

ARROWS BEYOND YOU

1 Samuel 20:1-42

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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'" (1 Sam. 20:42).

It is sad to say, but from the moment that David came to fame by his victory over the giant Goliath, his days of peace in Israel were numbered. The reason was the insane jealousy of King Saul, who saw David only as a threat, despite the young man's continual record of humble and faithful service. In the chapters that follow David's victory, we are inching towards his exile, with each chapter presenting a different character study during this time of crisis and trial. In chapter 18, the key actor is David in his response to Saul's sudden attempts to take his life. Chapter 19 focuses on Saul, whose evil spirit drives him from one failed attempt against David to another. Chapter 20 returns our focus to Jonathan, Saul's son and David's covenant friend. Jonathan finds himself trapped in what many people would consider a terrible vise, with his faith and godliness competing against ambition and personal gain. Jonathan shows us how a man of God approaches a situation apparently governed by lust, fear, and hatred, but in fact governed by his faith and by the bonds of covenant fidelity.

DAVID'S PANICKED APPEAL

Seeing David at the beginning of this chapter, it is hard to remember that this is the young champion who boldly faced Goliath in the name of the Lord. Different threats take differing tolls on people, and while David could fearlessly face an

uncircumcised warrior like Goliath he was unnerved by the open hostility of the king of God's own covenant people. Therefore, when Saul came to Ramah, David fled back in panic to Gibeah. Seeking out his friend Jonathan, he asked what he had done to deserve such treatment: "What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?" (1 Sam. 20:1).

Some commentators see David's flight from Samuel and the prophets at Naioth as an indication that he was seeking worldly rather than divine aid. It certainly is true that David's panicked attitude is explained at least in part by the absence of prayer in this chapter. We get a sense that David had allowed his thoughts to dwell on the injustice of his situation and the temporal threat posed by King Saul, forgetting the reality of sin in the world as a sufficient explanation for injustice and not remembering God's sovereign care over his life. On another occasion, David would pray, "The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" (Ps. 27:1), but here we see no evidence of that light in David's life, but only the darkness of fear and alarm.

Jonathan responded to David's appeal with dismay: "Far from it! You shall not die," he answered. He reminded David that he was present for Saul's councils and would know of any plot against his friend. This attitude seems incredible, since Saul had already made several direct attempts on David's life and Jonathan had recently rebuked his father's stated intent to have David killed (1 Sam. 19:1-5). No doubt, Jonathan was not merely being naïve or overly charitable in denying Saul's intention: more likely, he was still coming to grips with the terrible situation and his mind had not yet accustomed itself to the evidence about his father. Matthew Henry explains, "Jonathan, from a principal of filial respect to his father, was very loth to believe that he designed or would ever do so wicked a thing."¹

David was not persuaded by Jonathan's rosy assessment, and he answered incitefully: "Your father knows well that I have found favor 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" (1 Sam. 20:3). David's oath signals

¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:304.

his loss of nerve before the prospect of Saul's violence. Seeing David's distress, Jonathan asked what he could do to help. David answered by reminding him that Saul's court would celebrate a monthly ritual meal, at which David was expected to attend. "But let me go," he said, "that I may hide myself in the field till the third day at evening." Jonathan was to cover for David's absence with a falsehood, claiming that David's family had required him to return home briefly for a sacrifice. "If he says, 'Good!' it will be well with your servant," David concluded, "but if he is angry, then know that harm is determined by him" (1 Sam. 20:5-7).

Commentators vary in their assessment of David's subterfuge, some excusing it as an understandable deception and others condemning it as a simple violation of God's command not to lie (Ex. 20:16). I think it is possible to justify this deception biblically, given God's holy war against Saul, yet it is also clear that David was acting out of fear rather than faith. This was not the kind of action that David later would be proud of, and we are reminded by the apostle Paul that "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

There is one matter, however, in which David sets a good example. In his distress, he sought safety in covenant promises that had been given to him. Jonathan had covenanted his faithfulness to David, so David sought Jonathan out for help. Ralph Davis comments: "In confusion and trouble, you take yourself to the one person who has made a covenant with you. In David's disintegrating world there was yet one space of sanity, one refuge still intact – Jonathan. There was covenant; there David could expect *faithfulness*."²

It was, in fact, Jonathan's covenant faithfulness to which David appealed in his despair. "Therefore deal kindly with your servant," he pleaded, "for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you" (1 Sam. 20:8). This is an excellent way for believers to pray to our covenant God. David urges Jonathan not to hand him over to his father, and, if David had committed a sin worthy of death and must be brought to justice, Jonathan should be the one to slay him: "If there is guilt in me, kill me yourself" (1 Sam. 20:8). David knew that he would find justice in a covenant friend, just as believers

² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 168.

who have appealed to the blood of the new covenant in Christ may confidently seek justification in the presence of God. God's covenant promises, "I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12), so those who have entered into covenant with God through faith in Christ may come to him to be vindicated and find protection for their souls.

