

September 22, 2024

“Heroes & Villains: Jonathan”

2 Samuel 1:17-27

Intro:

Friendship is not as easy as we often think it is. I believe that one of the reasons for this is that we apply a broad set of meanings to the term “friend”. Most of us would probably say that we have many friends, but if we are honest and objective, all of those people are not on the same level of friendship. Most of our friends are more like acquaintances – we know them, and we have no problem interacting with them and hanging out in groups, but if we had to make a top-five list of friends, they wouldn’t make the cut. There is nothing wrong with this, and we should cultivate those lesser levels of friendships. However, to make the top five or better requires a different level of engagement and depth of relationship. Those friends are truly special in our lives, and it is good for us to take time to reflect on what it is that earns them a place at the top of our lists.

It is also good to take stock of how we measure up as friends ourselves.

Last week we started a new sermon series to explore some of the Heroes and Villains we find in the Bible – and sometimes the ones who embody a bit of both. What is it that makes them heroes or villains? What is it that we can learn from their stories today? We began with Jezebel, who really is all villain, and the danger that someone like her can pose to our worship of God.

This week we are going in the opposite direction to spend time with someone who, from what we know of him in the Bible, is fully on the hero side.

Allow me to introduce to you Jonathan: the prince who would never be king.

Biography:

Jonathan's story is found primarily in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, with the end right at the start of 2 Samuel. Most of Jonathan's story is overshadowed by David's, which is a shame because Jonathan really is a remarkable individual.

We first hear of Jonathan in 1 Samuel 13. Saul is the king in Israel and he is constantly at war with the other nations around him. At this point in Saul's story, he is setting out to engage in battle with the Philistines. He has taken charge of most of the forces, while his son, Jonathan, is given charge of a smaller contingent. Jonathan takes his small army and attacks a Philistine garrison at Geba, and by doing so ramps up the conflict between Israel and the Philistines. Ultimately, this will lead to the famous battle between David and Goliath, but this is not David's story.

We should take a moment here to note that Jonathan is not a little boy at this point. Typically when we hear the stories of David and Jonathan, both of them are portrayed as boys, or at best young men, but this isn't an accurate depiction. Jonathan, before he ever meets David, is not only a capable fighter, but also a regular general in the Israeli army – such a position would not be given to a mere boy, not even to the king's son. So let's re-frame our mental image of Jonathan from someone super young to a man old enough to lead others.

In chapter 14, Jonathan comes up with a bold plan to gain victory over the Philistines. He grabs his armor bearer and the two of them set off to find out if God is really with them in this whole business. Without telling King Saul (which is odd) they climb up to the Philistine outpost and allow those watching from the walls to see them. The plan, strange as it sounds, is to be seen and caught. If they are caught by being called to go to the Philistines, then God is with them and victory is at hand. If the soldiers go down to Jonathan and his armor bearer to capture them, then God is not with them in this battle. You can read the account, but the short version is that the two of them end up killing about 20 of the enemy, at which point the whole rest of the garrison is thrown into and turn on one another, ultimately resulting in an Israelite victory. Go Jonathan!

Jonathan is well liked by the rest of the Israelites, and when a situation comes up later on in chapter 14 where Saul gives a command that hurts his men, Jonathan tries to get it overturned so that the Israelites will not be hindered in their fight. The result is that Saul takes an oath to kill anyone who breaks the command he had given – even his own son. When it is revealed that Jonathan disobeyed the command, the people intercede on his behalf so that he will not be killed. Favor is passing from Saul, but before it fully lands on David, for a brief while it settles on Jonathan.

It isn't until 1 Samuel 18 that Jonathan's story intertwines with David's. From that point on, Jonathan is associated with David, and seems to have nothing more than a supporting role in David's story. David is certainly the one taking center stage, but Jonathan is still there and he is still important. Most importantly, he is a hero in the narrative.

