

FAITHFUL IN FRIENDSHIP

1 Samuel 23:15-29

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“And Jonathan, Saul’s son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God” (1 Sam. 23:16).

There are two statues in Washington, D.C. that together tell a remarkable story. One is the massive memorial to General Ulysses S. Grant that stands at the east end of the Reflecting Pool, literally in the morning shadow of the U.S. Capitol building. Visitors can hardly miss this majestic depiction of the famous general atop his war stallion. Grant’s military leadership was decisive to the Union’s victory in the Civil War, and he is considered a symbol of the force of human will, an icon of the strong man who stands against the storm when all others have shrunk back. This prominently displayed monument was erected by his grateful, admiring generation as a celebration of his unique contributions.

Some two and a half miles away, in a pleasant but small and nondescript city park, stands a more commonplace memorial. The statue of this lesser-known Civil War figure, Major General John Rawlins, has actually had eight different locations and is hardly ever noticed by visitors. Rawlins had been a lawyer in Galena, Illinois, where Grant lived just prior to the war, and he became Grant’s chief of staff. Rawlins knew Grant’s character flaws, especially his weakness for alcohol. At the beginning of the war, Rawlins extracted a pledge from Grant to abstain from drunkenness, and when the general threatened to fall away from that promise, his friend would plead with him and support him until Grant could get back on track. In many ways, it was Rawlins who stood beside the seemingly solitary figure of Grant the great general. Rawlins’ memorial is modest compared with the mounted glory afforded Grant, yet without his unheralded love and

support, Grant would hardly have managed even to climb into the saddle. This is why the wise man of Ecclesiastes extolled the virtue of a friend in need: “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!” (Eccl. 4:9–10).

THE FRIEND WHO COMES

If the friendship between Grant and Rawlins is a great American story, perhaps the greatest friendship recorded in Scripture is the brotherly love between Jonathan and David. The two men met in the aftermath of David’s famous victory over the Philistine giant, Goliath. First Samuel 17 tells how the entire Israelite host cowered in terror before this fearsome champion, and how the shepherd boy, shielded only by his faith in God and armed with only a slingshot, struck down the Philistine and led Israel to victory. Jonathan was the son and heir of Israel’s King Saul, and the hero of earlier battles. In fact, Jonathan had been the darling of Israel’s army prior to David’s explosive appearance on the scene. How natural it would have been for Jonathan to resent the upstart youth. Yet exactly the opposite happened, for Jonathan presents one of the most beautiful portrayals of manly grace in all of Scripture. First Samuel 18:1 simply records, “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” Jonathan loved David because Jonathan loved the Lord and loved the faith he saw burning in young David. It is worth noting that this man who is considered the greatest of friends was also a man of vibrant faith and purity of heart.

David’s victory over Goliath must have seemed long distant, as David was brought to the brink of despair by king Saul’s vicious pursuit. After his initial flight from Saul, David found refuge in the caves of Adullam, in central Judea. Having left his fortress, however, to rescue nearby Keilah from a Philistine seige, David had exposed himself to Saul’s assault. Saul’s rapid advance drove David and his forces into the southern desert, hotly pursued by the king’s superior forces. During this time when David seemed on the brink of defeat, Jonathan came and provided a model of Christian friendship.

We read of David's dire situation in 1 Samuel 23:14: "David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand." By this time David had been running from Saul for several years. We can imagine his extreme weariness and how slim his hold on God's promises of salvation must have been at times. No wonder this is the man who wrote: "My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long!" (Ps. 6:3, NIV).

It was at just this time that Jonathan returned to David. Becoming aware of David's increasingly desperate position, Jonathan acted to provide one of the classic examples of faithful friendship. The Bible expresses this in these brief but potent words: "Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God" (1 Sam. 23:16). How loaded with implications is this simple statement!

For starters, Jonathan took the initiative and went to David. This was an act of sacrificial ministry. Safe at the side of his father and within the strong ranks of the pursuing army, Jonathan departed to expose himself to the danger David was experiencing. From the comfort of the king's royal provision, he ventured out into the desert deprivation of his friend. This is what friendship requires. A friend who is not willing, and even eager, to sacrifice time, labor, and hardship is not worthy of being called a friend at all.

Second, Jonathan was sensitive to the needs of his friend. Many of us would be willing to make sacrifices if we only understood the real needs of others. But this would require us to do what Jonathan did: to think through what David must be experiencing. Jonathan was not focused on his own hardship, the difficult situation his friendship with David created for him, or the peril to his career aspirations. Instead, Jonathan committed his own needs to the Lord and gave his thoughts to the plight of his friend. This is the kind of thing Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Philippians: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).