JONATHAN'S OATH AND COVENANT

When Jonathan promised his good will and support, David asked how Jonathan would convey news of Saul's conduct. At this, Jonathan took David out into a field – apparently one familiar to them both – and made his arrangements. He spoke in the formal language of a covenant oath: "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" (1 Sam. 20:12-13).

Notice how Jonathan responds to this dreadful dilemma. He is not able to manage all the variables, nor even to reconcile his own loyalties. He is Saul's son and is duty bound to his father, but also David's covenant friend. Moreover, he himself stands to lose much if things should go the wrong way. Many people have been completely overthrown by the kind of dilemma Jonathan was in. Yet at the end of this chapter – indeed, at the end of his life – Jonathan escapes without any reproach and succeeds in upholding his conscience. What enabled him to accomplish this? The answer is *faithfulness*. Jonathan's duty was to be faithful in all his relationships and to the covenant into which he had entered. He relied on God to save him, however the Lord might ordain the events of his life. For his own part, he sought his duty and resolved to live faithfully.

First, Jonathan's duty called him to be faithful to his covenant promise to David. He thus made his arrangements to inform David of Saul's mood:

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" (1 Sam. 20:18-22).

Next, Jonathan took counsel of God's revealed Word so far as he knew it. We are never told how Jonathan learned that God had appointed David to succeed Saul as king, but it is clear that Jonathan was aware of God's arrangement. This, of course, meant that Jonathan would not follow his father to the throne. Instead of resisting God's will, Jonathan put God's glory before his own and determined to serve on the side of the Lord. Knowing God's will for David's kingdom, he dutifully served that cause, accepting that his higher duty to God overrode any lesser obligation to obey his father. We, likewise, should make it our business to serve the cause of God's gospel regardless of the apparent cost to ourselves, in all cases obeying God's Word even if we must refuse the commands of men.

Third, having accepted God's Word, Jonathan sought his own refuge through covenant promises. For this, having bound himself to faithfulness towards David, he now binds David in covenant faithfulness to him, knowing through faith in God's Word that the royal destiny lay with David, despite his father's threats on David's life. "May the Lord be with you," he said, "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" (1 Sam. 20:13-15).

When there was a change of dynasty in the ancient world, the universal practice called for the complete slaughter of the prior ruler's household. Jonathan thus appeals to David to spare his life and that of his children when God clears the way for David's kingship. Jonathan was acting out of his covenant responsibility for his children and their children: to provide for them after the fall of his father's house, "Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul" (1 Sam. 20:17). "There has

seldom, if ever, been exhibited a finer instance of triumphant faith,” writes William Blaikie, “than when the prince, with all the resources of his kingdom at his beck, made this request of the helpless outlaw.”³ In this way alone, by faith in God’s Word as it spoke to his situation, Jonathan secured a future for his descendants, as David later fulfilled his part of this covenant by bringing Jonathan’s lame son, Mephibosheth, into his own household.

Like Jonathan, believers today are to guide our way through life’s challenges by the compass of faithfulness to our covenant duties. Few of us face royal dynastic controversies, but we do confront various difficult challenges in life. Ralph Davis provides an example in the selfless ministry of his mother towards his dying father after his mind began to slip. She had promised faithfulness “in sickness and in health” and her duty to him was neither glamorous nor dramatic, but only covenantal. Davis recalls, “None months after my father died my mother died, perhaps because she felt she could. She had accomplished her mission: taking care of her husband.”⁴ The examples could be multiplied: husbands remaining faithful to difficult wives, Christians keeping an unprofitable business going to provide jobs to long-serving employees, church members pulling together during a pastoral transition, or in other cases Christians taking a costly stand for God’s Word despite the scorn of church leaders and friends.

Even more importantly, believers today, like Jonathan, may find their salvation by entering into the covenant of love offered by the anointed king over God’s people. Jesus calls us into his covenant embrace, promising to give us rest (Mt. 11:28), relieve our thirsty souls (Jn. 7:37), grant us light in the darkness (Jn. 8:12), and offering us forgiveness (Jn. 3:36) and resurrection into everlasting life (Jn. 11:25-26). Jesus covenants with all who will come: “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24).

³ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 321.

