

Closer Than a Brother

1 Samuel 20

A plump Passover moon silvered Jerusalem, tiger striping the narrow lanes with shadows. Eleven disciples crowded around Jesus as they walked past windows that spilled orange lamplight onto the cobblestones.

They were on their way to Gethsemane. And the Master knew every moment mattered.

Soon, He would be in chains, and the time for teaching would be past. So as He walked, God's Son offered some final words of wisdom to these men who had lived with Him for almost three years.

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, John 15:13-15

Our precious Lord is the eternal and exalted God. Still, He does not want slaves who obey Him mechanically. What He wants are friends: people who want to live in a personal, intimate relationship with Him.

But there is nothing new about that, It is a time-worn truth that reaches back to Abraham.

"Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called a friend of God. James 2:2

To Abraham, the Creator was more than his God. He was an intimate companion. And the patriarch counted it a privilege, not a responsibility to serve Him. That is just the kind of relationship the great God who scattered stars across an endless universe wants to share with us.

In fact, that is why Jesus died. He shed His blood and endured unspeakable shame and terrible torment that foolish, frail and failing men and women like us might be His personal friends.

Friendship is the subject of this passage. It spotlights the deep and abiding friendship of two men: David and Jonathan. It was a sustaining, enduring friendship that did not end until Saul's splendid son was slain in battle. And it is a model for us to imitate.

But if we are to understand what it means to walk with our Savior as intimate, eternal friends, we must understand what genuine friendship is. And the friendship of David and Jonathan teaches just that.

The love these two men shared highlights some of the characteristics of the kind of friendship our Lord would have with us.

It shows us how to walk with Jesus, not as slaves, but as friends.

Longing

David was on the run. For some time, he had trembled at the ice and anger in Saul's eyes. Then the king repeatedly tried to kill him.

Fleeing Gibeah by night, David left his wife watching from a window. For a while, he found comfort and counsel with Samuel at Ramah. But now he was on the run again.

However, David did not scurry away as we might expect. He did not hide himself away in a cave deep in the desert mountains of the Arabah or lose himself in the searing sands of the Sinai.

Instead, David traveled to what was the most dangerous spot on earth for him. Traveling by night, he slipped silently back to the green hills of Gibeah, to the very shadow of Saul's court.

It was a terrible chance to take. But David took it. And the reason he did is both simple and beautiful.

There was but one person in all the world David knew he must see in his hour of need. That person was not his father or mother. It was the one person he called his friend—Jonathan.

In the hard logic of this world, there was no real need for David to speak with Jonathan. But David had an inexplicable and insatiable desire to be with his friend. In a swirling storm of frantic fears, of trouble and terror, only a faithful friend could soothe the pounding of his heart and melt the lump in this throat.

If Jesus really is our friend, we have that same kind of longing to be with Him. We do not seek His blessings or His bounty. All we want is Christ Himself. We hunger and thirst for His presence.

O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, Psalm 63:1

But all too often we who claim Christ's name do not have a hunger to be with Him. And we are puzzled that some people make such a big deal about Bible reading, prayer and church attendance.

Really now, we wonder, what does it matter if I miss church now and then? After all, going to church does not make a man a Christian any more than going to a garage makes him an automobile.

But skipping church services and prayer times are merely symptoms of the sickness. The real problem is not that we fail to worship with other believers. Neither is it that our Bibles gather dust on a shelf and prayers are rare and brief.

The real problem is that we feel no need to be with Jesus. When we can omit opportunities to be with our Savior, yet not feel any apparent ill affects at all, we have good reason to be worried. If we have no deep desire and pressing need to be with Jesus, He is might not be our friend at all. Because real friends long to be with one another.

Leaning

David really was taking a desperate, dangerous chance. And King Saul was not the only reason why. When David finally managed to meet with Jonathan, the former shepherd was placing his very life in the hands of the man who was heir to the throne of Israel. Later, Saul angrily tried to make Jonathan understand what was at stake.

