

Ever had a BFF? Want one?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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1 Samuel 18:1-12 (NRSV)

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ²Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. ³Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. ⁵David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

⁶As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. ⁷And the women sang to one another as they made merry,

“Saul has killed his thousands,
and David his ten thousands.”

⁸Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?” ⁹So Saul eyed David from that day on.

¹⁰The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; ¹¹and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David eluded him twice.

¹²Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul.

1 Samuel 19:1-7 (NRSV)

Saul spoke with his son Jonathan and with all his servants about killing David. But Saul's son Jonathan took great delight in David. ²Jonathan told David, “My father Saul is trying to kill you; therefore be on guard tomorrow morning; stay in a secret place and hide yourself. ³I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you; if I learn anything I will tell you.” ⁴Jonathan spoke well of David to his father Saul, saying to him, “The king should not sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have been of good service to you; ⁵for he took his life in his hand when he attacked the Philistine, and the LORD brought about a great victory for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced; why then will you sin against an innocent person by killing David without cause?” ⁶Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan; Saul swore, “As the LORD lives, he shall not be put to death.” ⁷So Jonathan called David and related all these things to him. Jonathan then brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before.

Centuries ago, La Rochefoucauld wrote, “However rare true love may be, it is less so than true friendship. . . . A true friend is the greatest of all blessings . . .” Young David and Jonathan were true friends, their souls bound together in covenant relationship.

Their bonds of friendship would transcend family, tragedy, and even death.

I hope you've read the book, *Same Kind of Different as Me*. It is the true story of a deep and abiding friendship formed between two men in Ft. Worth. Ron is white, a rich art dealer; Denver is black, a homeless man who has lived on the streets for most of his life. You could hardly imagine a more unlikely pair. They meet when Ron's wife gets him to help her serve meals at a homeless shelter. She senses that God wants her to befriend the most intimidating man in the place, Denver, and she sends her husband over to sit down with him. They strike up an acquaintance and eventually Ron tells Denver that he wants to be his friend. Denver asks him: “I heard that when white folks go fishing

they do something called ‘catch and release.’ . . . So, Mr. Ron, it occurred to me: “If you is fishin for a friend you just gon’ catch and release, then I ain’t got no desire to be your friend. . . . But if you is lookin for a *real* friend, then I’ll be one. Forever.”

Catch-and-release. That sure seems to describe far too much of what I hear about friendship these days. BFF? Best Friends Forever? What a joke. It’s a phrase tossed around like it is little more than “Have a good day.” BFF-for-a-day is more like it.

Reading Bible Stories

It can be pretty hard to know what to make of some Old Testament stories. Here are a few tips:

1. The stories tell us what happened, not what ought to have happened. There is not a clear moral to every story.
2. What people do in these narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Sometimes it is just the opposite!
3. All the stories are selectively told. Every writer has to pick and choose what details to include, even how the story will be told. This is true of the Bible too.
4. The stories are not written to answer all our theological questions. They may raise as many questions for you as they answer.
5. Do your best to close some of the historical and cultural distance between our world and ancient Israel. A few basic reference tools, like a Bible dictionary, will be helpful in this.

Here are two simple questions to keep in mind when you read Old Testament stories. First, what does the passage tell us about God’s character, his activities, or his will? Second, what does the passage tell us about the story of Israel (the people of God)?

For more on this, see Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It is written for laypeople and is excellent.

Denver and Jonathan help us to grasp what we really ought to mean by BFF. If you have such a friend in your life you are richly blessed. Denver is Ron’s BFF and Jonathan was David’s. And Jonathan’s friendship would be tested as few are.

Like father, like son?

During the time that the Israelites settled in Canaan, they had no earthly king. The LORD 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. 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 Jonathan – his own son! -- for breaking one of Saul’s battle orders. Only the intervention of the people saved Jonathan’s life (1 Samuel 14:24-46). The story of Jonathan’s disobedience seems to prepare us for the possibility that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. But we will learn that Jonathan is not the man his father became.

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, just as Jonathan’s soul was bound to David’s.

The grace of friendship

Like so many others during David’s long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. Jonathan’s soul was *bound* to David’s, according to the biblical writers. What a wonderful expression of a deep and true friendship.

But such a friendship is not really about how one feels but what one does. So, Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. It is

important to see that Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan's covenantal friendship was a gift freely given. Indeed, this pretty much characterized their relationship. 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. *Such is grace.*

Reflecting a friendship based upon the bonding of souls, Jonathan always had to walk a tightrope between his loyalty to his father Saul and his loyalty to David.

In today's second passage from 1 Samuel, Saul has set out to kill David. No tossing a spear at David in a moment of madness this time; the king is going to rid himself of a rival. So, Jonathan, who "delights" in David, must choose, and he goes to work for David and against his father's desires. Jonathan persuades his father to spare David's life and restore him to the royal court.

For awhile, Jonathan has to do no more than talk his father out of something. But as time goes on, Jonathan has to actively thwart Saul's plans. For example, after an attempt on David's life, Jonathan and David would conspire to save David from yet another of Saul's plots (see chapter 20).

Even then, all that Jonathan asks of David is that, no matter what happens, David would always be faithful to Jonathan's own family. At their last meeting (ch. 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 descendents.

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 descendents. . . 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

Jonathan could have acted like his father, working always to protect his own interests. Instead, Jonathan chose the path of friendship, covenant, and trust. He pledged himself to work sacrificially for David's goodwill. *Such is love.*

The Death of Jonathan

Jonathan never broke with his father, even as he worked to ensure David's escape from Saul.

