

1 Samuel 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 31 July 2020

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 20 Then David fled from Niath in Ramah, and came and said before Jonathan, What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?

And he said to him, Far from it, you shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing, either great or small, without disclosing it to me. And why should my father hide this from me? It is not so. But David vowed again, saying, Your father knows well that I have found favour in your eyes. And he thinks, Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved. But truly, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.

Then Jonathan said to David, Whatever you say, I will do for you. David said to Jonathan, Behold, tomorrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit at table with the king.

But let me go that I may hide myself in the field till the third day at evening. If your father misses me at all, then say, David earnestly asked leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city, for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the clan.

[1:04] If he says, Good, it will be well with your servant. But if he is angry, then know that harm is determined by him. Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you.

But if there is guilt in me, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father? And Jonathan said, Far be it from you. If I knew that it was determined by my father that harm should come to you, would I not tell you?

Then David said to Jonathan, Who will tell me if your father answers you roughly? And Jonathan said to David, Come, let us go out into the field. So they both went out into the field.

And Jonathan said to David, The Lord, the God of Israel, be witness. When I have sounded out my father about this time tomorrow, or the third day, behold, if he is well disposed toward David, shall I not then send and disclose it to you?

But should it please my father to do you harm, the Lord do so to Jonathan, and more also if I do not disclose it to you and send you away, that you may go in safety. May the Lord be with you, as he has been with my father.

[2:09] If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the Lord, that I may not die, and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.

And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, May the Lord take vengeance on David's enemies. And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul.

Then Jonathan said to him, Tomorrow is the new moon, and you will be missed, because your seat will be empty. On the third day go down quickly to the place where you hid yourself when the matter was in hand, and remain beside the stone heap, and I will shoot three arrows to the side of it, as though I shot at a mark.

And behold, I will send the boy, saying, Go, find the arrows. If I say to the boy, Look, the arrows are on this side of you, take them, then you are to come, for as the Lord lives, it is safe for you, and there is no danger.

But if I say to the youth, Look, the arrows are beyond you, then go, for the Lord has sent you away. And as for the matter of which you and I have spoken, behold, the Lord is between you and me forever.

[3:19] So David hid himself in the field, and when the new moon came, the king sat down to eat food. The king sat on his seat, as at other times, on the seat by the wall.

Jonathan sat opposite, and Abner sat by Saul's side, but David's place was empty. Yet Saul did not say anything that day, for he thought, Something has happened to him.

He is not clean, surely he is not clean. But on the second day, the day after the new moon, David's place was empty. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, Why has not the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?

Jonathan answered Saul, David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem. He said, Let me go, for our clan holds a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to be there.

So now, if I have found favour in your eyes, let me get away and see my brothers. For this reason he has not come to the king's table. Then Saul's anger was kindled 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?

[4 : 28] For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die. Then Jonathan answers Saul his father, Why should he be put to death? What has he done?

But Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him, so Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death. And Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger, and ate no food the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, because his father had disgraced him.

In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him a little boy. And he said to his boy, Run, and find the arrows that I shoot.

As the boy ran, he shot an arrow beyond him. And when the boy came to the place of the arrow that Jonathan had shot, Jonathan called after the boy and said, Is not the arrow beyond you?

And Jonathan called after the boy, Hurry, be quick, do not stay. So Jonathan's boy gathered up the arrows and came to his master. But the boy knew nothing. Only Jonathan and David knew the matter.

[5 : 32] And Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and said to him, Go and carry them to the city. And as soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap, and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times.

And they kissed one another and wept with one another, David weeping the most. Then Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring forever.

And he rose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city. In 1 Samuel chapter 20, David inquires of Jonathan, asking what he has done wrong, that Saul keeps seeking his life.

Jonathan, unaware of most of the recent events, believes that Saul is still keeping his oath.

However, knowing how firm the friendship between David and Jonathan is, and remembering how Jonathan talked him out of killing David the last time, Saul has kept it from him.

David arranges a plan with Jonathan. It will smoke out Saul's intentions into the open. At the start of the month was a new moon feast, a religious event and sacrificial meal.

