

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Men who met David: Jonathan

Today's talk is the second in our short series entitled 'Men who met David'. Last week the man who met David was the infamous Goliath in that thrilling story in 1 Samuel 17 where the young lad David, with apparently little protection and no hope, met the giant Goliath in a one-to-one duel and defeated and killed the giant. David had the protection of God's strength which was all that he needed.

That meeting with David described in last week's talk was a one-off and a fight. The meeting for today's talk could not be more different! This time, the man who met David is Jonathan, a prince meeting a shepherd boy, but the two of them became the best of friends. It is a lovely story but I also find it one of the saddest stories in the Bible, as we shall see.

Before going into the details, let us remind ourselves of the background to this friendship. In Samuel's advancing years, and given the corruption of his sons, the elders of Israel came to Samuel and asked for a king to rule over them, just like all the other nations round about - see 1 Samuel 8:1-6. God told Samuel to go along with this request, even though effectively it meant that Israel had rejected God. Saul was then chosen as king and he seemed ideal for the position, being from a well-off background, a handsome young man and an imposing figure, much taller than anyone else. Saul started off well, winning victories over Israel's enemies. But it wasn't long before Saul's faults became evident. He started disobeying God and ignoring the words of Samuel, God's messenger. Saul's downward path is a sobering record in 1 Samuel. The lesson is that the outward appearance is irrelevant in working for God. Saul seemed to have everything to make him a success but, crucially, his heart was not right before God.

God's people, Israel, had many enemies and 1 Samuel particularly records the constant battles between Israel and the Philistines, but in trying to do things in his own strength Saul failed and eventually the Philistines killed Saul as recorded in 1 Samuel 31. It was against this background of Saul's failure that God acted to choose a person who would replace Saul as king, a man "after [the LORD'S] own heart", to quote 1 Samuel 13:14. That man was David - see 1 Samuel 16.

This is what makes this friendship between David and Jonathan so remarkable. Jonathan was the oldest son of Saul and should himself have succeeded to the throne of Israel. But Jonathan saw qualities in God's man, David, which led Jonathan to love, protect and promote David. I should add that there are a number of other Jonathans in the Bible but none is covered extensively.

With that background, we will now look into some of the detail. The events of the life of Jonathan are recorded in many of the chapters in 1 Samuel, from chapter 13 to chapter 31. I would like us to consider some of those events and to think of the lessons which we might draw from them as we proceed through the chapters. I want to do this bearing in mind that in a number of ways David can be taken as a picture, or type, of the Lord Jesus. As already mentioned, David was a man after God's own heart. David was introduced from a humble background, but became king. For many years, David was hated by the leaders of his day and rejected by many of the people, including his own brothers, but there were some who saw that David was God's man and who were willing to follow him and join in his rejection. These are just a few of the parallels with what happened to Jesus which allow us to accept that, in some ways, David is a type of the Lord Jesus. Of course, all Old Testament types fall short of the reality and Jesus far exceeds anything David was or did.

Jonathan is first mentioned in 1 Samuel 13 and I would like us initially to look at the events concerning him in chapters 13 and 14. This is before the recorded first meeting between David and Jonathan in chapter 18 and so chapters 13 and 14 are providing us with some background clues as to the character of Jonathan, particularly in comparison with his father, King Saul, who, even in these early days of his being king, was displaying many worrying features.

Let us note from chapters 13 and 14 first of all the problems that emerge from Saul's nature and actions and, secondly, the benefits that come from Jonathan's character and actions. The first comparison is in chapter 13 verses 1-4, which reads: "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, Saul chose him three thousand men of Israel; whereof two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in mount Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin: and the rest of the people he sent every man to his tent. And Jonathan smote

the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, Let the Hebrews hear. And all Israel heard say that Saul had smitten a garrison of the Philistines, and that Israel also was had in abomination with the Philistines. And the people were called together after Saul to Gilgal.”

From these four verses we note that it was Jonathan with his smaller army who actually won the victory over the Philistines, although Saul took the credit and drew attention to it by blowing a trumpet and boasting of the victory as if it was his. Jonathan quietly got on with the job, even though someone else hijacked the publicity.