⁴ Davis, *1 Samuel*, 170.

AT TABLE WITH KING SAUL

Jonathan's duty to David required him to go back to the presence of his father: "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" (1 Sam. 20:24-25). Saul of course noticed David's absence, but since it was a ritual feast he supposed that David must have suffered some defilement, which one could experience by any number of means. It speaks well for David's character that Saul's natural explanation was one that represented David's careful observance of God's law. But on the second day, which was not a ritual meal, there could be no such excuse. So when Saul asked Jonathan for an explanation, his son replied with the prearranged falsehood: "Jonathan answered Saul, 'David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem,' since his clan was holding a sacrifice and his brother commanded his presence. 'For this reason he has not come to the king's table'" (1 Sam. 20:28-29).

Whatever we think of David and Jonathan's deception, it clearly did not accomplish anything positive. Jonathan was undoubtedly a very poor liar and a savvy person like Saul was able to see right through his falsehood. The king's explosive response was stunning to his son: "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?'" (1 Sam. 20:30). It is a sign of grace when a believer learns to curb his or her tongue in anger, and Saul's outburst signifies the opposite. Saul vented his abuse, insulting his son by cursing Jonathan's mother, Saul's own wife. His hatred for David is seen in his referring to him as the "son of Jesse" (just as we show contempt today by referring to someone only by their last name). To Saul, unrestrained in his abusive rage, Jonathan's opposition to his will in any cause – even a righteous one – earned the forfeit of his status as son. Since Jonathan refuses to curry his father's favor, even his mother is now cursed she for whelping so insolent a son.

To the extent that it is worthwhile reflecting on Saul's angry invective, we can note three powerful motivators that poured out of the king's heart. The first is *shame*: so determined was Saul to master

all wills that his son's righteous disobedience was a source of shame to the king. It speaks volumes about Saul's descent into depravity that he sees Jonathan's godliness as "the shame of your mother's nakedness," by which he refers to the act of a woman giving birth. Second, Saul seeks to manipulate by means of *guilt*, naming Jonathan the "son of a perverse, rebellious woman," by his failure to obey Saul's murderous will (1 Sam. 20:30). Finally, Saul appeals to *greed*: "For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established" (1 Sam. 20:31). Saul thus depicts a soul depraved by its rebellion against God: he sees shame in righteous conduct, he applies false guilt to motivate others to sin, and his vision is bounded by the greed of what he and his family might possess.

With these poisoned barbs planted in Jonathan's heart, Saul issued his demand: he must bring David to be killed. Unless we have experienced this kind of parental manipulation or known loved ones who have thus suffered, we little imagine the potency of this venom. The movie *Braveheart* depicts a similar encounter between the young Scottish lord Robert the Bruce (1274-1329), who later becomes one of Scotland's great heroes, and his power-groping father, the Lord of Annandale. The Bruce is pulled by the call of duty to his nation, but cowed by his father's scorn and tempted by his own lust for power. Overwhelmed by his father, the Bruce betrays Scotland by riding to battle against his countrymen in the company of its chief enemy, William I of England. The weakness the Bruce showed under the influence of his wicked father is matched only by the shame on his face when he is recognized by William Wallace, leader of the Scottish resistance. The learning experience through his failure ends up shaping the Bruce so that he will never betray his people again.

Saul's son, Jonathan, needed no such shameful experience to know where his covenant duty lay. He defended David to his father, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" (1 Sam. 20:33). At this, Saul took up his ever-present spear and hurled it to strike down his own son.

Let us reflect on the horror of Saul's moral degeneracy. How little he dreamed of this crazed and despicable conduct when he first hardened his heart against the Lord. Saul had justified making himself a

servant of self-will and sin because he resented God's chastisement, and was unwilling to humble himself before the rebukes of God's Word through the prophet Samuel. I wonder if Saul would have followed that path then if he could have seen the man that sin would make him to be? How little he reckoned on the perverting power of sin once it is embraced or the curse of God's judgment when the Lord should decide to deliver him over to iniquity! It is not without reason that Hebrews 3:12-13 urges Christians: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Saul's mad rage had two effects on Jonathan. First, it tore away any last hope of reason or godliness in his father. "So Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death" (1 Sam. 20:33). The second effect was a bitter grief over the conduct of his father. "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" (1 Sam. 20:34).

Jonathan had liberated himself from the depravity of his father by choosing covenant faithfulness to God over a self-centered grasping after personal ambition. He had come to a living embrace of Jesus' maxim, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Mt. 6:33). But the grief of his father's malice burned in his heart. Saul could not accept Jonathan for the very reason that God's Word praises him. Saul thought his son a shameful fool for suffering the loss of a kingdom in order to be faithful to covenant of love. To suffer this misunderstanding and contempt has been the lot of many who walk with the Lord. Jesus declared that his followers must all be willing to suffer this very kind of abuse: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26-27).

