

Heroes of the Faith Series

Loyalty in Action

Jonathan

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Heroes of the Faith:

Loyalty in Action

Jonathan (The Lord has given)

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself

1 Samuel 18:1

The person we are going to study in today's cluster – Jonathan, King Saul's son – is a man remarkable for his loyalty and unselfishness. These are qualities we saw in Ruth, and which we meet again here in a very different context. They are perhaps all the rarer amongst the ranks of the privileged and powerful.

- A bold initiative: Read 1 Samuel 14
- A narrow escape for Jonathan
- A Heart free from Jealousy
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When David arrived as a young man in Saul's court, he quickly distinguished himself through his musical abilities, and later his military prowess. His friendship with Jonathan began almost immediately after defeating Goliath, and continued until his premature death. Jonathan quickly realised that David was the one the nation was looking to, and that he was also God's choice for the day when his father was no longer king.

It is clear that Saul had no proper communication with Jonathan, either as his son or as a senior military commander. In every sense, Saul is a picture of a poor leader; a soul in decline. It was partly in reaction to this lack of leadership that Jonathan set out in 1 Samuel 14 on an extraordinary 'lone wolf' mission to attack a Philistine outpost.

A bold initiative: Read 1 Samuel 14.

We often read in Scripture of God accomplishing His purposes through many or through few (1 Samuel 14:6). Jonathan led his armour bearer up a steep cliff, and bravely attacked a vastly superior Philistine outpost.

What happened next is nothing less than remarkable. God sent a panic amongst the Philistines, causing them to assault each other, a process greatly aided by those Hebrews who had been forced into the Philistine ranks turning their swords on their new masters.

There are other examples in Scripture and in history of God causing such panics. Perhaps the most famous can be found in 2 Chronicles 20.

How does Jonathan's action strike you? Was he foolhardy, and unaccountable? Or more led by the Spirit than even he realised at the time? Did God intervene to rescue him because He 'needed' to, or because it was part of His wider purposes to deliver Israel?

The most likely reason for his action was not some direct prompting from the Lord but rather that he was weary of the long spiritual deadlock. There are strong grounds for believing, however, that Jonathan was confident that God could bring about a victory, even in the face of insuperable odds. One plus God is still a majority – and to his credit, Jonathan was ready and eager to act on that trust at a time when everyone else was paralysed by their fear, as surely as they had been when Goliath had been strutting up and down in front of them. Jonathan looked at the size of the enemy's forces and, like Joshua and Caleb before him, decided that that alone did not make it impossible for God to help them. God always has sufficient resources to overcome intimidating pressures and to win whatever battles need to be won!

If you are facing a major issue now, remember: every problem has many sides to it. You can't always go for the jugular and see it resolved all at once. Other things may have to happen first – but there may be small but necessary steps that you can take now that will make the fuller victory possible further down the road. As Confucius said, "the longest journey begins with the shortest step."

There is an important principle for us to consider here: You cannot steer a park car! It is fine to trust in God, but there are times when that trust has to be acted on – even in the face of insuperable odds. Have you been (or are you going through) such a time in your own life? Share it with the group, and get them to either give thanks for the deliverance that has happened – or pray that it will come about.

A narrow escape for Jonathan

When Saul realised that the Philistine army was in disarray and in full retreat, he mustered his forces and set off in pursuit of them. Although they succeeded in overthrowing their oppressors, the Hebrews would have achieved still more had King Saul not forbidden them from eating that day. This is a classic case of a good principle (namely fasting) being used in just the wrong way at the wrong time.

Saul then finds out that his son Jonathan has helped himself to a small amount of honey in order to keep his strength up. Without even taking account the fact that he knew nothing about his father's crazy order, Saul continues to display his erratic and frankly maniacal tendencies. Overlooking the great deliverance Jonathan has just brought about, Saul declares,

'May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan.'

1 Sam. 14:44

It was vanity that prevented Saul from acting to spare his son's life, because to do so would be to admit that he had been wrong in requiring everyone to fast at such a time. It took the active howls of protest from the soldiers to prevent Jonathan for being put to death for this 'crime.'

Praise God for timely interventions! May we always be there and be willing to speak up for others when we need to do so. At the same time, may the Lord enable us to make right decisions as and when it is most timely to do so – and to be honest enough to admit when he have made wrong decisions. It is better to do what is right (even if that means backtracking from our previous position) rather than striving to keep up appearances.