The rest of chapter 13 makes sorry reading. After Jonathan's victory, the Philistines put together a large force to make battle against Israel and the Israelites with Saul were scared stiff, hiding in caves and some even leaving Canaan. Then Saul makes a massive mistake, displaying his impatience and lack of appreciation of the reality of God's word. He takes the place of a priest and makes a burnt offering so that God speaks to him through Samuel in verses 13 and 14: “Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue...” Saul was all about himself and any notion of obeying and serving God was superficial. Chapter 13 ends with the painting of a bleak picture: the Israelites under Saul had very few weapons to fight against the large Philistine army which was advancing against them.

Then, in 14:1, Jonathan takes the initiative. With only his armour bearer, he moves out, without telling his father, to take the fight to the enemy. All sorts of obstacles face him including problems in his journey (see verses 4 and 5), but in faith in God he utters the words in verse 6: “Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the LORD will work for us: for there is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few.” Jonathan's armour bearer grew in faith and joined in the fight as he followed Jonathan's example. The two of them killed 20 Philistines causing the whole of the Philistine army to tremble.

Meanwhile, Saul unwisely had instructed all of his army to refrain from eating and they were not happy about this. Jonathan, unaware of Saul's ruling, ate some wild honey. Saul found out and was determined that Jonathan must die. But the Israelites had a high estimation of Jonathan who had so encouraged them and they would not allow Saul to kill him. Chapter 14 closes with Saul continuing to look only on outward appearances by seeking to recruit for his army any man who seemed to be big and strong. Saul had still not learned the lesson of trusting God for victory by whatever means God chose.

So, chapters 13 and 14 show us Saul looking to enhance himself but not having true faith and not truly submitting to what God had to say. With Saul it was all about outward appearances. In comparison, Jonathan achieves things for God, recognising that salvation and victory come from God. He doesn't draw attention to himself and gives encouragement to individuals and to the whole nation of Israel, God's earthly people. His is real faith in action, not in words only! There, in those far-gone days of about 3,000 years ago, are some lessons which I can take hold of today.

After those initial incidents in the life of Jonathan in 1 Samuel 13 and 14, we don't read of him again until chapter 18. In the intervening chapters, chapter 15 demonstrates more of Saul's inadequacies but, crucially, chapters 16 and 17 introduce us to David, God's choice as a replacement for the failed first king. David, the youngest son and apparently the least expected of Jesse's sons to be king, was in fact God's choice. God saw in David what He did not see in any other; just as, nearly a thousand years later, God saw qualities in Jesus when all others around were failures. In chapter 17 there is the battle of David versus Goliath, the subject of last week's talk, and so David emerges as God's choice and as the rescuer of Israel.

Now we come to chapter 18 where Jonathan has heard David speak for the first time and there is an immediate bond between the two of them. 1 Samuel 18:1, 3 and 4 read: “And it came to pass, when David had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with 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 stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.”

A few words from David, and Jonathan's whole being, his very soul, responded to David. Look forward to the Gospels and we hear the words of Jesus to some fishermen: “Follow Me” - see Matthew 4:19. And immediately those fishermen left their nets to follow Jesus! What a great moment it is when any one of us recognises the beauty and greatness of Jesus and gives our whole being to Him. Isaac Watts wrote:

*Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

That is the basis of becoming a Christian. It is not just a formal recognition of who Jesus is, but an appreciation of Him in our souls and the formation of a personal relationship with Him, as there was between Jonathan and David - see 1 Samuel 18:1.

Jonathan the prince also recognised that David, this young shepherd lad, was in fact greater than himself. And so in verse 4 Jonathan gives to David his garments, his weapons and his belt that is everything that spoke of his own position and achievements. In my life I have to own the superiority of Jesus and that my victory and strength can only come from Him. The remainder of chapter 18 concerns firstly the continuing advancement of David, perhaps summed up in verse 14: "David behaved himself wisely in all his ways; and the LORD was with him", and secondly Saul's jealousy of David and Saul's false motives in his actions.

In chapter 19, Saul's hatred and jealousy of David deepen and he plots to kill David. Verse 2 says that "Jonathan ... delighted much in David" and he tried to reason with his father by pointing out the good that was in David, by emphasising that David had shown no enmity to Saul and by recounting the exploits of David which had brought benefits to Israel. Saul temporarily relented of his intention to kill David, but very quickly returned to his determination to get rid of David.

