

## David & Jonathan — Closer Than Brothers

The Friendless American Male is the title of David Smith's 1983 book that tried to examine why American men seemed to have such a shortage of friends. He and others have listed lots of reasons including that American men are very competitive. Some would say that is a function of physiology — it is hormones that make men competitive. Others say it is a sociological thing, that society teaches men to be competitive and competition precludes close friendships. Still others have said that American men are reluctant to express themselves emotionally, that it is hard for men to cry in front of other people or maybe even to cry at all. They are reluctant to say "I love you" to a woman, much less to another man. Others add that it's a fear of homosexuality. Rather than risk temptations or accusations, men keep friends at a distance. And then there are those who say that it's because men lack role models. Boys grow up in families and in society where they rarely see good examples of close friendships between men to emulate.

None of these reasons applies to the friendship that maybe is the all-time classic close friendship between two men, David and Jonathan. These two men were joined in an exceptional male friendship of mutual love.

David was a shepherd anointed to become king. But he wasn't even home on the day of his anointing — he was out tending his sheep. The prophet Samuel had been instructed by God to go to Bethlehem and to anoint David so that he could become the second king of Israel. It was a difficult decision for the prophet to make.

Some years earlier the people of Israel had pleaded with God for a king, just like all of the other nations. God had said that he would be their king and that they would have a theocracy or a government by God. But they wanted to be like the other nations, so God gave them Saul as their king. Saul was tall, handsome, articulate, politically astute and the people were delighted with him as a choice. He was, in many regards, a very good king for Israel, and clearly superior to the kings of all the neighboring nations.

At first the prophet Samuel was delighted with Saul as king, but delight was turned to grief when Saul switched from humility to pride. Saul disobeyed God and went from being filled by the Spirit of God to being empty spiritually. And so when God told Samuel to go and anoint someone else as king, he not only felt the grief of seeing the failure of the one he had anointed earlier, but also the fear that if King Saul found out, Samuel would be accused of treason and it would cost him his life.

But when God pressured, Samuel went to Bethlehem and explained to the people who were frightened by the coming of this famous and powerful man,

that he was there to perform a public sacrifice. He went to the home of Jesse and explained his mission. Jesse brought out seven of his sons one by one, all of whom seemed to Samuel to be superb candidates for the throne. But in every case God whispered into the prophet's ear that God looks not at the outward appearance but at the heart, and on that basis God rejected the first seven.

Samuel asked if Jesse had any more sons. Then the youngest son, David, was sent for. He was caring for the sheep in the hills surrounding that village of Bethlehem. And God picked him. On that day Samuel announced God's choice and poured the oil of royalty over David's head to show that he was to ascend the throne of Israel and to become the king.

There was no parade, no dance, no coronation, no shouting — they just went back to business as usual, keeping the anointing a secret. Everyone that was there assumed that if the word got out in Bethlehem, it would leak back to the court of King Saul who would count it to be treason. They were afraid that Saul would come and probably not only kill David, but his family and maybe the inhabitants of the village as well. I suspect that there was little, if any, conversation about this peculiar event even in family conversations at the dinner table. They just went on with life as usual.

But then one day in a place called Socoh, about 15 miles west of Bethlehem, there was a standoff in the war between Philistia and the nation of Israel. A nine-foot giant of a soldier, named Goliath, stepped out on the field and challenged the Israeli army to decide the war with a one-to-one combat. King Saul and his soldiers were struck speechless. No one volunteered to fight the giant. They knew they didn't have a chance.

Day after day Goliath shouted his challenge. It was on one of those days that David's father, Jesse, sent him to take food to his older brothers who were serving in the Israeli army. David heard what the giant had to say and he reacted very differently from the other soldiers. He saw it, not as a conflict that had anything to do with height or weight, but as a competition between competing deities. To David it was between the gods of Philistia and the one true God, Yahweh, of Israel. He truly believed that the God of Israel would triumph no matter who fought the giant. He even volunteered to do it himself.