[6 : 38] And David wouldn't turn up, he would leave his seat empty. When Saul inquired about his absence, Jonathan would tell his father that David had been called home to his family's yearly sacrifice.

Depending on Saul's reaction, David would either be told to return to the court, or to flee for his life. David already knew that Saul had broken his oath and was trying to kill him. However, by getting Jonathan to discover the fact for himself, Jonathan would also be alerted to the true nature of the situation, and to the character of his father.

Jonathan was still believing the best of Saul, and prepared to countenance the possibility that Saul could take an oath in the name of the Lord, and then go back on it. Jonathan speaks to David very plainly, making clear that he knows that David is the true heir of the kingdom, and the one that the Lord will establish in Saul's place.

He asked to form a covenant with David again. This time the covenant is not merely with David as an individual, but with David's house after him. The relationship between David and Jonathan has changed significantly in these chapters, where the focus was once on David being taken into the favour of Jonathan's house, now the focus is on Jonathan being taken into the favour of David's.

David had begun by asking for covenant mercy and faithfulness from Jonathan, and now Jonathan asks the same of David. Jonathan devises a plan by which he can alert David of his father's intentions.

[8 : 00] David was to stay three days in the field. The fact that all of these events occurred in a field is worth noticing, perhaps. Two brothers in a field might remind us of Cain and Abel. However, unlike Cain, the older Jonathan wants to save the life of his younger brother, not to take it.

On the third day, Jonathan would shoot three arrows, and depending on where he shot them, David would know whether it was safe for him to return, or whether he had to flee. When Saul discovered that David had left the court, and realised that Jonathan knew, he was furious with Jonathan. He refers to David as the son of Jesse, even though David is an adopted son and son-in-law in his house. Recognising that Jonathan's loyalties lie with David, he speaks in a way that seems to disown Jonathan too, calling him the son of a whore, and saying that he has shamed his mother, suggesting that he isn't prepared to own Jonathan as his son.

By this point, it is clear that Jonathan has openly been playing second fiddle to David, and his father has noticed. A few chapters ago, David was spoken of as if he was a wife being taken into the household of Saul, the husband and king of Israel.

Now David is being spoken of as the new husband and king of Israel, and Jonathan is seeking his protection and support. Jonathan recognises himself as dependent upon a new dynasty.

[9 : 17] Even though David was a fugitive whose life was sought by the king, Jonathan recognises that the Lord is with David, and that no force will ultimately prevail against him. Saul then cast a spear at Jonathan, just as he had done with David, and once again he misses.

The once great warrior Saul has missed his target on three separate occasions, while Jonathan will hit his target three times in a row later in the chapter. On the morning of the third day, Jonathan went out into the field and gave David the signal to flee from Saul.

After the boy who was gathering Jonathan's arrows had departed, David came out of his hiding place and bade an emotional farewell to Jonathan. They would only meet once more before Jonathan's death.

This moment is the start of a new phase in the life of David. He has been tested in the house of his father-in-law and will now become the leader of his own men, a group that will become the seed of a new Israel.

The story of 1 Samuel is, among other things, a story of adopted sons taking over from natural sons. The wicked sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, are replaced by Samuel, the righteous son of Hannah.

[10 : 22] The unfaithful sons of Samuel are replaced by Saul, whom Saul adopts as his own child. The son of Saul, Jonathan, is replaced by Saul's adopted son and son-in-law David.

We see a similar theme in other parts of the Bible, most notably in Genesis, where the older son is often replaced by the younger. Abel is favoured over Cain. Isaac is favoured over Ishmael. Jacob is favoured over Esau. Joseph is favoured over his brothers. In most of these cases, we see the favoured son being hated, resisted and resented by the ones that he replaces. In such situations, two sacrifices are called for and most do not want to make them.

First, fathers have to be prepared to give up their beloved sons and their ambitions for them, for the sake of other sons. Isaac, for instance, wasn't prepared to make this sacrifice and insisted on blessing Esau rather than Jacob, even though God had made clear that Jacob was the true heir of the covenant.

Abraham showed his willingness in first sacrificing Ishmael, sending him away, even though he dearly wanted to see the covenant established in him. He then showed it again in being prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise.