Consider David's predicament. He was the leader of a band of weary fugitives, stranded in the desert. David would be paying the price of

leadership, his own thoughts given over to his men and their needs, while he stood alone with no peers or companions for his own comfort. While David lent his strength to others, there were none to uphold him in his weakness. Consider, today, a doctor or nurse providing care to the desperately sick: who is there to uphold and encourage the caregiver? Or consider a mother spending herself for her little children, or a rural pastor fretting alone over his flock. What friend will come alongside, seeking to understand and minister out of that understanding? Jonathan knew how great is the gift of companionship to a struggling friend.

The Bible makes clear that God was not willing to give David up to Saul. But do you think David was consistently confident of this? Wouldn't David have found this hard to see in such a time of trial? There he was in a hostile land with a royal enemy hot on his heels. David could use a reminder of God's faithfulness, encouraging him to believe and continue the fight. God was about to provide that encouragement in the form of a true friend.

Jonathan went to David in his place of struggle. In the same way, our friendship today means little if we will not seek out and find our brothers in their places of need. "A friend loves at all times," says the proverb, "and a brother is born for adversity" (Prov. 17:17).

THE HELPING HAND

It would have meant a great deal to David just to see his faithful friend Jonathan in such a time and place of need. But Jonathan did more than show up. He did for David the single thing most needed in troubling times: "Jonathan . . . strengthened his hand in God" (1 Sam. 23:16). David's hand was trembling, in danger of slipping from the strong support that is our faith in God. Jonathan came and strengthened the grip of David's faith and hope in the Lord. William Blaikie comments: "He strengthened his hand in God. Simple but beautiful words! He put David's hand as it were into God's hand . . . , in token that the Almighty was pledged to keep and bless him, and that . . . no weapon formed against him would ever prosper."¹

¹ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 360-1.

Do you ever wonder how to encourage a struggling friend? Sometimes we are tempted to encourage with words of what we will do or what the person will be able to do for himself. But harsh reality will soon disclose the insufficiency of our own mere strength. It is a good thing to come and take another by the hand. But it is something greater to take that shaking hand and rest it secure on the promises of God. This is exactly what Jonathan did for David: “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. Saul my father also knows this’” (1 Sam. 23:17). “Surely no act of friendship is so true friendship as this,” says Blaikie. “To remind our Christian friends in their day of trouble of their relation to God, to encourage them to think of His interest in them and His promises to them; to drop in their ear some of His assurances... is surely the best of all ways to encourage the downcast.”²

At the very moment Jonathan said this, his father’s army was bearing down on David. So on what basis did he speak this way? Jonathan spoke from his memory of the promises God had made to David, promises that were certain to be fulfilled. We might paraphrase Jonathan’s encouragement in this way: “Look, David, don’t fail to put your trust in God. Remember the Lord’s promise that you will be king. But in case you are doubting, let me share something with you. Even my father Saul knows that this is how it will all end up. So don’t fear Saul, David, but trust the Lord!”

It was because Jonathan was strengthening David’s grip on God’s character and promises that he could say to David, “Do not fear” (1 Sam. 23:17). David was in danger of being undone by fear. Psalm 54, reportedly written on this occasion, gives honest reasons for why David was terribly afraid: “strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves” (Ps. 54:3). Since the slaughter of the priests at Nob, Saul had shown himself willing to employ desperados and thugs to work his violence. Such men were bearing down on David. If we have ever felt the looming threat of neighborhood bullies, of a malicious superior at work, or of corrupt and tyrannical government powers, we can put ourselves in

² Ibid., 361.

David's shoes. If David was to continue he must have an antidote for fear, which Jonathan gave him in the promises of God.

This is what the prophet Elisha did for his servant when they were surrounded by enemy horsemen: "Do not be afraid," he urged him, "for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." In response to the servant's doubt and unbelief, Elisha then provides an example of how our encouraging words will often need to be accompanied by prayer. Elisha prayed for precisely what his companion needed, and what we often need lest we fall prey to fear: "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see" (2 Kings 6:16–17).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew the value of godly friendship in the midst of danger. A rising German Bible scholar who had outspokenly opposed the early rise of Adolf Hitler, Bonhoeffer had been persuaded to go into voluntary exile, so that during the early years of Nazi domination he lived safely in England. But Bonhoeffer knew that his friends and congregation needed his presence and his personal appeals to faith. Returning to Nazi Germany against the advice of many supporters, he led an underground seminary, living together with faithful Christian men preparing to minister in that difficult situation, until his opposition to Hitler ultimately led to his arrest and execution. In *Life Together*, a book recounting his experience in that secret Christian community, Bonhoeffer wrote:

The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged... He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation... And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.³