David was not totally unprepared, for, although he had no military experience, he had been a shepherd, and that's a tough job. As a shepherd his legs were strong from climbing the hills, his arms were strong from carrying sheep and he had fought off animals that had attacked his sheep. He had become especially adept with a slingshot, practicing for hours and hours until he was

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absolutely precise. He could put that stone exactly where he wanted it, and so, when he flung his stone, he hit Goliath squarely in the forehead. The giant went crashing to the ground, and David ran out and cut off Goliath's head with the giant's own sword. David held it up in victory to show that the God of Israel had triumphed.

All of this is a very familiar story to most of us, but what may be unfamiliar is the story of another man who was on the sidelines of that battle watching all that took place. This man was just a little bit older than David. He was equally good looking, but, unlike David, was a veteran of battle, well liked and the heir apparent to the throne. He was the son of King Saul – Crown Prince Jonathan. And he was mesmerized by David.

Jonathan took in every word David said; he watched every movement. When the battle was over and when David was in conversation with his father, King Saul, Jonathan insisted that they be introduced. And he immediately fell in love with this man that he had never met before, this shepherd from Bethlehem.

Now the rest of David's story is far too long and too complex to tell here. In simple summary, he became the apple of the king's eye. He himself became so well known for his accomplishments as a veteran soldier that there was a popular song that went through the villages of Israel that said, "David has slain his ten thousands." David also was a brilliant musician. King Saul suffered from bouts of depression, and the only therapy that worked to relieve his depression was having David come and play his harp. Saul was so taken with David that he made David a general in the army and chief of the royal guard. He even gave his daughter in marriage to this shepherd from Bethlehem, making David the son-in-law to the king.

That was the good side. The bad side was that Saul became increasingly jealous of David. He was jealous of the friendship that emerged between his son Jonathan and the young man, David, and although David never gave him cause to think of him as disloyal, increasingly the king turned against him. On one occasion Saul took a javelin and tried to kill him. Plots to have David killed were secret at first, but soon changed into a nationwide manhunt led by King Saul. The entire army of Israel searched throughout all of Palestine trying to find David and to kill him.

And Saul, who had begun so well, ended his life in suicide. He died by a self-inflicted stab wound and his body was later cremated. His death precipitated a civil war of seven and a half years that eventually concluded with David reuniting the country and sitting on the throne of Israel that became known as the throne of David. In fact, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ is repeatedly referred to as the son of David and the one that God has ultimately and eternally selected to sit upon his throne. But the crown, which David wore, was once promised to another man, and the throne he sat on rightfully belonged to another — Prince Jonathan.

Jonathan, I think, was a wonderful man. He had all of the external appearances of his father. He was tall, articulate, capable, a hero in battle, respected by all the men in the army and he was popular throughout all the nation of Israel. But beyond that, on the inside, he was a man of unimpeachable character and sterling morality. He was genuinely a man of God, so much so that I think to myself, if ever I were in a position to choose someone to be my king, I would choose someone precisely like Prince Jonathan.

When David moved into the palace, the initial love relationship between them developed. They prayed together, played together and fought together. They nurtured what already was a strong and instant friendship into one that developed to become a classic of all of history.

But the turning point came on a day when David felt their friendship was deep enough for him to share his most intimate secret with his very best friend. On that day he told Jonathan how God had sent the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem years before and anointed David to be the king of Israel. In that astonishing revelation, Jonathan realized that his best friend was also his number one enemy. His best friend David was making claim to the throne that he considered to be rightly his. At that moment Jonathan had to make a decision that I think I would find far too difficult to make. Surprisingly it didn't take him long, for in short order he renounced his right to the throne and pledged his allegiance to David who would someday be king. Jonathan actually took off his royal robe, unbuckled his belt and took off the sword and gave them all to David and acknowledged his right to the throne.

I think he did it for two reasons. One was that he was genuinely a man of God and he figured that if God had selected David to be the king, that David ought to be the king. Jonathan believed that the Lord was the chooser of kings and that divine anointing was greater than royal succession. The other reason was that he had come to know David and to realize that he was a man of character, strength, leadership and integrity and godliness and that David would make a superb king for Israel.