[11 : 30] Sons also have to be prepared to sacrifice their position and prerogative and give it to one that they might think is less worthy. Esau wasn't prepared to surrender his position to Jacob.

Joseph's brothers hated him for his dreams that he would rise above them. The character of Jonathan then burns upon the pages of 1 Samuel as a most remarkable example of humility, spiritual insight, heroism and devotion.

The nobility of Jonathan stands in the most marked contrast to his father's character. Saul was unwilling to give up power and ambition to God's will. He was the stubborn father who would not sacrifice his son and his ambitions for Jonathan to God's will.

However, when Jonathan saw that God had raised up righteous David, Jonathan acted in a way that is so far beyond the typical mode of human behaviour that it commands our attention.

When David came on the scene, he was the natural rival to Jonathan by his nature. He performed the same sort of brave acts, he received the love and the praise of the people and was successful in everything that he did.

[12 : 35] It seemed increasingly clear that God was with David and that David was going to usurp the place of Jonathan. The natural thing for Jonathan to have done would have been to seek to kill David just as his father was doing.

However, unlike his father who resisted God's purpose, Jonathan acted against all supposed self-interest to serve it. He took David under his protection. He freely gave up his position as crown prince to David.

He risked and resisted the wrath of his father for David. He allowed himself to be dishonoured for David. He put his life on the line for David. His greeting of David in this chapter is like the greeting Esau gave to Jacob upon his return in Genesis chapter 33 verse 4.

There are two Esaus in this story. Saul is the Esau who seeks to take David's life and is envious of his blessing.

But Jonathan is the Esau who is at peace with his brother. Jonathan is a powerful example for us in several respects. We may find ourselves in a position like Jonathan's on occasions.

[13 : 42] Jonathan was the son of a wicked man but with an immense privilege of position. He was willing to give all of this position up and to put his life at risk in order to align himself with the suffering and persecuted servant of God.

Jonathan was a man who at immense personal cost changed sides. He is a man who stepped back from a position that was going to be given to him when someone more suitable appeared.

He was the crown prince who resisted and deceived his father the king for the sake of a poor fugitive. He is the man who willingly gave up his power and title into the hands of God's servant. He was the man who broke the bonds of family for the sake of the kingdom of God. This is the sacrifice that Christ calls us to make. He calls us to love him, the son of David, over father and mother.

We are called to be like Jonathan, surrendering worldly wealth, position and inheritance in order to align ourselves with the weak and persecuted people of God, believing that God's will prevails over all human power.

[14 : 42] Such a sacrifice requires the same humility that Jonathan showed, the humility that makes us willing to be shamed and vilified, to be hated and attacked, to be robbed of status, reputation and ambition, to lose the spotlight and adulation of society and even to put our own lives on the line.

And to do all of this without self-pity or pride, but joyfully and confidently in the light of God's good purpose. In Jonathan, we also see a shadow of a greater Jonathan to come, of one who made himself of no reputation, took on the form of a servant and humbled himself, of one who gave up his rights so that adopted sons might be saved and raised up, of one who considers shame, dishonour and persecution as light when weighed against the delight of doing God's will, of one who gave up family bonds and ambitions for the sake of the weak.

As we have already seen, the book of 1 Samuel described Jonathan as being bound up with the life of David. For this reason, we should not be surprised to find that the greater Jonathan is also David's greater son, this time sent by a loving father who, unlike Saul, did not seek to spare his own son, but out of love gave him up for us all.

Much as his faith was earlier in the story, the love of Jonathan is a shining beacon in the darkness of the unfaithfulness and lovelessness of Saul's court. It is one of the strongest examples of love and devotion in the entire Old Testament.

Yet we are the recipients of a love that utterly eclipses that of Jonathan for David, a love that is more ardent, more costly, and more committed. David was a one-time shepherd boy loved by the son of a king.

[16 : 20] We are sinners loved by the son of God. David was a gifted young warrior loved by a military hero. We are frail creatures of dust loved by the one who is above all earthly powers.

David was a servant of the king for whom the king's son risked his life. We were the enemies of God for whom the son of God gave his life. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which the relationship between David and Jonathan supports David's claim to the throne? David's claim to the throne.