

Jonathan and David  
October 4, 2020

The Sunday's Bible study lesson concerns Jonathan and David, two of my favorite people in the Bible. Indeed, the relationship between Jonathan and David was important enough that I made it the topic of a message when I did a service at Mountaintop Presbyterian Church back on Sept. 12, 2004. Rather than repeat all of that, I'm inserting it. That means you are getting a lot more this week than normal, because I'm also going to make some additional comments that are more specific to this lesson. But first, here's what I had to say about Jonathan and David back then.

SCRIPTURE READING Psalm 23, 1 Samuel 14, 18:1-4, 20:30,31

**Psalm 23:**

- 1. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.**
- 2. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.**
- 3. He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**
- 4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.**
- 5. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.**
- 6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all; the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (KJV)**

We are indeed so very fortunate to have the firm foundation for our faith laid by saints of old in the scriptures, from which God's Word can speak to us today, as it has for the many faithful since antiquity. Today we go back to an ancient story, that of Jonathan and David. We will be reading from the Bible in the Book of 1st Samuel. You may recall Samuel as the last of the Judges. It was a turbulent time in Israel's history. I read the words of the last verse of the Book of Judges, which immediately precedes the time of Samuel:

**Judges 21: 25 In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes. (NRSV)**

You see, there was no continuing authority in the usual political sense. Judgeship was not hereditary. Kingship was. Not that inheritance of a judgeship wasn't tried. High priest Eli's two sons were corrupt judges. What Samuel first heard from the

Lord, when he was a little boy, was a message of condemnation for the house of Eli. Yet later, we read that when Samuel himself grew old, his sons also set themselves up as corrupt judges. The people of Israel, tired of living without a structured and well organized government, asked for a King. Someone to be given authority, and who would be responsible for leading the Israelites. The need was fairly obvious. The Philistines had overrun much of the central hill country of Israel. Samuel warned the people that a King would enslave them, but a King was what they would have. Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, was chosen. He had three sons and two daughters, and the eldest son was named Jonathan.

Now, think for a moment. Does that title for this sound right? "Johnathan and David." Maybe you have more often heard "David and Jonathan." After all, David was the great King of Israel, conqueror of Jerusalem (known as the City of David), the model for the Messiah, and the ancestor of Jesus. Johnathan was.... well, we know him primarily as David's friend. I'm sure you have heard the story of how Jonathan signaled to David with arrows and the words he called out to the boy who was retrieving them, indicating in coded words that his father, King Saul, was angry. Saul saw David as a threat, and he would have to flee. I'm afraid that we sometimes think of Jonathan as just a sidekick, sort of a junior partner or pal, of David. Today we will explore this friendship, and I think we will discover something more, of great importance to David, and to us.

Let's start with the question. Just who was Jonathan? He was King Saul's eldest son, almost certainly born long before Saul becomes King. When we read about Saul's battles with the Philistines, Jonathan is one of his trusted captains. Let's read from the scriptures some of what it tells us of Jonathan. We begin with 1 Samuel, Chapter 14. The Philistines have pretty much subdued the Israelites, who are hiding from the Philistine raiding parties. Saul is encamped nearby with about 600 men. Across a deep ravine is the Philistine outpost, or garrison, from which the raiding parties go out. This is in the territory of Benjamin, just north of Jerusalem.

**1 Samuel 14: 6. Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised [meaning the Philistines]; it may be that the Lord will act for us; for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few."**

**7. His armor bearer said to him, "Do all that your mind inclines to. I am with you; as your mind is, so is mine."**

**8. Then Jonathan said, "Now we will cross over to those men and will show ourselves to them." 9. "If they say to us, 'Wait until we come to you,' then we will stand in our place, and we will not go up to them."  
10. "But if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up; for the Lord has given them into our hand. That will be a sign for us."  
11. So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines; and the Philistines said, "Look, the Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves."  
12. The men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armor-bearer, saying, "Come up to us, and we will show you something." Jonathan said to his armor bearer, "Come up after me; for the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel."  
13. Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, with his armor bearer following after him. The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer, coming after him, killed them. 14. In that first slaughter Jonathan and his armor bearer killed about twenty men within an area about half a furrow long in an acre of land.  
15. There was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people; the garrison and even the raiders trembled; the earth quaked; and it became a very great panic. (NRSV)**

Now, there are definitely differences between then and now in how we see the world, and how we seek God's direction. The custom then was to seek God's will by casting lots. The assumption was that the all-powerful Lord of Creation has the power to control the flip of a coin or the roll of dice in order to answer a question, and would do so. Notice that Jonathan extends this: he assumes that God will speak through the choice of words used by the Philistines when they see him. Furthermore, he has faith that God will be with him however hopeless the odds, because God's power is not limited by mankind's measures of power. He is willing to put his life at risk to this faith, and he does. Jonathan looks for an opportunity to let God lead him, acts in faith, and in so doing becomes a hero to his people, the Israelites.

