

Scripture Guide

1 Samuel 18:1-5

Biblical Context

In 1 Samuel 18:1-5 we see David and Jonathan's friendship form; however, Jonathan (יוֹנָתָן, *yonathan*; יְהוֹנָתָן, *yehonathan* meaning "Yahweh has given") is first introduced earlier in the narrative. In 1 Samuel 14, he is seen as a brave warrior and military hero who took down the Philistine army with only a sword and his armor-bearer.

With Jonathan both being the son of the king and a military hero, he would have easily been the people's choice and next in line to become heir to the throne after King Saul's death. Yet despite Jonathan's victory against impossible odds, he's too intimidated (like his father and the rest of Israel's army) to fight the Philistine giant Goliath. At this point David steps in, defeats Goliath, and is considered the latest and greatest military hero of Israel.

Jonathan's introduction in the book of 1 Samuel serves to bridge the gap between Saul's rise/decline to power and David's rise to power. While he's the next in line to be king and the new military hero to Israel, Jonathan recognizes the favor of the Lord on David and gives up his candidacy of king for the sake of David.¹

Jonathan's friendship with David serves as an intermediary between David and Saul. Where Jonathan's allegiance ought to lie with his father, Jonathan recognizes God's favor on David and devotes his loyalty to David as well.² Jonathan's friendship also serves as a bridge between the line of Saul being handed over to the line of David. By Jonathan pledging loyalty to David, he is essentially forsaking his opportunity to one day take the throne.

Thematically, the author also wants to show the reader just how different Jonathan is to his father in almost every way. Jonathan is first introduced as going up to fight against the Philistines while his father and all the Israelite army hides from them. Saul is seen as making a rash vow earlier on, while Jonathan's vow is sincere. David's success humbles Jonathan but enrages Saul. Saul seeks to murder David, Jonathan seeks to save his life. Saul wants more power, Jonathan gives up his power.

It should also be noted that the historical reading of Jonathan and David's friendship has been seen as an example for people to follow. Only until recently has this interpretation been scrutinized. In modern interpretations of this story, Jonathan and David's friendship has been seen as suspect, citing that Jonathan and David were in a homosexual relationship.³ The evidence for this is weak,⁴ and

¹ "In as much as Saul was a "king," in view of the hereditary principle in the ancient Near Eastern monarchies, Jonathan, as the popular, eldest son of a king, was likely to become king... Thus, Jonathan could not have considered the succession assured if a suitable rival arose. As probable but not assured, he had even more reason than Saul to feel threatened by David. The attitude of Jonathan, the crown prince, was thus remarkable and exhibits his unselfish character and personality. Jonathan gave while Saul took." Tsumura, D. (2007). *The First Book of Samuel* (p. 473). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

² Interestingly enough, Jonathan is the only one in the narrative who seems to recognize the hand of the Lord upon David whereas Samuel earlier in 1 Sam 16 was reluctant.

³ One of the main passages that lend to this interpretation is 2 Samuel 1:26. However this can be dismissed easily when you consider the patrilineal view of family in the ancient world. To cite Joseph Hellerman's *When the Church Was a Family*, "...the

predominantly stems from an inability to understand biblical friendship and instead see their friendship through a Western hyper-sexualized lens.⁵

Despite their loyalty to one another, their friendship ends by Jonathan's untimely death at the Battle of Mount Gilboa and the tragic conclusion of Saul as well. The ending of 1 Samuel with the death of Saul and Jonathan signifies the beginning of David's reign as king.⁶

Even though the story of Jonathan and his friendship with David ends abruptly, we later see in 2 Samuel 9 David honoring Jonathan's son Mephibosheth because of the covenant made earlier in 1 Samuel 18. In ancient near East culture, Mephibosheth would have been viewed as a threat to David's throne because he is from the line of Saul. But rather than preemptively retaliate, he honors the legacy of his short friendship with Jonathan by blessing Mephibosheth and treating him like royalty, "like one of the king's sons" (2 Sam 9:11)."

Connection and Application

God's people are called to covenant with one another to pursue God's greater purposes. David and Jonathan's covenantal friendship models what the church is called to live out. Jesus says, in John 15:13-14, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." The world will know we are followers of Jesus and His kingdom purposes by the way we model committed friendship with one another. Where the world models contractual friendships that say, "I'm only in this so long as you do this for me," the counter-cultural friendship of God's people is covenantal, "I'm in this no matter what."

Covenant friendship implies ongoing sacrifice. Jonathan models sacrifice and humility in order to lift up David. This is the heartbeat of covenantal friendship, a posture that says, "I'll do whatever it takes to build you and God's Kingdom up." This means renouncing our desires and preferences so that we can love and serve in the same posture that Jesus loved and served us (Mark 10:45, Phil. 2:3). Spiritual friendship is marked by such radical service. When we die to ourselves, we allow the Spirit to shape us to be more like Jesus and build up His kingdom.

closest family tie was not the contractual relationship between husband and wife. It was the blood relationship between siblings...The emotional bonding modern Westerners expect as a mark of healthy husband-wife relationship was normally characteristic of sibling relationships." (p.38) This sentiment is echoed in Proverbs 18:24, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

⁴ Most notably introduced in David Jobling's commentary, *1 Samuel*. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998.)

⁵ For a layman's apologetic on the traditional view, read "The Truth About David and Jonathan" by The Village Church.

<https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/articles/the-truth-about-david-and-jonathan>. The sexual interpretation is ultimately an issue of eisegesis versus exegesis. Exegesis seeks to discover the original meaning and interpretation of a passage. Eisegesis seeks to import an interpretation foreign to the original meaning.

⁶ 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were originally combined as one book.