After a long time on the run, David and his men seek refuge with Achish, the king of Gath, one of the Philistine city-states. David seems prepared to do battle alongside the Philistines and against Saul. However, the Philistine lords reject David's help, fearing that he is still loyal to the Israelites, Saul or no Saul.

The Philistines and the Israelites go on to fight a great battle at Mt. Gilboa, which is southeast of Nazareth. The Philistines rout the Israelites, killing Saul and three sons, including Jonathan, who has fought alongside his father.

When David learns that Saul and Jonathan were killed, his mourning is profound for the loss of both father and son. 2 Samuel 1:17-27 records David's song of lamentation which closes with:

"O my dear brother Jonathan, I'm crushed by your death. Your friendship was a miracle-wonder, love far exceeding anything I've known – or hope to know."

from *The Message*

¹from Patricia Tull's essay, "Jonathan's Gift of Friendship," in the April 2004 issue of *Interpretation*. She is professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Friends to the End?

There are other important stories of friendship in the Bible. One of my favorites is that of three friends who have been exiled to Babylonia. All Nebuchadnezzar, the sixth-century BC conqueror of Jerusalem, wanted from these three friends was that they kneel and worship a golden statue. Couldn't they at least go through the motions?

The Babylonian king had erected a sixty-foot golden statue which he ordered everyone to worship, even the Jews. Just to make sure that no one would refuse, the king ordered that a big furnace be fired up, ready to consume any 'lunatic fringe' that might disobey. Despite the furnace, word got back to Nebuchadnezzar that not everyone was going along. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained defiant. When the king learned of their stubbornness, he flew into a rage. Though ordered to worship the statue, the three friends simply refused. Though uncertain of the outcome, they trusted God. To punish the insubordinate Jewish exiles, the king had the friends tossed into a fiery furnace so hot that it burned up the soldiers who did the tossing. It isn't very difficult for us to imagine the depth of Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment when he looked into the furnace and saw *four* men, not three, walking around the furnace, unbound and unhurt. So he ordered the three to come out of the furnace. They didn't even smell of smoke. As he had done before, Nebuchadnezzar submitted himself to the power of the Lord God, even outlawing any blasphemy against God throughout the empire.

The Power of Three

Whenever Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are mentioned in the book of Daniel, all three are mentioned together. There is not a single instance in which any one of these friends do or say anything apart from the other two. Today, we might refer to these friends as being "joined at the hip."

Early in the last century, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote extensively about the power of three. He noted that three close, mutually supporting friends or loved ones can create a bond capable of withstanding troubles that might crush a pair. In the touching movie, *About a Boy*, young Marcus knows that he and his troubled mom can't make it on their own. As he says, "we need back-up; everybody needs back-up."

The exiled Jews living in Babylonia had three choices. They could give up their Judaism entirely, fully embracing the religion of their Babylonian neighbors. They could accommodate themselves to the Babylonian culture and demands, perhaps not turning their backs on God entirely, but making whatever changes were needed to get along with their new "masters." Or . . . they could stay defiant. They could choose the path of most resistance and simply refuse to diminish, in any way, their commitment to the LORD God, to God's covenant with them, or to each other.

We can be sure that some exiles gave in entirely and that others took the path of accommodation. But some, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found in their bonds of friendship and faith, the strength to withstand the threats and the pressures. Their trust in God endured.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Borrowing a vivid image from the story of Absalom's death (one of David's sons) in 2 Samuel, Professor Tull writes that friendships and marriages "hang between heaven and earth." They carry our loftiest ambitions in life, but also all our human limitations. Indeed, the phrase 'soul mates' is probably most often used in the context of marriage. How are marriages and deep friendships similar? How do they differ? Look back over your life and reflect on the truly deep, close soul-bonding friendships you've had . . . if you've had any. Do you feel like you chose that person or did it 'just happen'? Did you offer your friendship freely or in the hope of some immediate gain? How can we better recognize and reciprocate the gifts of friendship that are offered to us?
2. In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "For life to have personal meaning, there must be people who matter to us, and for whom we matter, unconditionally and nonsubstitutably. Ask someone what his or her greatest source of happiness is, and they are unlikely to mention their latest car, their last holiday, their new designer jeans. They are, or were, more likely to say: my marriage partner, my children, my reputation, my friends. Lose these and we lose the very concept of happiness, of a life well lived, of dedication to something larger than ourselves." Do you agree with the rabbi? How would you go about talking to one of our youth about the importance of true friends? How would you describe a true friend? What advice would you give regarding the nurturing of true friendship? What would you say if the youth asks you why so many people have so few really deep, true friends . . . soul mates?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings, we'll begin reading through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and even into 1 Kings as we go through the entire David narrative.

<p>Monday, 1 Samuel 22 David gathers a following and an armed band of 400; Saul slaughters the priests of Nob for sheltering David</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Samuel 23:1-14 David saves a city from the Philistines</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 23:15-29 The hunt goes on and David eludes Saul in the wilderness.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Samuel 24 David foregoes an opportunity to kill Saul. He will not kill someone whom God has anointed.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Samuel 25 Samuel dies; Abigail stops David from slaughtering many, including her family, in revenge for an insult.</p>	<p>Saturday, 1 Samuel 26 Again, David passes up the opportunity to kill Saul!</p>