Meanwhile, Saul doesn't even know where Jonathan is. He observes the panic, wonders what caused it, and finds when the roll is called that Jonathan and his armor bearer are missing. Saul then orders his small army into battle, and they pursue and battle the routed Philistines. Other Israelites joined in. During this

pursuit an interesting incident occurs that gives us further insight into Jonathan. Reading further in Chapter 14, verses 24 to 27:

**1 Samuel 14: 24.** Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, "Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies." So none of the troops tasted food. **25.** All the troops came upon a honeycomb; and there was honey on the ground. **26.** When the troops came upon the honeycomb, the honey was dripping out; but they did not put their hands to their mouths, for they feared the oath. **27.** But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the troops with the oath; so he extended the staff that was in his hand, and dipped the tip of it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes brightened. (NRSV)

You can probably guess what happens next. Saul inquires of the Lord whether he should continue the attack and does not get an answer. Why? It must be someone's fault. We continue reading in Chapter 14, verses 38 to 45.

**1 Samuel 14: 38.** Saul said, "Come here, all of you leaders of the people; and let us find out how this sin has arisen today." **39.** "For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, even if it is my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!" But there was no one among all the people who answered him. **40.** He said to all Israel, "You shall be on one side, and I and my son Jonathan shall be on the other side." The people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you." **41.** Then Saul said, "O Lord of Israel, why have you not answered your servant today? If the guilt is in me or my son Jonathan, O Lord God of Israel, give Urim; but if the guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim." And Jonathan and Saul were indicated by the lot, but the people were cleared. **42.** Then Saul said, "Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan." And Jonathan was taken. **43.** Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done." Jonathan told him, "I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand; here I am, I will die." **44.** Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan." **45.** Then the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today." So the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die. (NRSV)

Here we see that Jonathan is willing to submit, even in the face of what is and was an obviously unfair judgement. Notice that the people were willing to go along, "Do what seems good to you," when it might have been someone else, even Saul, that would be found guilty. But they will not stand to have Jonathan, the hero of the battle, put to death unjustly.

Now, the way the Israelites sought God's purpose is perhaps quite different from what we do today. But we need our heroes today, just as the Israelites desperately needed leadership. They needed evidence of God's presence with them, as they sought freedom from the oppression of the Philistines. Jonathan was the hero who showed, in his own personal bravery, his faithfulness, and in his willingness to accept even an unjust death, that God was indeed present in this time of trial. There is more here in 1 Samuel, but I think this is sufficient to see what Jonathan is made of.

Meanwhile, David is merely the seventh son of a Bethlehemite sheep herder, too young to be given notice. You know the story that follows. We can read in the following chapters how David is chosen and anointed by Samuel, how David comes to visit his brothers in Saul's army, and hears about the Philistine giant Goliath who holds the Israelites in fear. David is confident that God is with him, and indeed slays the giant. He is brought before Saul, who asks whose son he is, and at this time Jonathan first meets David. We read in 1 Samuel, Chapter 18, beginning with verse 1, to verse 4:

- 1. 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.**
- 2. Saul took him that day [that is, into his army], and would not let him return to his father's house.**
- 3. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.**
- 4. 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. (NRSV)**

This is remarkable. Jonathan is clearly much older than David. He's a military hero. He is the heir to the throne, the crown prince, to put it in the language of a later day. David had been a nobody, a poor nobody at that, but he has expressed a faithfulness in God and has, like Jonathan, been rewarded by victory. Jonathan recognizes in David something very important, more important than Jonathan himself. He sees God at work. Not only that; he submits himself and his own interests to what he

sees as God's will, even to giving David all of the symbols of his own standing: his robe, his armor, and his weapons. Given the age difference, we might think of him as David's mentor. But it is indeed yet more than that. Jonathan is willing to give up more than the effort required for friendship. He invests his resources, his future, indeed all that he can give, entirely in David.

Saul understands what is at stake. He is Israel's first king, and any king wants his dynasty to continue. That's why he is a King and not just a Judge. When Jonathan makes excuses for David missing a feast where Saul plans to have him murdered, Saul warns Jonathan in Chapter 20 verses 30 and 31:

**30. Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. 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?"**

**31. "For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the Earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me for he shall surely die."**

These are strong words. And indeed, Jonathan knows what he is doing. He is giving up his own hope of being king in favor of David, whom he loves and cares for, and has helped in every way possible. He shows David what God's love means.

