

Covenant Friendship

2 Samuel 9:1-13

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Turn your Bibles to 2 Samuel 9. As we continue our series on “by faith.” This summer series is all about exploring themes in the Old Testament of living by faith, as we take a break from our year-long study in the Book of Hebrews. Now, if the phrase “by faith” sounds familiar to you, it’s because we had stopped our study in Hebrews right before chapter 11, which is known as the hall of faith, and are taking the summer to explore themes in the Old Testament of living by faith—some that are common, and some that are uncommon. So today’s passage is one of those uncommon passages. Maybe not a story that you’ve heard much growing up, if you grew up in church. But truth be told, this is the conclusion of a story—of one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture. It may sound strange when we read it, but I assure you, like any good movie which begins at the end of the story, the payoff is worth it once we go over the context. So 2 Samuel 9. We’re going to read the whole chapter.

And David said, “Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?” Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and they called him to David. And the king said to him, “Are you Ziba?” And he said, “I am your servant.” And the king said, “Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God to him?” Ziba said to the king, “There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet.” The king said to him, “Where is he?” And Ziba said to the king, “He is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar.” Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar. And Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and paid homage. And David said, “Mephibosheth!” And he answered, “Behold, I am your servant.” And David said to him, “Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always.” And he paid homage and said, “What is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I?”

Then the king called Ziba, Saul's servant, and said to him, “All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him and shall bring in the produce, that your master's grandson may have bread to eat. But Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall always eat at my table.” Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. Then Ziba said to the king, “According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so will your servant do.” So Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons. And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Mica. And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants. So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate always at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Can we pray together?

Father, we thank you for your faithfulness to us as you have sent us a Savior, Redeemer, and Covenantal Friend in Jesus Christ your only Son. It is in him we understand in shadow and in pictures

what your covenantal faithfulness looks like here today in your Word. It is this very Word that speaks to us the truth of Christ and the wonders of the cross. And so we pray for your words, not the words of man, would awaken in our hearts a love and devotion for this Christ and his body, the church. And it is in the name of that great Friend, Jesus, we pray all these things. Amen.

So let me ask you a question that you can think about in your minds here today. What is—if someone were to ask you—what is your favorite Bible story? What was your favorite Bible story growing up? For me, it was the story of David and Jonathan. As a young child, I remember my mom reading the story of David and Jonathan. And it had my name in it, so I thought, “This must be an amazing story.” You know, like any selfish kid would think. She would read it to me every single night, and I just fell in love with the story. This is a story that, as I’ve grown up over the years, I love preaching through. And I want to apologize, by the way, to my Shine and Revolution students. I’ve given them a short-form version of this sermon in the past. And for those who also have attended our Lord’s Supper service, I’ve also briefly touched upon this as well. But I hope to bring a more robust and bigger picture of this text. Because I think this is just one of the best stories in the Old Testament. This is one of the best stories you can find in all of Scripture.

This is the story of two lifelong friends. They come from incredibly different backgrounds, motivations, and lifestyles. This is a story of the friendships that we only wish we could have. This is a story that transcends all generations. This has got all the drama that you would ever want, for all of you Netflix bingers. I mean, it’s got friends marrying their sisters. It’s got fathers trying to kill their sons. It’s got even Philistines being destroyed. This is basically your typical Old Testament story. And it’s the perfect story to answer this particular question: what does it mean to live by faith in relationship with one another? Or to put it plainly: how do we live by faith in Christian community and in fellowship amidst the very real heartbreak and tragedy and strife brought to us perhaps even by other believers? How do we see the friendship of Christ when our circumstances don’t allow us to see it? How do we have faith in the relationships that we do have, both here in the body and the fellowship of believers across the world?

Well, for David and Jonathan the answer to that question was: covenantal friendship. And this story in 2 Samuel 9 actually ends here, but it begins—if you can turn your Bibles now backwards to 1 Samuel 18. So you can hold your place in 2 Samuel. We’ll flip back there later on. But I want to give you this story in full, and to see why and understand why 2 Samuel 9 is such a stirring conclusion to everything that goes on here. So the covenantal friendship begins here in 1 Samuel 18. Now, in chapter 18, this is the end of a famous story in Scripture involving a slingshot and a giant named Goliath that some of you may have heard of. And David, this young shepherd boy, in chapter 18—who really doesn’t look all that much like a king—he becomes a national hero. David is now a major celebrity in Israel. And with that celebrity status comes a huge price. David is now away from the comfortable land that he grew up on as a simple shepherd, and he’s thrown into the spotlight. And David’s fame and newfound power has brought him into the king’s court.