HELP TO PERSEVERE

Jonathan's intervention proved to be a turning point for David. Jonathan helped his friend by strengthening his hand in God so that he would not be taken by fear. But what was Jonathan helping David to do? The answer is that David needed help persevering in his faith in the Lord. Persevering was essential to David's salvation: he

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), *Life Together*, 23.

needed not only to believe in the Lord's salvation but to keep believing and acting on that belief. Perseverance is utterly essential to our salvation as well. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul exulted in the believer's salvation through the blood of Christ "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard" (Col. 1:23). The Puritan Thomas Watson explained: "It is not the beginning of the Christian life that gets glory but the end of it... The excellence of a building is not in having the first stone laid, but when it is finished: the glory and excellence of a Christian is when he has finished the work of faith."⁴

We will never know how close David was to giving up, perhaps abandoning his followers and fleeing Israel forever or abandoning faith to live as a true outlaw against king Saul. God's provision of Jonathan's encouragement is a sign that David was hanging by a fairly thin thread. Consider the new difficulties facing him, on top of his prior woes. First, after he had exposed his forces by rescuing the town of Keilah from the Philistines, that city responded by reporting his presence to King Saul (1 Sam. 23:12–14). Now, in the rocky Judean desert where David was trying to hide, the Ziphites were actively negotiating his betrayal to Saul (1 Sam. 23:19). These were his own countrymen, fellow Judahites. Unlike the people of Keilah, who at least had the excuse of fear for their lives, the Ziphites operated by cold, cynical opportunism: "the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, 'Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hachilah, which is south of Jeshimon? Now come down, O king, according to all your heart's desire to come down, and our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand'" (1 Sam. 23:19-20). Facing no specific threat from Saul, the Ziphites contacted the king out of sheer greed, providing detailed information of David's whereabouts and offering to hand him over.

Saul, in his twisted spirituality, honored this wickedness with his imagined benediction from the Lord: "May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me" (1 Sam. 23:21). This attitude is typical of despots, who calculate good only in terms of their own increased power. More to the point, Saul closed the deal on

⁴ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 286.

David's destruction. Imagine how disheartening news of this would have been to David! How especially disheartening is the fully ripened depravity so common among the ungodly. Here, David walks in steps that his greater descendant would more perfectly tread: encircled by evil foes, betrayed by one close to him, and handed over to suffer torment and death. In Psalm 22, David prays with words of lament that Jesus would later bring to life on the cross:

Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help.
Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion"
(Ps. 22:11-13).

What an apt description of Saul in his response to the Ziphites. "Go, make yet more sure," he charged them. They should make certain of David's precise location:

"Know and see the place where his foot is, and who has seen him there, for it is told me that he is very cunning. See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides, and come back to me with sure information. Then I will go with you. And if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah." And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul (1 Sam. 23:22-24).

What was David to do in the face of such relentless evil? The answer is seen in the record of the early Christians, enduring centuries of violent Roman persecution, refusing to worship Caesar as "Lord," while they advanced the gospel and gave praise to God. The answer is seen in the gospel remnant that endured the tyranny and violence of decades of Communist power in Russia, Eastern Europe, and China. Faithful Christians devoted their years of unjust imprisonment to prayer, in this way unleashing gospel power upon their lands. The answer will be seen today through believers in the post-Christian West, who refuse to be absorbed into secular humanist hedonism and falsehood, who continue the work of the church and the proclamation of the gospel of salvation in Christ's blood. What was David to do in the desert of Ziph? He was to persevere in faith, serving God and his people while awaiting the Lord's chosen time of deliverance.

David's own intelligence brought news of Saul's movements: "David was told, so he went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arabah to the south of Jeshimon" (1 Sam. 23:24). The

circumstances were naturally unnerving and his situation was deteriorating by the minute. But, his hand strengthened in the Lord by the words of Jonathan, David set his hope in the Lord, and continued on in desperate faith.

The superscription of Psalm 54 says it was written “when the Ziphites went and told Saul, ‘In not David hiding among us?’” The psalm thus records David’s prayer during this time. He began, “O God, save me, by your name, and vindicate me by your might” (Ps. 54:1). This reflects Jonathan’s reminder of God’s promise, so that David prays by the Lord’s name. As he presses on, David knows exactly what he is relying on: “Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life. He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them” (Ps. 54:4-5). His faith enlivening as he prays, David concludes with words of certain deliverance, looking on his setting not by sight but by faith in God’s Word: “With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you, I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies” (Ps. 54:6-7). Here is faith rising up as it should: like David, we most truly praise God when we thank him before he delivers us and when we give praise for the triumph our faith has seen though our eyes have not.