FAREWELL TEARS

Jonathan's bitter education at Saul's table left him with only one course of action to follow. "In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to the appointment with David, and with him a little boy" (1 Sam. 20:35). Realizing now the cunning madness of his father, and suspecting that he might be followed, Jonathan was discrete and careful. "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?'" (1 Sam. 20:36-37). This was, of course, the pre-arranged signal for David to flee. Conveying his newly-gained urgency and throwing away restraint, Jonathan added, "Hurry! Be quick! Do not stay!" (1 Sam. 20:38). After sending the boy back to the city with his weapons, Jonathan went forward and David emerged from his hiding place. David acknowledged his debt to Jonathan by bowing before him three times. Then "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'" (1 Sam. 20:41-42).

Anyone who is put off by this show of affection between godly men knows nothing of the close bond of wartime comrades, childhood friends, or covenant brothers in the Lord. Nor do we appreciate the gravity of their lamentable situation if we think their tears an unmanly display. On the eve of the American Civil War, Lewis Armistead and Winfield Scott Hancock spent a night weeping together as they departed for the war, one to assume command in the Southern army and the other in the North. Both would bitterly lament their parting, especially on the day when, as Armistead died and Hancock lay bleeding, their respective commands clashed in the climactic assault of the Battle of Gettysburg. Men of great feeling will exhibit emotion not only over their victories and losses, but also over lost and parted comrades.

David and Jonathan likewise parted for their duties on opposite sides of the conflict about to begin. The chapter ends with the statement that David "rose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city" (1

Sam. 20:42). Only once more, briefly in a desperate and dangerous setting, would the two men meet again in life. But despite the travail of the occasion, their parting was unsullied by infidelity and their consciences were clean because of their obedience to the clear call of duty. Though physically separated and pulled apart by differing obligations, “they would remain inseparably joined by the oath they swore in the Lord’s name.”⁵

This friendship provides an eternal example to the uplifting and purifying effect of godly brotherhood. Jonathan’s covenant faithfulness may only be excelled by that of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Blaikie writes: “In the case of Jesus Christ, we have all the noble qualities of Jonathan in far higher excellence than his, and we have this further consideration, that for us He has laid down His life, and that none who receive His friendship can ever be separated from His love.”⁶

“GO IN PEACE”

The final words in this bitter chapter are spoken by Jonathan, “Go in peace.” What a ludicrous statement, outwardly speaking!

They were departing for war and conflict. David was about to flee in panic and would live for years as a fugitive, and Jonathan was returning to what was probably the more distressing fate of continuing in service to his wicked and deranged father. How could Jonathan speak of their going in peace? His answer was the covenant they had made, which established peace between them: “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’” (1 Sam. 20:42). Through all the troubles to come, both men would be faithful to their covenant to the end of their days, so in the midst of such great conflict they departed in peace and lived in peace. If we will likewise commit to a life of faithfulness in covenant with others, we too will enjoy peace even in a world of woe.

⁵ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 219.

⁶ Blaikie, *1 Samuel*, 328.

More important still was the peace they received through their covenant with the Lord. Their peace rested on God's covenant promises and the faithfulness of God to keep his oath. This is where our souls find peace as well: "His oath, his covenant, his blood / sustain me in the whelming flood." We gain peace with God through the covenant of grace, which says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Through faith in Christ's blood we are forgiven our sins and justified with God. His covenant promise then secures peace: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). Though all the world should assail us, God's covenant faithfulness and the certain hope of his blessing will calm our souls. "When all around my soul gives way / he then is all my hope and stay."⁷ Like Jonathan, we do not have the power to control the affairs of our times or restrain the sins of those around us. Nonetheless, like him, we may live in troubled times with the blessing of God's peace. Isaiah spoke of those like Jonathan when he said to the Lord, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you" (Isa. 26:3).

Finally, just as Jonathan responded to the evils of his day by calling David into covenant with himself, God calls us into covenant through faith in his Son, Jesus. Christ calls us to a life of covenant faithfulness, and for this he strengthens us with the divine blessing of peace (Lk. 2:14). Just as Jonathan and David separated in peace, having rested their hearts in a bond of covenant love, we rest our souls in the promised grace of our sovereign Savior and Lord. He promises to his covenant people: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (Jn. 14:27).

⁷ Edward Mote, "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," 1834.