Yet again we see Jonathan being true to David and indeed being brave enough to stand up for him in front of the king. Make no mistake about it, this action could have cost Jonathan his life! I am challenged about my own bravery to stand up for Jesus when others, sometimes powerful, influential people who could cause me problems, are showing that they despise or even hate my Saviour.

I don't want to omit consideration of that phrase from verse 2: "Jonathan delighted much in David." Thinking of the qualities of David would bring great pleasure to Jonathan. I remember as a boy that I would often find my father sitting with his Bible open and meditating on the Lord Jesus. The Amplified Version of the Bible expresses the first few words of Psalm 45 as: "My heart overflows with a goodly theme". Do I spend enough time delighting in Jesus so that, as I increasingly appreciate Him, my heart overflows? This is the picture I get from Jonathan's considerations of David.

In the 20:1, Saul's plotting causes David to flee for his life. David, though innocent of seeking any harm to Saul, is being persecuted by him. How like Jesus, who sinned against no one but was nevertheless hated by so many!

Jonathan's commitment to David is summed up in 20:4 when he says: "Whatsoever thy soul desireth, I will even do it for thee." Jonathan wanted to perform whatever it was that David wanted. I ask myself, is that my desire for Jesus?

David and Jonathan agree that Jonathan will find out whether it is safe for David to return into Saul's presence and they devise a means of transmitting the answer to that question. The message was to be transmitted through archery. David was to hide himself at an agreed spot and Jonathan, with a servant, would take his bow and fire three arrows. The servant would then be sent to find the arrows. If Jonathan called to the servant that the arrows were on this side of him, the message was that all was well for David to return. On the other hand, if Jonathan called that the arrows were beyond the servant, David would have to leave because Saul's anger against him was unchanged. Sadly, the message was that the arrows were beyond the servant boy. The boy was sent away and David and Jonathan parted as recorded in the last two verses of chapter 20: "...they kissed one another, and wept with one another, until David exceeded. And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, The LORD be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed for ever. And he arose and departed: and Jonathan went into the city."

Here, then, was the parting of the ways. David leaves and the remaining chapters of 1 Samuel largely deal with the period of David's rejection when he was hunted by Saul and his men like "a partridge in the mountains" - see 26:20. There was no doubt that Jonathan loved David and continued to do so to the very end. But Jonathan returned to the city (20:42). He was not willing to take his place with a rejected David. Instead, his loyalty to his father, Saul, took him back to the city when he should have been at the side of the one whom God had chosen.

What does this mean for me as a Christian today? At the cross, the world rejected Jesus. They said "Away with this man ... Crucify him" (Luke 23, verses 18 and 21). I don't believe that that verdict on Jesus is any different today. Am I willing to take my place with a rejected Jesus, whatever the cost? The cost may be significant in terms of difficulties with family or friends or colleagues or career. This is such a sad point in the life of Jonathan. His love for, and loyalty to David were great but he was not willing to be rejected with David.

I think I am right in saying that there is only one other recorded meeting between David and Jonathan which is in 1 Samuel 23:16-18. They meet in a wood where David was hiding. The Bible beautifully records that Jonathan actually encouraged David and affirmed that David would become king of Israel. But these verses end with David staying in the wood, the place of rejection, and Jonathan not staying with him but returning to his house.

The death of Jonathan is recorded in 1 Samuel 31:1-2. He died in battle at his father's side at the hands of the Philistines. Jonathan stayed with his father and perished with him!

David's touching reaction to the news of the death of Saul and Jonathan is noted in 2 Samuel 1:17-27. I will read verses 23, 25 and 26: "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions... How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places. I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." Obviously, these were words wrung from the heart of a deeply distressed David who had so valued his bond with Jonathan. Later we read in 2 Samuel 21:12-14 that David retrieved the bones of Saul and Jonathan and buried them in their family grave in the country of Benjamin.

In this talk, I have followed through the life of Jonathan and sought to draw lessons for us from his life, particularly in his relationship with David, a picture of our relationship with the Lord Jesus. I should mention without developing the idea, that Jonathan is also sometimes looked on as a picture of the future remnant of the Jews who, having left Jesus, the true David, will go through the Great Tribulation.

I trust that this lovely, touching story of Jonathan, who had so many of the qualities of faith, will be challenging to all Christians who are listening. The sad end to his story, when he was not willing to be with the rejected David, should challenge each of us as to our personal commitment to the Lord Jesus in our day, the day of His rejection.

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