Jonathan gave up a great deal for his friend, and it cost him. He made himself vulnerable to accusations of treason against his own father. When his father found out, King Saul actually tried to kill his own son and so he lost his father's friendship as well as his father's throne.

I wish I could tell you that Jonathan's story has a happy ending, but it doesn't. He died in a one-sided battle against Philistia and his body was hung like a side of beef on a hook on the wall of a heathen temple so all could walk by and see the body of the man who was supposed to be the next king. He had a right to the throne, but he never sat upon it.

Now our purpose here is not to review the history of ancient Israel, but to explore the exceptional friend-

ship between David and Jonathan. There are within the Bible several most unusual descriptions of their relationship. Let's start out in the Old Testament book of I Samuel, chapter 18, the book that tells their story and is named after the prophet Samuel. Verse one tells what happened after the battle of Socoh on the day when Jonathan and David first met. "After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself."

Don't you find that to be an unusual description? Don't we assume that we love ourselves best and most of all? But let there be no doubt that Jonathan loved David as much as Jonathan loved Jonathan.

But that's not the only unusual description for if you go down to verse three we read, "And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself." They actually formalized their friendship by a covenant. That is something very foreign to our superficial friendships. Surveys in America show that very few men ever acknowledge being "best friends" to one another.

Some tribal groups have a practice of becoming "blood brothers" by cutting the veins of two persons and then pressing them together as they bleed so they can be called blood brothers. It is a primitive covenant of relationship.

That's the sort of thing that David and Jonathan did. They established a covenant that bound their friendship one to each other, and they repeatedly renewed their covenant vows to each other throughout their relationship. In I Samuel 20:23, Jonathan said to David, "The Lord is witness between you and me forever."

Children sometimes say, "We are friends forever." But these were grown men who had at least a notion of what the implications were for Jonathan when he said, "David will be my friend forever even though he is claiming the throne that is rightfully mine." And David was saying, "Jonathan will be my friend forever" even though the ancient custom was for new kings to kill all remaining relatives of the previous king to remove any threat of civil war.

In I Samuel 20:42 Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord," claiming that there was not only a spiritual relationship but also a divine stamp of approval on this bond that they had together.

I Samuel 20:41 gives us a most unusual description, "Then they kissed each other and wept together — but David wept the most." There was no hiding of emotions here, no shortage of physical expression. They actually embraced and kissed. In America it is a comparatively uncommon practice for men to embrace and kiss one another and it makes us uncomfortable. But in many countries today it is common for men to hug and even

kiss.

Earlier in the chapter, in I Samuel 20:4, Jonathan said to David, "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do for you." I can't speak for you, but I can tell you that there are very few people in this world to whom I would make that offer. That takes an astonishing degree of trust, and yet David and Jonathan trusted each other enough in their friendship to be able to say, "Anything you say, anything you ask, I promise that I'll do it."

Maybe the ultimate expression and most unusual description comes on the day when David received word of Jonathan's death in battle. It's actually over in the next book in II Samuel chapter 1. David spoke and wrote a lament and he required that all of the men of his army memorize it.

*How the mighty have fallen in battle!  
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.  
I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;  
you were very dear to me.  
Your love for me was wonderful,  
more wonderful than that of women.*

(II Samuel 1:25-26)

The unusual descriptions tell us that David and Jonathan's friendship had some most uncommon characteristics. It was first of all a physical friendship, physically expressed. When you hear such words as your love for me was more wonderful than the love of a woman, that they embraced each other, that they kissed each other, don't many of us immediately assume this was a romantic relationship and that they were homosexually involved with each other? Such thoughts probably say

far more about our minds and our culture than about David and Jonathan's relationship. Both David and Jonathan were married. Both of them were parents and there is repeated evidence of their heterosexuality. In fact, David's heterosexuality on

more than one occasion got him into some rather serious trouble. David and Jonathan were not sexual, but physical. They were willing to physically demonstrate their friendship and their love.

Their relationship was formal. They formalized it with a covenant. They were willing to go on record for other people to see and hear that their friendship was a permanent friendship.

