; here I am with you, according to your heart” (1 Sam 14:7).

At this point, Jonathan shows himself to his opponents to provoke a response. This is more tactically clever than may be implied in the text. On one hand, the text allows us to see that Jonathan was trying to determine what the LORD would have him to do based on the particular response, and we can see that based on their response, the LORD wanted him to engage his enemies. What might be missed is that the response of the Philistines was a response of timidity

and fear. Brave Philistines should have sent a small party outside their perimeter of protection and pursued their far inferior enemy.

Hiding behind their advantage of height and terrain, the Philistines urged Jonathan and his armorbearer, “Come up to us, and we will show you something” (1 Sam 14:10). And come they did, on their hands and knees over ragged rock. Upon their arrival, Jonathan and his armorbearer laid them to waste. Here is another striking detail. Jonathan and the armorbearer slaughtered twenty men over a half-acre of land. All in all, a half-acre of land isn’t very large. Yet twenty men lay dead by the hand of two.

It wasn’t long ago that I was searching for a new home, and frankly, it was rare to find a lot in the suburbs that even had a full quarter-acre of land. So here you have a 2,000 square foot home, a two-car garage, and front and back yard in less than a quarter-acre. You could host a barbeque for 20 of your closest friends and all easily fit in your back yard. So, what does that say of the cowardice of twenty men who lay strewn across a plot of land more than twice as large? It tells precisely that; they were cowards! On half-acre of land lay 20 dead men by the hands of two brave warriors, who only had one sword and one spear between the two of them.

All the evidence indicates the Philistines failed to attack. The LORD struck the Philistines with such utter fear they fell by the hands of these two warriors, and the LORD used the faithfulness of these two godly men to spur a great victory for Israel that day. Such a commotion was stirred that the rest of the Israelite army gathered for an assault, and men came from the mountains with all sorts of implements to make war on their enemy. “So the LORD saved Israel that day” (1 Sam 14:23).

The wars continued to be waged against the Philistines, and Saul continued to make poor choices by failing to follow the word of the LORD. In 1 Sam 14:19, he told the priest to remove

his hand from the inquiring of the LORD's will and made a rash vow that, if it were up to Saul, would have cost him the life of his son Jonathan. In chapter 15, he failed to follow the word of the LORD by sparing the life of King Agag and other spoils of their victory. Suffice it to say, his behavior was on par with his previous sin and Samuel again declared;

. . . the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel. . . . The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. (1 Sam 15:26, 28)

David, The Warrior Shepherd

David was the youngest of eight boys. He spent much of his time in the wilderness keeping his family's flock safe from themselves and predators. Following his private anointing as king by Samuel, the text introduces the reader to David's talents in music and presentation. He was described as being, "skillful in playing, a mighty man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a handsome person; and the LORD is with him" (1 Sam 16:18).

Because of his gifting, and the providence of the LORD in his life, David was introduced to the workings of the royal court, invited to spend time in service to King Saul. David would have been about 17-20 years old and was similarly titled as Saul's armorbearer. A king would have had several men who served as armorbearer, and it was likewise evident that David had the opportunity to come and go based on the needs of Saul. The setting of chapter 17 infers he had been sent home to his father who was now sending him to check on his brothers at the front lines.

A similar stage is set to test the courage of this godly man with a similar outcome. David is confronted by a crisis of faith against a far superior foe. Like Jonathan, David was a manly man, a man's man. He was strong and brave, and most importantly, he was a godly man. He blended the utmost faithfulness in God with sheer courage. In his heart and mind, his ~~one sword~~ and ~~spear~~ staff and sling were plenty for God to win a decisive victory over the enemies of Israel.

He had killed a bear and a lion; that took a blending of tactile skill, strength, bravery, and a rush of adrenaline. But this time, his enemy was mocking the LORD and the LORD's people. David was jealous for the name of the LORD, and he was ready to put his life on the line to declare the LORD as champion of their cause. So, "David hurried and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine" (1 Sam 17:48). What a sight that must have been to see him charge after Goliath in sheer courage and determination.

A Bond of Covenantal Friendship

Following David's victory over Goliath and Israel over the Philistines, there was a brief exchange between Saul and David. It can certainly be inferred that Saul was impressed with the feat he saw take place that day and the heroism of this young man. It's possible that his questioning of David stemmed from his interest in whether this heroism ran in the family, "Whose son are you, young man?" (1 Sam 17:58). Or possibly, the question was to determine his lineage considering Saul's offer of his daughter as a bride to the victor. Either way, it is a fairly shallow and brief recount of the discussion and Saul's overall response.

