

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: D Pulman

1st Samuel, Samuel to King David

Chapter 20 - Jonathan protects David

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

The background to chapter 20 is found in the previous chapter where Saul's son Jonathan intercedes with his father on behalf of David. Then we have David's wife Michal protecting David from Saul's messengers who had been sent to David's home to slay him. Finally, at the end of the chapter the Spirit of God intervenes to protect David. So we open chapter 20 where David realises that there is no possibility of reconciliation with Saul.

We will consider chapter 20 under seven headings. Scriptures quoted will be from the English Standard Version.

1. David goes to see Jonathan, vv.1-3.
2. David and Jonathan devise a test, vv.4-11.
3. Jonathan seeks confirmation of David's friendship, vv.12-17.
4. Jonathan devises a means to communicate with David, vv.18-23.
5. Saul asks about David, vv.24-29.
6. Saul becomes angry, vv.30-34.
7. Jonathan and David go their separate ways, vv.35-42.

1. David goes to see Jonathan, vv.1-3.

"Then David fled from Naioth 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."

David now realised that there is no possibility of a reconciliation between Saul and himself. Even being with the prophet Samuel was no guarantee of safety. However he had one person to whom he can turn to seek help, Jonathan, the son of Saul, and to try and find the underlying cause of Saul's hatred and murderous intentions. David and Jonathan had been friends for a long time ever since David had slain Goliath. At the beginning of chapter 18 Jonathan and David became firm friends. So much so that Jonathan gave David his own armour and weapons and this became a sign of a binding covenant between the two. Saul in that same chapter realised that David as well as being a national hero was also a threat to what Saul imagined was his dynasty when the

women sang of David after each of his victories, "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

As David comes to Jonathan he said, "What have I done wrong that your father seeks to kill me?" However Jonathan is not able to comprehend for he said, "You will not die." Jonathan is also confident that his father would do nothing without first discussing his intentions with him. David however presses home his deep concern that Jonathan is not in his father's confidence regarding the matter of himself. David then goes on to invoke the name of the LORD affirming that there is but a step between himself and death. In Proverbs 18:24 we have the Scripture which confirms the relationship that David and Jonathan had. "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." We see this worked out in the lives of these two warrior friends. However, the verse also reminds us of the love the Lord Jesus has for each of His people, highlighted in the line of a hymn, "No one ever cared for me like Jesus." Jesus sticks closer than any brother.

2. David and Jonathan devise a test, vv.4-11.

"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.' 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."

To prove to Jonathan that the threat is real, David suggests a means of testing what he believes is true. It so happened that there was a three-day feast commencing on the next day, and David would normally be expected to be at the king's table. If the king wonders why David is not there and becomes angry with Jonathan's explanation, then Jonathan would know that his father intended to kill David. So David then asks, "How shall Jonathan communicate the result of this simple test?" Jonathan suggests that they walk into the field to discuss the matter.

Saul when he was first anointed king he conducted himself well. But after awhile he began to take matters into his own hands thinking that he knew better than the prophet Samuel. When this course of action backfired, he was not afraid to blame others. This is seen clearly in chapter 15 in relation to the battle against the Amalekites, please read this after the broadcast. Saul is like a believer today who thinks the word of God is not always applicable to them and that they know better. There are Christians who struggle with Genesis and the account of creation because science so-called keeps challenging God's word. What we need is the complete assurance and faith that God's Word is true, no matter what theories are put forth that contradict what we read in Scripture.

[In some Christian circles this well-known hymn, author unknown, captures the thought of the Lord being the Creator, and much more.](#)

Eternal Word, eternal Son,
The Father's constant joy,
What Thou hast done and what Thou art
Shall all our tongues employ;
Our life, our Lord, we Thee adore;
Worthy art Thou for evermore.

The eternal glory's living light,
Of God the image Thou,
Creator of the universe,
Upholding all things now;
Our peace, our strength, we Thee adore;
Worthy art Thou for evermore.