Their relationship was physical, it was formal and it was verbal. David could look at Jonathan and say, "I love you." Jonathan could look at David and say, "I love you." It takes a strong person to acknowledge and express feelings. They were very strong men who verbalized their love.

Their relationship was also altruistic. If there ever was a case where a story defines a word, it's the story of

***...David and Jonathan trusted each other enough in their friendship to be able to say, "Anything you say, anything you ask, I promise that I'll do it."***

David and Jonathan, for “altruism” means complete unselfishness, a total giving to another. It’s the type of thing where in battle a man throws his body on a hand grenade that’s about to explode in order to save the lives of his buddies. David and Jonathan had an altruistic relationship. They were so completely given to each other that they were unselfish in their relationship.

Now all of this begs a question. And that is why? Why were David and Jonathan able to have this exceptional relationship? The reasons are given in their stories. If you go back again to I Samuel 18:1 we read what happened the day they met – they “*became one in spirit.*” In the King James Version of the Bible it says, “*the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David.*” They were knit together, one in spirit. Knitting is done with like strands. You knit yarn with yarn or, if a bone is broken, you say that the pieces knit together as they heal. If you make a silver necklace, then it’s silver to silver. When David and Jonathan were “*one in spirit,*” when their souls were knit together, it’s because they were so much alike. They were similar in age. They were similar in morality. They were similar in zeal. They were similar in intellect. They were similar in their allegiance to God, and they were similar in their loyalty to King Saul. It’s because they were so much alike that they were able to be one in spirit – to be soul mates.

We have a saying in our society that opposites attract. That saying fits pretty well with magnets, but rarely works with people. The reality is that most of our friendships are not with those who are very different from us, but with those that are very much like us. If we are selfish, we will have selfish friends. If generous, generous friends. People of low morality are attracted to those of low morality and those of high standards to those of high standards. Those who share a commitment to Jesus Christ are likely to be attracted to those who also share a commitment to Jesus Christ. When you knit souls together to become soul mates, similarity is the norm rather than the exception.

But there’s another explanation that’s told in their biography. I invite you to look at a final reference. I Samuel 23:15-16 describes one of David’s darkest days. He receives word that this king to whom he has been so fiercely loyal is out to take his life and he is discouraged, some would say depressed. “*While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.*”

David felt rotten. Perhaps you know the feeling – I sure do! There are times when the darkness of the clouds of circumstances almost seems to eclipse the sun, days when either from internal mood or external happening it seems to be almost impossible to go on. You wonder how you are going to get through the day, and then along comes a Jonathan, a soul mate, someone who seems to understand as no one else can possibly understand, who gives you strength in God.

We’re not talking here about someone who slaps you on the back and says, “Don’t worry — it will be better tomorrow,” or, “Every cloud has a silver lining” or a similar trite expression. It is someone who comes with few words but a supernatural sensitivity – one of those rare soul mates like Jonathan – who senses my need and strengthens me in the Lord.

That’s the way it was for David and Jonathan. For they were not just knit together as one in spirit, but they were also bonded together as one in the Lord. Had God not been part of their relationship I think that they still would have been very good friends. They were that much alike that they would have been attracted to each other, but without God they never would they have had the exceptional relationship of mutual love. They would never have gone down in history as the very best male friends.

Perhaps it is unlikely than many or any of us will have a friendship that will match that of David and Jonathan, but we can learn from it!

We can learn that the choice of friends is more important than choosing houses or cars or careers or anything else that so often tends to consume our interest and energy. We can learn that the friends we choose will be like us and we will be like them. Therefore, we must become the kind of person that we would like our friend to be and choose the kind of friend who will make us the way God wants us to be.

But perhaps the most important lesson is that God is as essential an ingredient in a friendship as he is essential in our personal lives. While two people can have a great deal in common and be very good friends, it is a common bond together in Jesus Christ that makes that relationship soar to the exception. It is then we are able to strengthen one another so that we can say we are not only knit together as one in spirit but we are bound together as one in God.

It is then and only then that we can have an extraordinary, exceptional and supernatural relationship like that of David and Jonathan.

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