...as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Therefore now, send and bring him to me, for he must surely die. Verse 31

Saul was already reigning as king of Israel. The man David would replace would not really be Saul but his son, Jonathan. Nevertheless, David came to his friend and placed himself in the prince's hands.

At first, Saul's son refused to believe his father really did want to kill David. After all, had not the king promised him David would not slain?

Saul vowed, "As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death." 1 Samuel 19:6

But David was adamant. He knew he was in desperate danger and that his next step might well be his last.

Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and came and said to Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before your father, that he is seeking my life?"

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. So why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!"

Yet David vowed again, saying, "Your father knows well that I have found favor in your sight, and he has said, 'Do not let Jonathan know this, or he will be grieved.' But truly as the Lord lives and as your soul lives, there is hardly a step between me and death." Verses 1-3

David had a plan to confirm whether or not the king was plotting his murder. It was time for the new moon sacrifice and feast. And David's seat would be empty.

Jonathan was to make an excuse for his friend. If the king accepted the excuse, all was well. But if he was enraged, then David was right; the king did hunger for his blood.

It was up to Jonathan to carry out the plan. And David knew he could trust his friend. In fact, David trusted Jonathan so much, he gave him what any ambitious prince would consider the chance of a lifetime.

Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you. But if there is iniquity in me, put me to death yourself; for why then should you bring me to your father?" Verse 8

David was fierce warrior. But he would not fight back if Jonathan believed his friend was really an insidious, evil enemy working to overthrow Saul by wickedly working on the emotions of the king's son.

David trusted Jonathan with his life. And Jonathan trusted David in the very same way.

The young prince was a man of prayer. And God had revealed to him that David had been anointed and appointed to be Israel's next king.

But, as Abimelech did after Gideon died, most kings started by slaughtering all their rivals to the throne. So if David was to be king, Jonathan and his children and grandchildren would be in harm's way.

Nevertheless, Jonathan trusted David to take care of his family after he was gone.

"...may the Lord be with you as He has been with my father. If I am still alive, will you not show me the lovingkindness of the Lord, that I may not die? You shall not cut off your lovingkindness from my house forever, not even when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." Verses 13-15

Somehow Jonathan suspected he would not live to see David sit on the throne. And after he was dead, there was no way he could guarantee David would keep his word. But Jonathan and David were friends. And friends trust one another.

Both of these two men were faithful to one another. Jonathan carried out David's plan and protected his friend from his father's wrath.

Many years later after Jonathan was dead, David did indeed become king. And one of the first things he did was search for Jonathan's children. He found only one: a crab-like cripple named Mephibosheth. And from that moment on, Jonathan's son ate at David's table.

Both men were faithful to one another. But there is no friend as faithful as Jesus Christ. He never fails us and never forsakes us. He is much more than worthy of our trust.

And our Lord demands just that: that we trust Him. He insists that we place our very lives in His hands. He is never pleased with us if we stop short of utterly and absolutely leaning and relying upon Him.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, Hebrews 11:6

Jonathan told David he would do whatever his friend asked of him. That was how complete his faith was in David. And our trust in Jesus cannot be any less. We too must be willing to do whatever He asks.

After all, a friend who cannot be trusted is not really a friend at all.

Loving

David and Jonathan were bound by the bonds of a God-given love. Years later, David received the news that his friend had died in battle. And in his grief, David described the love he and Jonathan shared.

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women. 2 Samuel 1:26

The great love these two men shared was the reason why they were willing to trust one another. God's Word makes it plain that was the single reason for the vow they made.

Jonathan made David vow again because of his love for him, because he loved him as he loved his own life. Verse 17

Jonathan's love for David even surpassed his love for his own father. And Jesus said that is the level of love He demands of us.

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Matthew 10:37

David put his life in jeopardy by coming to Gibeah. At the same time, Jonathan put his life in danger by standing for his friend.