Now, imagine yourself and put yourself in David’s shoes for just a moment. If you’re David, who do you trust? Who do you know is being real around you? Or who just wants to take advantage of you? What true relationships could you really have? I mean, it’s always going to seem to be marred with some sort of suspicion. And I’m sure we can all sympathize with David’s plight as he moves from a very comfortable place where he grew up and was familiar to the uncomfortable and the strange. Loneliness and fear come into the fray when we’re faced with the unfamiliar and the new. And the questions that David faced are the questions that we all face, don’t we? What do I do with all of this? Where do I belong? Who can I trust?

And for David, he finds it in a covenant with perhaps the most unexpected of individuals: the king’s son, Jonathan. Look at verses 1 through 3 of chapter 18:

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him

that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

Now, there are five things that I want to speak on in the nature of the covenant, and the first is that covenantal friendship is beyond our shared interests. Covenantal friendship is beyond our shared interests. If you look at these two individuals, they don't have any business being friends. They don't have any business being joined together at all. The poor shepherd from the hills meeting the son of the king with all of his wealth and prestige. And yet, notice the intensity of their covenantal bonds. We see here in these three verses that the soul of one man was tied down to another.

Now, to understand what this is and what this covenant is about, we have to understand what a covenant is. Covenants were more than just contracts made between two people. It was the bringing of a life tied down to the life of another. In other words, if the covenantal relationship were to ever be destroyed, the person would be destroyed. It was tying literally your life to this bond. This wasn't just a mere promise. This is an agreement that, no matter what happens, we are in this for life. "I love you like my own soul" as verse 3 says. Now, we have to admit, this is not the way that we speak about each other and categorize each other in relationships today. I mean, just as an experiment, okay, look at someone near to you or next to you. Stare them directly in the eyes. And without laughing or any pretense, try and just mouth the words, "I love you like my own soul." Try it. See? You're already laughing. You broke the cardinal rule.

See, why does this sound so ridiculous to us to say to one another? It does sound ridiculous, doesn't it? Because of the way that our culture has transformed friendships and relationships and commitment. Instead of a relationship of covenant, we have turned friendships into a relationship of economy and bargains. A new research study by the Barna Group on Generation Z, which is the generation after Millennials—so Millennials, you will not be blamed for everything anymore; you will now have Generation Z to blame everything on. It shows that young teens are twice as likely than the generation before them to describe themselves as lonely. And this despite being plugged in with greater capacity and social interaction than ever before. To quote the study—this was done by the Barna Group, which is like the Christian Gallup Poll. To quote the study on the nature of how relationships are defined in our modern technological era, George Barna writes this. He writes this:

In order to keep up with their peers, members of Generation Z create a personal brand by manicuring their online presence. Social encounters are documented online relentlessly. Those who aren't invited are keenly aware that they aren't invited. And what is happening without them leads to feelings of exclusion and loneliness. Those who post are also affected, anxiously waiting for the affirmation of comments and likes. This is an exhausting way to live, but they don't feel like they can stop. Social media is where they feel most seen, but the version of themselves that is being seen isn't authentic. There is no time or place where teens are really safe. Even alone in their bedroom at night, many can't stop scrolling through others' photos or videos. They feel pressured by the temptation to post something. There's just no escape.

Now, we know this effect isn't just for Generation Z, isn't it? This is something for all of us to think through. This is what happens when we form our friendships based upon affinity groups, personal bubbles, echo chambers, when it's either "you're for us or you're against us" all the time on the internet. But you see, for David and Jonathan, two people who couldn't be any more different or radically more apart, chose not to relate on the basis of whether they could offer each other something, because they couldn't—but on the basis of the covenant. On the basis of their covenantal friendship.

And this has implications for us here today. The covenantal friendship of the body of Christ, when we take our membership vows, when we choose to be a part of the community—it binds together people from all different backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, races, spaces, places, graces, right? To see that the gospel that binds us together is what brings us into a loving, diverse community. Where else would you find a room of people dedicated to showing up on a day off to worship the Lord? Where else? To delay sleep, to delay rest, all of those things—where else? It's only through the body of Christ that we do things like this every Sunday. This is why the church, by the way, perhaps more than any other institution or place in the world can demonstrate what true friendship and what true relationships look like. And it's only in covenantal bonds that we will find these kind of Christ-like, Christ-centered relationships that we see here. It goes beyond the superficial categories of relationships that frustrate us and cause us to sin.