Later, David indeed becomes King of Israel a few years after Saul and Jonathan die in battle with the Philistines. David can hardly be called righteous. We know of David's sin with Bathsheba, the death of her husband Uriah engineered by David, the turmoil of Absalom's revolt, and the intrigue among his sons over the succession, and David's deathbed words to Solomon about how to deal with his enemies. But we also have, from David, the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd....." that we just read. And other psalms. Many others. We see a willingness by David to accept that he is wrong, and confess his guilt, and accept punishment. This is rare in oriental despots, or indeed almost anyone else in a position of authority. Above all, David loves God, and seeks Him. And God loves David. Jonathan was probably the most important influence on David. Jonathan was a model of God's love. A form of love that sacrifices self for the other. The kind of sacrifice that, a thousand years later, David's descendant Jesus would make for all of mankind.

Is not this what God calls us all to do? Larry Matthews, pastor of my wife Cindy and I at our former church in Vienna Virginia, had a term for people who are

faithful to this calling: "Balcony people." It is they who call to us from above, who love us, who ask us to lift our eyes to the better things, who encourage, who believe that we can be better, and do greater things than we imagine. They model God's love to us. For that is how we experience God most often: in the faithful actions of His people, His balcony people. I'm sure you can think of those who, like Jonathan, were faithful to God and loved you, giving of themselves, and called to you from the balcony. Yes, the world is also all too full of basement people, who put us down and seek to lower us to their level. But as Christians, our calling is to join Christ on that balcony, and call to others with the message of love and of hope that will be their salvation, and our salvation. For just as Jonathan did for David, Jesus shows us how to be a true friend.

Amen.

And now, back in 2020, some additional thoughts. The lesson writer focuses on Jonathan trying to negotiate a settlement between his Father and David in 19:1-7. This is one of several occasions when Saul, in pursuit of David, is convinced to reconcile and stop his pursuit. But, a permanent reconciliation is beyond what Jonathan can do. It's not within his control, as long as he maintains the kind of friendship with David that goes beyond his own self-interest. Indeed, I think it is very much Jonathan's denial of self-interest that bothers Saul greatly. Jonathan does what he can. But, as the lesson writer points out, he also stays loyal to his father, King Saul. Indeed, he dies along with Saul in the Battle of Mt. Gilboa against the Philistines.

I understand the women's association has been studying Lamentations. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:17-27) "How the mighty have fallen! ..." is an exemplary expression of the love he had for Jonathan, and his respect for Saul despite the animosity Saul had for him. It is worth reading.

I think what was important about Jonathan's attempt to mediate between David and his Father was that he tried. He tried hard. But not everything we try to do, not even things that God calls us to do, necessarily bear fruit. Do you recall reading the vision of Isaiah's call? It begins, "In the year that King Uzziah died ..." Isaiah 6: 1-8 is what we usually hear read. But God's message that follows is that he will prophesy God's word, but the people will not listen. Today we are so often told to judge things and people according to results. But results depend on many

things. Our faithfulness to God is within our control, but not the outcome of what we do based on that faithfulness.

I think the author of this lesson also conflates things that are within the scope of individual responsibility with things that are collective – generally government. In a sense, that was why Jonathan had a problem. His call to God led him to sacrifice his future for David. We don't have words from Jonathan to that effect, but that was how he may have seen it, and that was very definitely how Saul saw it. Saul called for Jonathan to be obedient to his, the King's word, and to do his duty as the heir of the crown to sustain the dynasty. In effect, Saul in his person was the government. That's how monarchy works.

Things are different in our day. We can choose to make sacrifices of our own interests for the sake of what we hear as God's call to us. But are we to sacrifice other people's interests? That's what government does. It takes resources from some people and gives them to others. Some of those others in return dedicate themselves to public service – our soldiers and sailors that defend us from foreign aggression, for example. Others don't. The tendency is for those in power to gather more resources and power to themselves. Governments don't play by the same rules as individual, mortal human beings. They are not of a limited lifespan, in theory. Governing bodies often have no greater purpose than to perpetuate and increase their own power. It is against such abuse of power that our forefathers declared Independence. Self-surrender and trust in God works for individuals. We need to be careful when we apply those principles to those, individually or as governing bodies, responsible for public safety of others.

*Prayer: Merciful and patient God, enable us to grow in our willingness and ability to forgive others, including ourselves, that we may better share your love for us all. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*