A Heart free from Jealousy

If I asked you to name a great sin, you might not immediately think of either touchiness or jealousy. Yet which of us finds it easy to work with someone who is touchy, or who easily gives in to feelings of jealousy? Few emotions can wreak such havoc or more quickly wreck relationships. Jealousy may start with a simple stabbing thought in the heart, but it can quickly progress from there into wishing that the other person were not around at all. From there it can quickly ‘graduate’ into taking actions that harm the other person in word or deed. It can even be the first step in the run up to committing murder. This is James 1:15 in action: After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death’

Paul said, ‘I have no one else like [Timothy] who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:20-21)

As much as Paul’s words represent high praise for Timothy, his young protégé, they are also, by implication, an indictment of other Christian workers. It is so easy to allow the “me monster” to get in the way. It is so easy, too, to be on the lookout for our own interests as well as for serving Jesus.

It would have been easy for Jonathan to have allowed resentment to get into his heart. After all, he was the king’s son, but it was David whom the crowds were cheering in the street. Unlike Saul, Jonathan appears to have been remarkably free from the green-eyed monster.

Compare 1 Sam. 18:5-16 with Jonathan’s amazing assertion that he knows that David will be king in his place, that Saul himself knows this, and that Saul will not succeed in harming David 1 Sam. 23:16-18.

When we allow room in our hearts for jealousy or resentment we open them up to all manner of deadly foes. I look on it like this. A disappointment or a sense of being overlooked drips in through the roof of our hearts into our attic. If we do not deal with it at the time, it can seep through the floor and reach the main living quarters of our life: envy, self pity, bitterness, or perhaps, if it takes another route, fear. If we continue to leave these things untreated they can plunge down into the cellar of our hearts, where they breed the bacteria of despair and cynicism – at which point a full scale rescue effort is needed to get ourselves back on track.

The secret is to cry out to the Lord when the first drop comes through the roof. But it is never too late for the Lord to start the pumps and to draw the bacteria filled waters out again!

Look around the circles of your life: at church, home and work. Is there anyone you feel jealous of? You may well find it helpful to pray about this with someone in order to be set free of it.

Facing reality

It is great to think (and say) the best of folks, but there are times to face things as they really are. When David tells Jonathan what King Saul is planning against him, the king's son has difficulty taking it in. Quite understandably, he does not want to think the worst of his father. David proposes a simple test: "Tell your father that I asked your permission to make a special trip to Bethelhem for an annual sacrifice – and see if he goes orbital! (Read 1 Sam. 20:5-12).¹

There was a farmer once who had two calves, a brown one and a black one. He declared that he was going to offer one of them to the Lord, but he hasn't decided yet which one it should be. One evening he burst into the kitchen and said, 'One of the calves has died!' 'Which one?' his wife asked. The farmer immediately replied. 'The Lord's calf!'

Would the Lord use this simple story to speak to you of priorities? Is there anything God has told you to do that you are not doing? Anything you are spending money on that you should not be spending it on? Conversely, is there anything, or anyone, you could be giving more to?

Once we have been 'found out' over one matter, it is easy to make things worse for ourselves. This is precisely what Saul did, when he told Samuel that he had obeyed God's instructions. Samuel knew this was false – he could hear the animals that were supposed to have been killed bleating and baaing! When he challenged Saul, the king tried to make the

¹ Many consider that King Saul's madness was rooted in his rejection as King by God (1 Sam. 15. The rejection itself, of course, came about as the result of disobedience). Samuel told Saul that 'to obey is better than sacrifice,' but Saul failed to destroy the Amalekites completely as God had decreed – and God was grieved (1 Sam. 15:10,11).

best of it by claiming that he had wanted to save the best animals in order to sacrifice them to God. The trouble was: God had not asked this of him. Then he made the excuse that actually he was afraid of the reaction of the people and gave into them, thus trying to move the responsibility for his actions away from himself. Samuel told him that God had rejected him as king and used the tearing of his robe by Saul as he tried to prevent him going away as a live picture of the fact that God had torn the kingdom out of his hands and given it to ‘one of your neighbours – to one better than you.’ (15:29 NIV).

This was the final rejection of Saul as king – and he took it exceedingly badly. Worse, he did everything he could to try to prove God’s decree wrong, by persecuting the man of God’s choosing who would be his replacement. His bid to hold on to his kingship led to murderous thoughts developing in his heart as David became ever more popular: successful not only in battles but also in gaining the love of his daughter Michal and the favour of the people.

It says that God was grieved that he had made Saul king. Is this saying that God had made a mistake? A note in the Life Application Bible makes sense of this remark. ‘God’s comment was an expression of sorrow, not an admission of error (cf Gen. 6:5-7) An omniscient God cannot make a mistake: therefore God did not change his mind. He did, however, change His attitude towards Saul because Saul changed. Saul’s heart no longer belonged to God, but to His own interests.’

When the penny drops, and Jonathan realised what was really in his father’s heart towards David, he was too upset to eat. The pledge of friendship he then made is one of the most moving in Scripture.

So Jonathan made a covenant with David, saying, “May the Lord destroy all your enemies!” And Jonathan made David reaffirm his vow of friendship again, for Jonathan loved David as much as he loved himself. (1 Sam. 20:13-17)

When the two men parted at this time, both wept together. Real friendship is always always prepared both to weep and to rejoice in the good times together.