So why, then, do we often fail as churches, as people, as individuals, at this? That leads us to our next point here about the covenant. The covenant friendship will be tested. You see, after David and Jonathan make this covenant in chapter 18, you see a dramatic shift in the story. It's no longer simply just about David. Jonathan takes hold as a central character in 1 Samuel as this covenant is time after time tested before David. Their lives become inescapably intertwined in messy, difficult situations. Time after time, the promise to remain faithful, the promise to maintain the covenant is challenged. So how does all of this messy drama start? Well, as with many dramas, it starts with a wedding. Chapter 18. You see David at this point in the story, at the end if you scroll through it, has married into Jonathan's family in the most unusual of fashions. You see, David's popularity is getting to a point where even Saul is feeling threatened. So Saul gets David to marry his daughter. And one of the requirements is that David is told to eliminate 200 Philistines and bring back their foreskins as a sign that he was worthy to marry Saul's daughter. Now, fathers of young daughters here in the room today—this is not a descriptive way to ask a young man to prove his worth. Okay? Just saying. We can leave this in the Old Testament, all right?

But the real point of all of this is that we have, for the first time in this story, a potential place of conflict for David and Jonathan. David is now in the lineage of the king. And now Jonathan, who's in the line of the throne, is told by Saul to kill David in chapter 19. Now, if you were in Jonathan's shoes, what would you do in this situation? How would you respond to the insecurities of your own heart and question the friendship at hand? What is David getting at here? Is he trying to be king? All of those insecurities, those fears, those doubts—they could come certainly into play here. And certainly the other question is, how could you betray your own father for the sake of a friend? Would you dare disobey your father in this situation? In 1 Samuel 19, look at verses 1 through 3:

And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David. But Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted much in David. And Jonathan told David, "Saul my father seeks to kill you. Therefore be on your guard in the morning. Stay in a secret place and hide yourself. And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you. And if I learn anything I will tell you."

You see, Jonathan realizes that the covenant is going to be tested. And in this we remember, by the way, with one another that the covenants are going to be tested. We could be shaken here, even with one another, by jealousy, strife, conflict, the fear of suspicion, betrayal, relationship politicking. It can have all of us feel a bit calculated in our relationship decisions, can't it? But what Scripture here is affirming to us and showing us again is that covenantal relationships never look to the situations that surround the covenant to determine whether the covenant is kept. They never look to the situations that surround the covenant to determine whether the covenant is kept.

Husbands and wives—your spouse's behavior does not dictate whether or not you are called to love them. Parents in this room—your child's academic, social, athletic, musical, or even spiritual status does not dictate the necessary need for you to encourage them and to let them know how much you love them and care for them. Church members—the difficulties of living in gospel community should not

dictate whether or not you are called to demonstrate grace and the love of Christ to those who are genuinely hurting or in need. When Jonathan has the chance to take the easy way out, Jonathan remembers the covenant will be tested.

Third point. Not only does the covenant bind us beyond our shared interests, not only will it be tried and tested, but the covenantal friendships must also be reaffirmed. Look at 1 Samuel 20 verses 16 and 17. This is now later in the story where Jonathan figures out the plot to take David's life and goes to warn David. And at the end of this warning, look at this here in verses 16 and 17:

And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the Lord take vengeance on David's enemies." And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul.

Here we see the covenantal bond of these two friends being joined together and being reaffirmed again and again and again and again. See, by faith they trusted one another in their friendship. They also know that the circumstances that try the covenant don't just show up in a vacuum once and for all, and you resolve it once, and it's done. But rather, we're prone to return to the darkness of our sin or the consequences of our sin over and over and over again. These circumstances return to harm us, destroy us, discourage us, make us want to give up. And so that's why the covenant needs to be reaffirmed.

This is, again, instructive for us as we think about covenantal friendship. There are pains that reverberate the body of Christ over and over again. And on a day like today, rather than assuming that we all love and care about each other, perhaps on days like today we should affirm them again and again over the members of the body here. No agenda, no expectation of return or reward. Just reaffirming our covenantal friendships with one another. "Hey, thank you for being such a servant of the church. I love you." "Hey, great job running the sound booth this morning, sound team back there. Right? I can't imagine how difficult it must be to deal with all of the complaints and the complexities of everything that goes on here." "Hey, deacons and elders of the church, I know that leading and serving in this church is often difficult and confusing, and the hours are long. And I know we don't often say it, but we love you. Please let us know what we can do to help you, rather than demand from you." "Church members, thank you so much for being a part of this covenantal community. You add so much value to the body of Christ here and to the work and the mission of CPC."

Covenants need to be reaffirmed. Because eventually—this is point number four—covenants will have to carry Christ-like sufferings. You see, Jonathan's warning to David would come at a huge price. He's let Saul know that David escaped on his behalf. And because of that decision, because he betrays his father, he's left to carry the sufferings while David runs away. Look at chapter 20 verses 30 to 34:

Then 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? For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die." Then Jonathan answered Saul his father, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" But Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him. So Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death. And 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.

