

DAVID, JONATHAN, AND SAUL

Introduction

This part of David's story follows immediately on his victory over Goliath. It speaks of the different attitudes of Saul and his son Jonathan towards David. These, in turn, give a picture of the saint's allegiance to Christ and the world's hostility towards him.

David and Jonathan

The sacred writer records, 'The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David', and that he made a covenant with David. Why? He recognised a kindred spirit.

They had a similar self-image. Both men saw themselves and their society as being in covenant with God. They owed him allegiance, but more importantly they could expect his help and blessing for his is faithful. That is similar to Christian fellowship, where people recognise the same beliefs and attitudes and are drawn to one another as a result. Such recognition promotes mutual love, for what they see is the image of Christ in one another. What a contrast to the 'fellowship' of the world – 'hateful and hating one another' (Titus 3:3).

Their faith translated into action. Faith in the Christ is never in isolation but always transforms character and conduct. In Jonathan's case it prompted an attack on the Philistine invaders because he knew that 'nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few'. In David's case it led him to attack Goliath believing that his blasphemy renders him obnoxious to God.

James reminds us that 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:26). There are many things prompted by faith, but 'faith' that does not make a difference is not the faith of the gospel.

In some cases faith appears to take risks. Jonathan and David's actions show that. It may be the risk of material loss or social ostracism. But from the point of view of faith it is no risk because faith counts on the faithfulness of God to do what he has promised.

Faith sees future possibilities. Saul and his army saw no hope for Israel. Jonathan and David took account of God's covenant faithfulness and reckoned there was good ground for hope – sufficient to act in a way others thought risky to the point of folly. In the life of faith people have believed God would give victories when it seemed impossible, even that he would raise from the dead. Is that not the Christian hope? There is no room for hopelessness wither in personal life or the life of the church.

David and Saul

The only thing mentioned at the start of chapter 18 is that King Saul would not allow David to go home but kept him in his service. Even the world recognises the work that Christian faith effects even though it seeks another explanation.

As we move on (verses 8-15) we see Saul becoming jealous to the point he tried to murder David. His attitude contrasts with Jonathan's at every turn. What is the explanation?

In a sense there is no explanation, for sin is inherently irrational. But we recognise the mechanics even though we deplore the way the person acted. There is a lesson here: we should never say we were 'made' to do something wrong. The choice is always ours, but there are various factors in play that lead to us being tempted.

In Saul's case we find he was not careful to keep God's commands. We might recognise that as an undue desire to please other people so that we forget to please God. What followed was a loss of confidence in God, which we see in his failure to face up to the Philistines. The two things are connected – a bad conscience inevitably leads to loss of confidence that God will support us. The only remedy is to repent, and bring our sin under the shed blood of Christ.

At the heart of Saul's attitude to David was selfishness, which in turn reflected a lack of love to God. Saul did not acknowledge that the kingdom belonged to God – he thought it belonged to himself. And he was determined to keep it, and hand it down to Jonathan his son. As time went on he became paranoid.

Sins that cause great harm are the result of refusing to keep our place in relation to God. That was the sin of Satan and of our first parents. It is pride, and it comes between man and God, and between man and man. Pride turns murderous, and tortures the person who harbours such a spirit – 'a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him' (1 Samuel 16:14).

As long as pride rules there can be no reconciliation. We need a new heart if we are to live in fellowship with God and with one another.

A picture of the saints and Christ

In the case of Jonathan we have an illustration of the relationship between the saints and Christ.

Jonathan renounced what seemed to be his entitlement to the throne and gave allegiance to David – 'And Jonathan took off the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armour, even to his sword and his bow and his belt'. There is a recorded instance in Middle Eastern literature of a royal prince laying down his robes on the throne as a gesture that he was relinquishing his right to someone else. Jonathan did that out of regard for the Lord who had appointed David to that position.

That attitude is very different from the current emphasis on personal 'rights'. Christianity is counter-cultural. Society's attitude is that 'I have the right to anything I want so long as it does not harm someone else'; God's authority is not recognised.

Jonathan's attitude was similar to that of John Baptist towards Jesus when he said, 'He must increase but I must decrease'. Both gave way to the man God had chosen.

Christianity is all about acknowledging the position to which God the Father has appointed the Lord Jesus. Peter emphasised that at Pentecost. The first chapter of Colossians speaks of him as head of the church and the universe. Hebrews speaks of him as appointed Christ by God himself. Our religion is about relating to Christ as we should – in faith and obedience.

He is Ruler of all. His Word should be our law.

He is the saviour of the world. We should take him as our prophet, receiving his all teaching, as our priest, depending on his offering and intercession, and as our king, trusting him to defend us while we accept his right to rule our lives. He is Head of the church – and we should place all our worship and our problems at his feet.

Jonathan could not have handed over to David so gladly if he did not value him. Similarly we only hand over to Christ Jesus because we love what we see in him.

A picture of the world and Christ

Saul, on the other hand, provides an illustration of society resentful of the place Jesus has been given.

There is irreconcilable conflict between the approach that denies Christ his rights, and the approach that acknowledges them. In practice that conflict is also opposing sets of values and aspirations. It is the love of God or the love of the world.

The parties who have those opposing approaches pull in opposite ways. Each aspires to influence other people. Neither can win without the other's influence being destroyed.

But there is a difference. Saul tried to trap David – setting him a task he thought would lead to his death. Those who love God refuse to use either violence or deceit; whereas the world is only interested in power. Hence persecution, and the patience of God's people under it; it is the Spirit of Jesus, and they are his followers.

Conclusion

No one can hinder God or stand in his way successfully. Whether it is David or Jesus the will of God will be done. Saul died; David became king.

They crucified Jesus. God raised him from the dead and gave him glory. 'Jesus must reign till he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:25).