The Son in whom the fulness dwells,
Through whom all glories flow,
Thou hast a servant's form assumed
That creatures God might know;
Our spring, our Head, we Thee adore;
Worthy art thou for evermore.

Declarer of the Father's name,
Expression of His grace,
The Word of life, the light of men,
The Lord with unveiled face;
Our joy, our hope, we Thee adore;
Worthy art Thou for evermore.

3. Jonathan seeks confirmation of David's friendship, vv.12-17.

“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. 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.”

As both Jonathan and David are walking in the field, Jonathan states that he will find out from his father in the next two or three days what his intentions are concerning David. Once known Jonathan would convey the information to David. These two were the greatest of friends and Jonathan is not intending to let any harm come to David. Jonathan had realised that David is the next rightful king of Israel. So, he seeks assurance that David will not put him to death when he reigns, nor will he cut off his family. Once again Jonathan makes a covenant with David seeking to secure his family.

Right from the beginning of their friendship Jonathan understood that David would be the next king. It did not bother him, and he was happy with this because David was his friend. Jonathan

would be happy to serve alongside David. However, Jonathan may have been worried about his father's actions and thought that one day his father would lead the army into a battle which he could not win. So, Jonathan seeks confirmation that when David becomes king, he would not destroy his family, something that happened in days of old to remove any rival claim to the throne. We see David being true to his promise in relation to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, see 2 Samuel chapter 9.

4. Jonathan devises a means to communicate with David, vv.18-23.

“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 young man, saying, ‘Go, find the arrows.’ If I say to the young man, ‘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.””

As it happens there was a new moon feast and Jonathan states simply that David's place at the feast will be empty and he will be missed. Jonathan instructed David to come to the field again on the third day. Jonathan himself will also come to the field under the pretext of having archery practice. Depending upon where Jonathan fires the arrows will show what the outcome was with Saul. Then again Jonathan reminds David of the covenant they had made before the Lord.

Jonathan was obviously still worried about the potential change of events. Jonathan was a 'god fearing' husband and father but was still concerned should he be proved wrong and David right. As believers we should be concerned about our families and keep them before the Lord in prayer. Also as believers we should be concerned about fellow saints and keep them before the Lord in prayer.

In families and even among the best of friends, things may happen to break the friendship or family relationship. Jonathan had this concern. But as believers we now belong to a heavenly family and this cannot be broken. Mary Bowly (1813-1856) in one of her hymns emphasises the certainty of being in that heavenly home. Let me quote one verse,

Lord, we await Thy glory;
We have no home but there,
Where the adopted family
With Thee Thy joy shall share.
No place can fully please us
Where Thou, O Lord, art not;
In Thee, and with Thee, ever
Is found, by grace, our lot.

5. Saul asks about David, vv.24-29.

“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.””

On the first day of the feast Saul noticed that David was not with them. He says nothing thinking that David was defiled and therefore not clean to be at the feast. However, on the second day Saul speaks to Jonathan asking where was David? Jonathan responds with the story that both he and David had agreed that there was a special feast and sacrifice at the family home, and he needed to be there. That he had asked permission from Jonathan who had agreed that David should go. That was why David was not at the king’s table for the new moon feast. At this point Saul could have been reasonable about the situation although he might have been upset that David put his family before himself, the king of Israel. However, in the next verses we get Saul’s reaction. Saul had become a man who liked to know the whereabouts of everyone. Saul gives the impression of a king who was very insecure especially in relation to David whom he saw as a threat to the throne. How quite different to Barnabas and Paul. When these two godly servants are on their first missionary journey Barnabas is mentioned first. But as time progresses soon Paul is mentioned first but there are no bad feelings between the two. No doubt Barnabas recognises Paul’s gift and was happy to take the supporting role.