David’s faith was not disappointed. Just when Saul had nearly cornered the fugitive band and it seemed that David’s cause was lost, a messenger approached the king: “As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul, saying, ‘Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land.’ So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines” (1 Sam. 23:26–28). God’s deliverance was marked by the naming of the place: “Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape.” The certainty of God’s sovereign resolve to save his people is rightly compared to a great and solid rock. Blaikie comments: “If it be God’s purpose to deliver you, He has thousands of unseen methods, to any one of which He may resort, when, to the eye of sense, there seems not the shadow of a hope.”⁵

⁵ Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 364.

The Lord's faithfulness to deliver David was never in doubt in this passage, but instead David's faith was being tested for perseverance. God will likewise test our faith by trying circumstances that seem without hope except in him. Thus as David moved on to a new stronghold at Engedi, he departed with a renewed faith strengthened by trial. According to Jesus, this is the purpose of our whole lives, that by perseverance we not only prove our faith (see 1 Pet. 1:6-7) but enter into the fullness of salvation. Notice the prominent place given to the theme of perseverance in Jesus' messages to the suffering churches of the book of Revelation:

"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10); "To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone" (Rev. 2:17); "The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations..., and I will give him the morning star" (Rev. 2:26-28); "The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev. 3:21).

This conquering perseverance was the aim of Jonathan's brotherly encouragement. David was not called to overthrow Saul's power nor to keep the Ziphites from their terrible sins. David was to persevere faithfully in that to which God had called him. For David, this meant faithful service to Israel while he awaited elevation to the throne. We today are called to persevere faithfully in the pursuit of holiness, in the work of the church, in the witness of the gospel, in the Christian parenting of our children, and in faithful performance of our duties at home, work, or school. We are not to give in when secular forces threaten to overwhelm us, when sinful fashions are made appealing, or when difficulty discourages our hearts. We are to continue, guided and inspired by Jesus' many gospel promises. "I am the light of the world," he said, "whoever follows me will not walk in darkness" (Jn. 8:12); "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (Jn. 7:38). We are to persevere, offering prayers like those of David in his wilderness fatigue. In the aftermath of his escape, David prayed in Psalm 57:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.

I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who
tramples on me (Ps. 57:1-3).

Jonathan shows us that the aim of our ministry in Christian friendship is encouraging support for the perseverance that David showed. If we will but press on in faith, salvation will soon draw near. But what encouragement we sometimes need to press on in faith! The writer of Hebrews urges us: “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

It is touching to realize that when David and Jonathan parted in the bitter setting of the wilderness of Ziph, they were seeing one another for the last time in life. “The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home” (1 Sam. 23:18). Apparently, Saul’s son had enough of his father’s ruthless pursuing, although his duty would return him to his father’s side. In his last act of friendship, he turned David’s heart to rest on one who was able to do so much more than he could ever do. One of the best ways for us to serve the Lord, to reflect His glory in the world, and fulfill God’s calling on us as Christian brothers and sisters, is to step off the sidelines of life, to offer our time and compassion to friends in need, and to speak words of truth and grace that lead others to (or back to) the Lord.

THE GREATER FRIEND

Scripture says, “there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24), and the ultimate example of that friend is the Son of God who willingly died to free us from our sins. Like Jonathan, Jesus came from a place of safety into our world of hardship and danger. Like Jonathan, Jesus left riches and comfort to enter into our poverty. Like Jonathan, Jesus gave thought to our need and, reflecting on our misery, brought words of salvation. Indeed, should we find ourselves in need with no Jonathan at hand to strengthen our faith, we may turn to Jesus and find a ready and present friend, who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” and offer “grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16). Andrew Bonar wrote in his journal of a certain wood where he would go to be strengthened through fellowship in

prayer with Christ. He named it his “Wood of Ziph.” He recorded, “God has often strengthened my hands, my divine Jonathan meeting me there.” Jonathan Edwards on his deathbed likewise called out for “Jesus of Nazareth, my true and never-failing friend.”⁶ The apostle Paul said the same of his trial before Caesar: “No one came to stand by me, but all deserted me... But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me” (2 Tim. 4:16-17).

Jesus not only strengthens our hand to believe in God, but he is the way to God’s love, atoning for our sins with his own blood. Jesus says to us, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). We, therefore, persevere by leaning our souls upon his saving grace. And we serve Jesus well when we stand by our friends, speak to them the words that strengthen faith, and, in Christ’s name, share in their troubles and sorrows. Jesus said of himself, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). If we will be true friends to our brothers and sisters in his name, then something like that may be said of us as well. Christ will use our ministry to strengthen the hands and hearts of many to persevere until the day when salvation comes forever.

⁶ Both examples cited from Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 194-5.