Not so for Jonathan! The few verses covering this exchange in chapter 18 are simply flooded with powerful expressions of emotions.

. . . the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. . . . Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan took off the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, even to his sword and his bow and his belt. (1 Sam 18:1-4)

Here is the introduction to covenant friendship. The souls of Jonathan and David were knit together as they saw a reflection of godly character and courage in the heart of the other man.

Jonathan's response was so deep that he loved David as he loved his own soul. The commentator, Rev. W. Harris observes:

There are material substances which have a singular affinity for each other because there are elements in each which are mutually attractive. The steel filings in the midst of a mass of other material will find their way to the magnet if it is placed anywhere near to them and cleave to it with persistent force. And there are many bodies which possess elements which give them so strong an affinity the one for the other, that when the chemist places them together, they lose their separate identity and the hitherto distinct substances become but one. So human characteristics and qualities—especially human excellences—form a basis of mutual affinity between those who are like-minded. A bold and courageous man is attracted to another who shows that he is also bold and courageous, and a man of strong emotions feels a drawing to another of an emotional nature.⁵

A covenant can be simply defined as an agreement between two or more persons.⁶ Yet here we are introduced to the covenanting, faithful God bestowing on these two men a covenanting, faithful friendship. It's hard to say at this point whether Jonathan had any indication that he was looking down on the future king of Israel. It will be demonstrated later that he knew in certainty, but at this point it is unlikely. However, the gesture he would make in removing his royal clothing and weapons was potent. The love of this prince was so intense that he had to physically bestow on this shepherd boy his royal apparel and likewise declare, “we are one!” This deep bond is such that these men were essentially declaring for the other, “my life for yours.”

If life were easy, covenants, oaths, and promises would be unnecessary, and that's the point. In the declaration of a covenant, each party is declaring, for good and ill, our oath will stand. As the initiator of the covenant friendship, Jonathan provided his clothing and armament as the sign of the covenant and thereby established it. It would not take long for the testing to

⁵ W. Harris, *The Preacher's Complete Homiletical Commentary on the Old Testament: Homiletical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1892), 193.

⁶ Henry S. Gehman, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1944), 118.

begin. In the same chapter, as the friendship of Jonathan and David is sealed, Saul's view of David begins to sour rapidly. He is immediately thrust into a state of jealousy as the women sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18:7).

It seemed to only get worse. The text recounts that David behaved wisely, and the LORD was with him; and the more wisely David behaved, the more Saul feared him. Though not in corollary, it likewise seemed that the more Saul feared and hated David, the more the people loved David. Additionally, even as Saul's bitterness toward David grew, his children's love for David grew. Michal, Saul's daughter loved him and wanted to marry him. Saul would eventually set this in place, but only with the devious intention of laying multiple traps that would hopefully lead to his ensnarement and death. What had remained Saul's temporarily secretive agenda turned into outright vengeance. Jonathan would have to decide between honoring his father's sinful wishes or strengthening his bond of covenantal friendship with David.

Jonathan Stands with David

1 Samuel 19:1 states, "Now Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David; but Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted greatly in David." Jonathan on several occasions would not only secretly assist David to preserve his life, but he would likewise speak well of David to his father in an effort to turn him away from vengeance. Trouble would continue to afflict David, yet even in the midst of it, these men renewed their covenant before each other and before the LORD. In chapter 20, Jonathan declares to David;

. . . 'Whatever you yourself desire, I will do it for you. . . . And you shall not only show me the kindness of the Lord while I still live, that I may not die; but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever, no, not when the Lord has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.' So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, 'Let the LORD require it at the hand of David's enemies.' Now Jonathan again caused David to vow, because he loved him; for he loved him as he loved his own soul. (1 Sam 20:4, 14-17)

Jonathan's friendship with David not only created a rift in the relationship between Jonathan and his father but as Saul declared, this friendship would cost Jonathan the throne.

Then Saul's anger was aroused against Jonathan, and he said to him, 'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen 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, you shall not be established, nor your kingdom. Now therefore, send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die.' (1 Sam 20:30-31)

This would only strengthen Jonathan's resolve though, and he would seek out his friend and strengthen him in the LORD. The narrative recounts it this way;

Then Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David in the woods and strengthened his hand in God. And he said to him, 'Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Even my father Saul knows that.' So the two of them made a covenant before the Lord. And David stayed in the woods, and Jonathan went to his own house. (1 Sam 23:16-18)

Covenantal friendship will often require sacrifice, yet it is the sacrifice that binds men together in brotherhood and honor. Stephen Mansfield remarks,

It is cowardly to walk closely with a man to enjoy the benefits of his friendship but then abandon him when he is under attack. True friendship leaves scars. Most men won't pay this price. It is why they will always live in a sea of casual relationships and discarded friends. Genuine men stand with their friends and look on the scars that result as signs of manly honor.⁷

Jonathan knew that David was destined to become the king in his place. He rejoiced in the elevation of his friend, and he longed to stand by his side and support him in his calling. Tragedy struck their friendship though, and as the LORD had declared through Samuel, Jonathan would die with Saul and his brothers in the war with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.