At the feast, Saul was filled with fury that David was not present. The king thought he had laid the perfect trap. He knew how careful David was to worship God and obey the Law. So the new moon feast was the perfect time to capture and kill him.

But David did not come. And it was obvious to Saul that his own son had helped his rival. If any doubt remained, it was erased when Jonathan stood up and spoke out for his friend.

Jonathan answered Saul his father and said to him, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" Then Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him down; so Jonathan knew that his father had decided to put David to death. Verses 32-33

When Saul's spear whistled by his ear, Jonathan knew David was right. His father did plan to kill him. So the young prince went to a shallow, rocky valley outside of Gibeah to tell David what had happened.

The two men met and talked a few precious moments. Then David disappeared into the hills. But Jonathan still had to face his father: the very man who had just tried to kill him.

But there is not a single word in the biblical record that Jonathan ever resented or regretted what his friendship with David demanded of him. Trusting David cost Jonathan the throne of Israel. It put him in a difficult and dangerous place with his father, too.

But love does not count the cost. Our Savior loved us so much, He willingly laid down His life for us. And never for a moment has He ever regretted paying such a terrible price, even for friends who are as frail and fickle as we are.

Both David and Jonathan knew love demands both selflessness and sacrifice. That is always true of genuine friendship here on earth. But, oh how much more ought it to be true of our friendship with the Lord whose love for us is limitless!

We cannot hang onto anything in our lives and still call Christ our friend. All our dearest dreams and highest hopes are His for the asking.

We dare not hold anything back. After all, He withheld nothing from us. His love for us was saturated with selflessness and sacrifice.

And our love must be like His.

Leaving

It was a code, of sorts. The plan was that David would hide in the rocky little valley where the two men had talked before. Jonathan would come out to practice archery. And he would bring along a little boy to fetch the arrows.

That is just the way it happened, too. David hid behind a rock and listened carefully. He knew what the signs meant. If Jonathan told the boy the arrow was beside him nearby, all was well with the king.

But if the prince told the boy the arrow was beyond him, Saul had murder on his mind. And it was God's will that David flee for his life.

I will shoot three arrows to the side, as though I shot at a target. And behold, I will send the lad, saying, 'Go, find the arrows.' If I specifically say to the lad, 'Behold, the arrows are on this side of you, get them,' then come; for there is safety for you and no harm, as the Lord lives. But if I say to the youth, 'Behold, the arrows are beyond you,' go, for the Lord has sent you away. Verses 20-22

David hid behind the Stone of Ezel listening. And what he heard broke his heart.

When the lad reached the place of the arrow which Jonathan had shot, Jonathan called after the lad and said, "Is not the arrow beyond you?" Verse 37

Jonathan sent the boy back to town with his bow and arrows. When he was gone, David stepped out from behind the rock.

When the lad was gone, David rose from the south side and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed three times. And they kissed each other and wept together, but David wept the more. Verse 41

The stone where David and Jonathan wept has come to be called the Stone of Parting. And that is just what it was.

Both friends feared they would never see one another again. And they were almost right. They would meet but one more time, and then only for a few minutes.

There is great pain in having to part from dear and precious friends. Jesus understood that. He could see the sorrow in the eyes of His disciples when He told them He must soon leave them.

I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, "Where are You going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. John 16:5-8

The disciples were filled with sorrow because they were about to say goodbye to the dear Friend who had walked by their side for three golden years.

But in the end, their sorrow was needless. They were yet to learn there is no stone of parting for those who claim Christ as Savior and Friend.

Every moment of every day the Savior's Spirit is with those who call Jesus their Friend. Even death itself cannot separate us from our Savior's presence. He has promised to always be with those who choose to love and live for Him.

I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Matthew 28:20

He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)

Jesus is more than merely a Friend to those who trust Him. He is a an unfailing Friend, a faithful Friend, a forever Friend.

He is the Friend each of us needs.