6. Saul becomes angry, vv.30-34.

“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? 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 answered 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 these few verses Saul’s anger overflow towards Jonathan even blaming his mother and saying it is a shame that Jonathan has chosen David and bring shame on his mother. Spelling out plainly that as long as David lived then the kingdom will not be established under Jonathan. Saul commands that Jonathan bring David to the king. However, Jonathan still defends David and questions what had David done to deserve death. Saul is so consumed with anger that he attempts to kill his own son with a spear. With this action Jonathan realised that his father was determined to kill David no matter what. Jonathan became angry and leaves the feast being grieved for his friend David and because his father had disgraced him by his words and actions.

Saul had shown his real intentions towards David and Jonathan realised that there was no way he can change his father’s mind. Saul was determined to kill his most successful warrior. He had no one to turn to, Samuel had turned away from him, although Samuel grieved for Saul until the day of his death.

Saul was not a Barnabas he was frightened of David and wanted him eliminated. In trying to destroy David, Saul was fighting against the purpose of God. There was no way in which he could succeed. However, the constant harassment of David and his followers was to eventually wear David down. The Lord Jesus was opposed constantly by those who should have known better, but the Saviour continued faithfully in His Father's will.

7. Jonathan and David go their separate ways, vv.35-42.

“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. And Jonathan gave his weapons to his 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.”

The next day Jonathan heads off to the field where he had agreed to meet David under the pretext of target practice taking a young servant lad with him. Verses 35–38 concern the pre-arranged signal between Jonathan and David. The young servant lad was unaware of the real intention of being there in the field. When the arrows are collected Jonathan gives his bow to the lad and sends him away back to the city. It is the final two verses of the chapter that conclude the sad separation of these two friends. The kissing and weeping by both, was a sign of their deep affection for one another. This was a normal thing in middle eastern countries, not so much in the UK where the shaking of hands and a hug would be more commonplace. Finally, there is a reminder of the covenant made between them both. At this point Jonathan returns to the city and no doubt realised that never again will they both fight alongside each other against Israel's enemies. David also became an exile in his own country to face a life of being hunted down by Saul. Jonathan's path back to the city would eventually lead to Mount Gilboa where he would perish alongside his father and brothers in a disastrous battle with the Philistines.

There is a little illustration for believers today. We live in a world which is hostile to Christians, worse in some countries than others. Nevertheless the world is under Satan's control who wants to eliminate the Christian testimony, and to damage believers. However, we must always be thankful for the fellowship of other Christians. In our daily lives we need to live in close contact with the Lord to enable us to have victorious lives. We can do this because the Lord Jesus has been victorious.

[We have this put very beautifully in S W Gandy's \(1776-1851\) hymn,](#)

[His be the victor's name
Who fought the fight alone;
Triumphant saints no honour claim,
His conquest was their own.](#)

By weakness and defeat,
He won the mead and crown;
Trode all our foes beneath His feet
By being trodden down.

He Satan's power laid low;
Made sin, He sin o'erthrew;
Bowed to the grave, destroyed it so,
And death by dying slew.

Bless, bless the Conqueror slain,
Slain in His victory;
Who lived, who died, who lives again-
For thee, His church, for thee!

Regarding David and Jonathan there is a major difference. David was to eventually move to the cave of Adullam where he would be joined by others including his father's house, see chapter 22: vv. 1-2. But Jonathan went back home to his family and stayed near his father. Much has been said about Jonathan not going with David, but we must take account of the ways of God that Saul and most of his sons, Jonathan included, must all eventually be removed so that there is no hindrance to David reigning over all Israel. That is apart from Ishbosheth whom Abner Saul's captain of his army sets up as king. But that venture eventually fails.

Right from the beginning of Genesis Satan set himself up in opposition to God. But that will not succeed. The Lord by His death and resurrection dealt Satan a mortal blow. Satan's fate is certain it only awaits the Lord's final judgment upon him.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on "1st Samuel, Samuel to King David, chapter 20 – Jonathan protects David" talk number T1346.

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