⁷ Stephen Mansfield, *Mansfield's Book of Manly Men: An Utterly Invigorating Guide to Being Your Most Masculine Self* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013), 81.

David's spirit was crushed by the news of his fallen friend and brother. He would rend his clothes, mourn, weep, and fast. David's poetic pen would likewise flow into a song for the children of Judah, as he would sing, tears stinging his eyes;

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan was slain in your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
You have been very pleasant to me;
Your love to me was wonderful,
Surpassing the love of women. (2 Sam 1:25-26)

The loss of his friend, however, would not be the end of the covenant friendship in David's eyes. For as time passed and David was eventually seated on the throne of Israel, his heart was reminded of his covenant friendship and the vow he had made to Jonathan and his household. So, David sought out the family of Jonathan to determine whether any remained alive. Immediately, upon hearing the news that a son of Jonathan yet lived, David had Mephibosheth brought to him. Because of the covenantal friendship David had with Jonathan, he spoke kindly to Mephibosheth;

Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father's sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually. (2 Sam 9:7)

And at that moment David memorialized his faithfulness and love to his covenant friend Jonathan. David would fulfill that covenantal vow until the death of Mephibosheth.

Today's Call for Godly Men and Covenantal Friendships

The story and legacy of Jonathan and David are filled with excitement, encouragement, and edification. But this is not simply a tale of history to be recounted to future generations; this lesson is a call to emulate covenantal friendship. Men in the church need to latch onto other godly men and build each other up in manliness and godliness. In our culture today, there is a

fight to remove masculinity from men, from the workplace, and our homes. One feminist declared, “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.”⁸ Not only do women and children need men, but men need men! The Proverbs again reminds us, “A man who has friends must himself be friendly, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov 18:24).

Older men need to grab hold of the younger men to disciple and mentor them in the LORD. Men of the church should camp in the woods, make fires, throw knives, shoot guns, wrestle in the dirt, grow beards, punch each other in the arms, guffaw, and growl. Yet most importantly, they should be exhorting each other in the faith to be manly men who are good fathers and great husbands. This is not toxic masculinity; this is godly masculinity. They need to be training each other on how to lead Bible studies in the home and church. They need to covenant with each other and be willing to sacrifice a Saturday to help a covenant friend to dig a ditch, turn a wrench, or welcome their newborn into the world.

Godly men need to be the kind of friend that when one is discouraged, depressed, down in the dumps, or being persecuted through gossip or other attacks, he has his friend’s back, and when necessary, his front. Men need to be able and willing to stand in the line of fire and take the hit for their friend when the going gets tough. Notable in Paul’s epistles are his words of mentorship to his brothers in the LORD. “To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house . . . ” (Phlm 1:1-2); “To Timothy, a true son in the faith . . . ” (1 Tim 1:2); “To Titus, a true son in our common faith . . . ” (Titus 1:4). To these men, he writes letters of exhortation, encouragement, and godly living.

⁸ Irene Dunn, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/irene_dunne_502388.

The modern Christian man needs to draw from the lessons of these men as well as from the lessons of other godly men throughout the centuries. Thomas Watson summarizes the characteristics of a godly man: a man of knowledge; moved by faith; fired with love; like God; careful about the worship of God; who serves God, not men; a man who prizes Christ; who weeps; who loves the Word; who has the Spirit of God residing in him; humble, prayerful, sincere, heavenly, zealous, patient, thankful; a man who loves the saints; does not indulge in sin; is good in his relationships; spiritually doing spiritual things; thoroughly trained in religion; walking with God; and who strives to be an instrument for making others godly.⁹

Conclusion

A godly man's friendships need to be rich in mutuality, love, commitment, loyalty, and encouragement.¹⁰ This is easily done when a godly character is the magnet that is drawing us together. Mansfield recognizes, "It's a high standard, but I think our friendships could have the same potential. Jonathan gives us a pattern for living out this potential."¹¹ Just as the nation of Israel needed godly men in the days of Jonathan and David, the church needs godly, covenanting men in the 21st century.

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⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 5-6.

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 63.

¹¹ Mansfield, *Book of Manly Men*, 75.

¹² אָמֵן ('ā·mên); Amen: verily, truly, so be it.

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