

“Friends Persevere”

1 Samuel 18:1–5; 1 Samuel 20:41–42;
1 Samuel 23:16–18 (NRSV)

Friends are patient, friends are kind. Friends do not envy, friends do not boast, friends are not proud. Friends do not dishonor friends, friends are not self-seeking, friends are not easily angered, friends keep no record of wrongs. Friends do not delight in evil but rejoice with the truth. Friends always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere.



Like most things in life that matter, strong friendships require perseverance, pushing through and past the inevitable threats to the friendship, perhaps ignoring temporary slights and hurts for the sake of the friendship. This is the story of Jonathan and David. The biblical writers take more care with the story of their friendship than with any other story of friends in the Bible. Their bond is forged in the fires of royal rage and survives even death. Here is their story.

A time for kings

During the time that the Israelites settled in Canaan, they had no earthly king. God was their king. But as time wore on, the people, wanting to be like their neighbors, pushed harder and harder for a human king. Despite God’s pointed warnings that kings are takers, the people persisted, and, in the end, God gave them what they wanted. God’s prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel. Saul quickly proved to be a disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul’s battle orders. Only the intervention of the troops saved Jonathan’s life (1 Samuel 14).

After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that “The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Samuel 15:35). God told his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul’s kingdom.

And Saul’s heart turned against David.

The grace of friendship

Jonathan, Saul’s oldest son and heir to his father’s throne, first met David soon after the victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Like so many others during David’s long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. We are told that Jonathan’s soul was bound to David’s, that Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan’s covenantal friendship was a gift freely given.

For, though soul mates, the relationship of Jonathan and David is pretty one-sided; Jonathan gives far more than he ever gets. Patricia Tull writes, “Friendship often begins with the unmotivated kindness of one person toward another, a generous, uncalculated action offered simply from the joy of companionship. Jonathan’s spontaneous love initiated the friendship and over the course of several episodes he continues to nourish it. He asks nothing of David in the present; all he asks for the future is to be remembered for the sake of his descendants. . . Jonathan stands in good company

with the God whose love for humankind precedes and exceeds all possible returns . . . [Jonathan] is the friend few of us deserve but most of us would dearly love to have.”¹

Twice more, Jonathan would make a covenant with David and only on the third occasion are we explicitly told that the covenant was made mutually. In Jonathan’s gift of friendship there is no quid pro quo; there is no transaction.

Friendships can be complex

Reflecting a friendship based upon the bonding of souls, Jonathan always walked a tightrope between his loyalty to his father Saul and his loyalty to David. The second passage above follows a “test” that Jonathan gives his father. Will Saul still seek to kill David? When Saul fails the test, Jonathan and David launch the plan for David’s escape. The narrator describes their parting and their pledge. Even in this, all that Jonathan asks of David is that, no matter what happens, David would always be faithful to Jonathan’s own family (20:15). At their last meeting (chapter 23), Jonathan eagerly abdicates to David his own right to be Saul’s successor. Not long after, Jonathan is killed in battle. It would be many years before David would act upon his promise to be faithful to Jonathan’s descendants.² Bruce Birch reflects on the difficulties faced by this friendship:

This is a story of conflicting claims of loyalty. The conflict is between the familial and the covenantal. Jonathan has responsibility as a son to his father; for that matter, David has obligations as a son-in-law to Saul. But Saul’s intention to kill David places family loyalty in conflict with a covenant made between Jonathan and David (vv. 8, 16; 18:3). . . . The story of friendship between David and Jonathan suggests that love and loyalty are always experienced in the midst of ambiguous claims and responsibilities. The experience of friendship can lead to painful as well as fulfilling decisions. We live in a societal context prone to cheap relationships. Many live under the illusion that their own self-fulfillment and self-gratification are the primary goals of relationship. But pursuit of such shallow relationships can never result in the experience of loyal friendship given and received. Loyalty requires honoring of commitments, concern for the other as fully as for self, parting as well as being with, giving rather than grasping, pain along with joy.³

¹ from Patricia Tull’s essay. “Jonathan’s Gift of Friendship,” in the April 2004 issue of *Interpretation*.

² See 2 Samuel 9 for the story of David’s kindness toward Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth.

³ Birch, B. C. (1994–2004). The First and Second Books of Samuel. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.