Overview: True Loyalty versus blind Loyalty

Then Jonathan said to the young man who bore his armor, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the LORD will work for us. For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few.” So his armorbearer said to him, “Do all that is in your heart. Go then; here I am with you, according to your heart.”

1 Samuel 14:7

Then Jonathan told David, “I promise by the LORD, the God of Israel, that by this time tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, I will talk to my father and let you know at once how he feels about you. If he speaks favorably about you, I will let you know. But if he is angry and wants you killed, may the LORD kill me if I don’t warn you so you can escape and live. May the LORD be with you as he used to be with my father. And may you treat me with the faithful love of the LORD as long as I live. But if I die, treat my family with this faithful love, even when the LORD destroys all your enemies.”

1 Samuel 20:12-15

The way Jonathan resolved this challenge shows the importance not only of being loyal, but of what must guide that loyalty. Some people’s ‘loyalty’ can be fundamentally ‘blind’, and fail to take certain realities into account. What we note here is that it was Jonathan’s supreme loyalty to God that enabled him to ‘arbitrate’ in this painful choice he had to make here between loyalty to his father and loyalty to his friend.

If we only make our decisions according to human wisdom, we are almost bound to feel as though we are letting certain people down. It is our duty both to be loyal first and foremost to God – and to make it clear to others that this is our ultimate yardstick. Do those around you know where your strongest loyalty lies?

Pray for all who have a choice to make in a battle between loyalties!

The Lord is a witness between you and me for ever! (1 Sam. 20:23)
After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the king’s son. There was an immediate bond of love between them, and they became the best of friends. From that day on Saul kept David with him at the palace and wouldn’t let him return home. And Jonathan made a

special vow to be David's friend, and he sealed the pact by giving him his robe, tunic, sword, bow, and belt.

1 Sam. 18:1-4

Despite being the rightful Crown Prince, Jonathan recognised that David would make the better king, and that this was God's will.

Literally it says that "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David" (1 Samuel 18:1 Heb. *nephesh*, lit. "soul bound with soul"). None had such reason to hate David as Jonathan – yet none proved so staunch a friend.¹

Strong friendships mean so much to us in life. They are one of God's richest gifts to us on our pilgrimage. Loyalty is a principle ingredient in both courage and friendship.

Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have made a pact in the LORD's name. We have entrusted each other and each other's children into the LORD's hands forever." (1 Sam. 20:42)

We have already seen Jonathan as a hero capable of great acts of faith (1 Sam. 14:6). The more the story develops, the greater the contrast becomes between Jonathan and his feckless faithless father.

When David was on the run in the wilderness, hiding from Saul, Jonathan came to visit him, and 'helped him to find strength in the Lord.' (1 Sam. 23:16-18) Is this not what all true friends do, sharing confidences and encouraging each other to trust God wholeheartedly?

Loyal people are prepared to stand by their commitments, even if it costs them for doing so. Years later, David went to great lengths to fulfil the promise he had made as a young man by taking Jonathan's lame son,

¹ Some people have suggested, based on David's words in 2 Sam. 1:26, that his relationship with Jonathan had homosexual overtones. In 1 Sam 18:1, neither the Hebrew word for love *ahav* nor anything else about their relationship suggests any such thing. The word *ahav* was a technical term in covenant texts for the bonding together by pacts of loyalty and reciprocal responsibility. It refers to a relationship between two parties who could depend on one another. According to v. 4, Jonathan bestowed his garments and his weapons upon David. This was a relatively common practice in antiquity which indicated the transfer of position. Jonathan acknowledged God's choice of David. And by this symbolic transfer of garments and weapons, demonstrated his own acquiescence to God's will (1 Samuel 18:3-4).

Mephibosheth, into his palace to live with him. Who would you associate with your most loyal friends?

The Lament of the Bow: Jonathan's Death

Forced to choose between his father and David, Jonathan consistently sided with David, whom he acknowledged as the Lord's chosen King (1 Sam 23:17). Despite this, he was still submissive to his father's command to accompany him to Mt Gilboa for one final, disastrous battle against the Philistines. This was where he, along with his brothers, lost his life at the hand of the Philistines, while an injured Saul took his own life, falling on his sword (1 Sam. 31:1-6). 2 Samuel begins with the moving 'Lament of the Bow' that David composed in honour of Saul and Jonathan. He praises both of them as 'heroes,' but he grieves most especially for Jonathan, whom he calls his brother, who has consistently shown him such astonishing love and faithfulness (2 Sam 1:17-27). There is a very real place in the life of the church for such generous-hearted laments – all the more remarkable in that Saul had, for many years, dedicated his life to pursuing him.

May we be equally as generous both to those whom we love and to those who bring us grief.