Saul has lost favor with God. God is going to choose a new king. The royal dynasty that should have passed to Saul's descendants is going to pass to another. For Saul, this is unacceptable. But Jonathan sees things differently. He recognizes the shift in God's favor, and he holds David in very high esteem. Jonathan and David become close friends. While 1 Samuel 13 and 14 contained Jonathan's own exploits, chapter 18 onwards shows Jonathan's commitment to David. Jonathan seals this commitment by giving to David his royal clothes and weapons. The symbolism is clear – Jonathan knows he will not be the next king, but that David will. Because his friendship with David is so deep, he is more than willing to step aside to support David in what God has in store for him.

But even though Jonathan's friendship with David is strong, his sense of loyalty still makes him want to believe the best about his father. When David tells Jonathan that Saul wants him dead, Jonathan strives to prove that it isn't true. He tries to bring about a reconciliation between Saul and David. He holds out hope that David's impression of things is wrong. Even so, David has the top spot for his loyalty and Jonathan attempts to get Saul to see reason, not to get David to

apologize for something he has not done. Jonathan's efforts seem to work until we get to chapter 20, where we find the familiar story of David and Jonathan and the arrows shot into the field.

Most of us know this story. David believes Saul is still out to get him. Jonathan can't believe such a thing of his father, but is willing to give David the benefit of the doubt and test his father's motives. A feast is planned, and David skips out. Jonathan plans to test his father by asking him to give David permission to be absent. In spite of Jonathan's hopes and loyalty to his father, Saul tries to kill Jonathan instead, and declares David to be public enemy number one. Jonathan goes out into the field, shoots some arrows, and sends a young boy out to retrieve them. This is a signal to David that he was right about Saul and that he will now need to flee for his life. This is deep friendship, that Jonathan was willing to risk his own life to save David's.

After a lengthy farewell in the field, David and Jonathan see each other only once more. In chapter 23:16-18, Jonathan tracks David down in his hiding place to encourage him to stay strong in his faith, and in the process renews his commitment to see David as the rightful king – again, forfeiting his own claim as the crown prince.

Jonathan continues to be loyal to his father, which does not diminish his loyalty to David, and continues to lead the armies of Israel in battle. In 1 Samuel 31, Jonathan is killed in battle, and so is his father. It is a sad end, but a noble one for Jonathan. His life was a testimony to faithful friendship and submission to the will of God. Saul's death was less noble, but this isn't his story either.

In 2 Samuel 1, we see how deeply David valued Jonathan's friendship. After the battle where Saul and Jonathan were killed, David composes a funeral song to honor both men. In this, David continues to take the high road in his conflict with Saul, but he also shows his love for Jonathan. The song highlights the exploits and martial prowess of both men, and the strength of their family ties. It is a fitting song to properly honor their memories. At the end, in verse 26, David breaks

down and expresses the depths of friendship that he and Jonathan had. For David, while it is true that Jonathan was mighty warrior and a true son to the king and devoted to the people of Israel, Jonathan's greatest role was that of his friend. At his death, David is truly heart-broken because of the loss of this friendship.

Faithful friendship:

This is the hero Jonathan. His is mostly a background story, but that makes him no less of a hero. He was loyal to his father. He was faithful and trusted in God to bring victory to the Israelites. He sought to bring peace in the conflict between his father and David. And most notably, he was fully committed to David and his success. Had he not been killed in battle, he would have happily stood to the side while David took the throne. He would have faithfully served as an advisor and as a friend. Jonathan's goal was to see David shine.

Those are rare qualities. Sure, friends enjoy one another's company, and they encourage each other and want the best for the other, but when that best – that success – is going to come at their own cost, then most “friends” won't stay faithful. Jonathan gives us an example of what it means to be a top-level friend. It is good for us to seek out and cultivate such friendships. They make our lives infinitely richer. I hope that each of you has someone like Jonathan as a friend.

But we must also examine how we measure up to the example Jonathan sets. Are we sacrificial friends to others? Do we remain faithful, even in the face of losing everything ourselves? Are we willing to stay supportive in the background, so that God's blessing can be experienced in our friends' lives?

I certainly hope that we can say we are that kind of friend.

Let's pray.