Jonathan would carry the shame that comes with the price of keeping the covenant. Jonathan here is essentially given a choice to give up his life. He's given a choice to either, A, listen to his father and his family, or B, experience great shame for something that he's not even really necessarily involved in.

Jonathan isn't really responsible for any of the strife that's between Saul and David. Yet he's asked to give up everything. And for the rest of his life, he would live in shame and disgrace.

Now, let's recap here. The son of the king gives up his rights for the sake of a sinner, for the redemption of this sinner, so that he might have a place in the inheritance of the kingdom. He endures the father's wrath and takes on the shame for the sake of the sacrifice. Now, does this remind you of anyone else in Scripture? You see, when you begin to relate to each other in covenantal relationships and friendship, walking together in the truth of the sacrifice that this requires, you'll begin to see how our union with Christ comes out in its outward effects. You will know the intensity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins. You will understand the shame that Christ had to endure. You will understand the trials and the difficulty of maintaining and keeping the covenant when we take on Christ-like sufferings. You will see that sometimes your covenantal friendships are all that you have left in the turmoil of difficulty in this life. When disease hits, the covenant remains. When shame and disgrace comes because of great sin, the covenant remains. When the person whom you thought was your ally speaks ill of you behind your back to others, the covenant remains. Jonathan here bears and endures Christ-like sufferings because of the beauty of the covenantal bond he had with David. And so will we when we strive to do the same, empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so.

So what would it look like for you here today to do that? What would it look like to open up our hearts not just to individuals who will say "yes" to us and affirm with us and agree with us on everything, but to extend that love to the ones who don't love us? I mean, after all, Jesus says even the Pharisees loved those who loved them. What would it look like to embrace the ones who hurt us the most and say, "How can I love you and serve you better as a brother or sister in Christ?" What could be more Christ-glorifying than this?

For you see, when we carry Christ-like sufferings for one another in covenant—this is point five—we also see the beauty of covenantal friendships in sharing Christ's glories. And this is what finally leads us to 2 Samuel 9. This is the conclusion of that story. Now, as we turn to this point in the story, Jonathan has kept the covenant to the very end. He's actually died with his father Saul in a war against the Philistines at the end of 1 Samuel. And he dies seemingly in disgrace. He's known in Israel as the one who rebelled against his father. He's the one who died in shame. And we're sort of left wondering, how is there redemption for Jonathan here? Meanwhile in 2 Samuel, David has ascended to the throne, and we have this beautiful conclusion in chapter 9. Now, look at verses 3 through 7 with me again.

And the king said, "Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God to him?" Ziba said to the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." The king said to him, "Where is he?" And Ziba said to the king, "He is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar." Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar. And Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and paid homage. And David said, "Mephibosheth!" And he answered, "Behold, I am your servant." And David said to him, "Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always."

Do you see the beauty about this picture? Mephibosheth grew up in the shame of his father. He was a cripple. He was lame. From a disgraced family. He had a disgraced father and grandfather. His land was dispossessed. And no one but Saul's servant in his family would look after him. I imagine Mephibosheth was probably told all manner of things growing up. "You're crippled because you deserve it." "Your whole physical condition is because of your father's plight." What would it be like? Now, we also have to understand that Mephibosheth is not a common name to give to your child, unless you know

what the name Mephibosheth means. Jonathan named his son Mephibosheth why? Because the name Mephibosheth means “the one who will remove my shame.”

Now, let's go back. Let's recap. What is David doing here in this passage? The great king invites the broken, lame cripple to his table to enjoy a feast, to bring him into the kingdom and restore the covenant that the cripple could not complete. He removes the shame of sin that once tainted Mephibosheth's life and invites him to the feast to celebrate and rejoice and bring him into the kingdom. Who does this remind you of? What a beautiful image. You see? Just as Jonathan was an image of Christ as friend to David, David in turn is an image of Christ to Jonathan. Our Lord Jesus—he calls us to this covenantal friendship here today. He calls us to trust and rest in his finished work on the cross, to complete the covenant where we could not. He calls us to remind ourselves of his goodness and faithfulness as our friend. He calls us to respond to each other the same way.

This is the covenant that Christ keeps for us here today. This is the covenant that Christ keeps, besides all our ways that we want to divide each other, all the ways that the covenant will be tested, all the ways that we try and segregate ourselves based on shared interest, all the ways that we don't carry Christ-like sufferings, all the ways that we don't share in Christ's glories—Christ still loves us and is with us, affirms us, and he says he will never leave us. This is the great King who invites us to the table to be restored from our brokenness and the effects of sin, who takes on the burdens of our sin and our shame. This is the friend who invites us to this Lord's Supper that we're about to partake in right now.