

31 January 2021

Jonathan's Choice

1 Samuel 14, 18-20 (Psalm 63)

Last week we heard how young David burst on the national scene in Israel, first as a court musician, brought in to soothe King Saul when his mind was afflicted, and second as the youth who defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath. Well, that victory on the national stage changed David's life forever. He couldn't just go back home to keep the sheep: he was a hero. Saul made a place for him in his royal court. This might have been a little daunting for a country boy, but fortunately he found a friend. He was made to feel at home right away by the open, selfless friendship of Saul's son, the crown prince, Jonathan.

I've mentioned Jonathan in passing, but we need to back up now and examine him more closely. Jonathan was a gifted, popular, effective leader. In some ways, he was Saul's greatest asset. Even when Saul was sunk in depression or fuming over imagined dangers in one of his paranoid episodes, his people could comfort themselves with the knowledge that at least they had Jonathan next. One time, a few years before David killed Goliath, Saul and the armies of Israel had been lining up against the Philistines at the Pass of Michmash. Saul was holed up in defensive posture, waiting for the signs to indicate a good time to attack, and in the midst of this waiting, Jonathan and his armor bearer went out on scout. When they drew near the Philistine lines, some of the enemy called out, "Hey, Israelites! Come on up here!" Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, "I take that as a sign from God. Are you game?" So they went up among the rocks, and went to war, just the two of them.

They found a narrow passage in the rocks, just wide enough for one man to pass at a time, and waited for the Philistines to come to them, which they did, and Jonathan defeated twenty Philistines, one at a time. The remaining Philistines fled, and by the time they got back to the main camp, the story had grown. Now, their defeat by two men had become a full scale assault by hordes of ferocious Israelites. The Philistines panicked. Meanwhile, back in the Israelite camp, Saul got word that the Philistines were on the run. Not having any idea why, he summoned the priests and told them to consult the oracles to see what he should do. Eventually, he did issue orders to attack, but by that time most of the Philistines were miles away. It was a victory for Israel, but not the decisive victory it might have been. And everyone in the army knew that it wasn't Saul's victory, but Jonathan's.

Anyway, that was Jonathan, next in line to the throne, the prince who wore the *me'il*, the royal robe that signified his position and authority. And it was that Jonathan who welcomed David to the court. "So you're the musician who soothes my father's mind. Thank you for that."

"Yes, sir. I guess so."

"And you're the boy who killed the giant and brought us victory."

David shrugged. "I'm just a shepherd. I don't even know what I'm doing here in the king's court. I don't even have the right clothes."

Jonathan took off his *me'il* and draped it over David's shoulders. "Here. You wear this. It fits you better anyway. My name's Jonathan." And from that day, 1 Samuel says, Jonathan's heart was knit to David's, and he loved David as he loved his own life.

Soon no one questioned David's place at court. Not only did he continue playing his harp for Saul, when needed, but Saul placed the young man over one squad of soldiers, and over the coming months it became clear to all Israel that whatever David's squad did was successful. Now the Bible has little interest in details of military strategy, but reading between the lines it is possible to see a few differences between Saul and David as commanders. Saul was a careful general, content to wait for reinforcements or for better weather or for good omens from God or maybe something else before committing his troops to battle. He was the General George McClellan of the tenth century BC. David, on the other hand, was a born guerrilla fighter. His men struck quickly, then disappeared. His squad was always on the move, and every time his enemies thought they had him trapped, they discovered that David was already gone, probably attacking somewhere else. He was creative, brash, daring, and very successful. A new popular ditty appeared that the women of Israel sang in the streets, "Saul has killed his thousands; but David his tens of thousands."

Saul was not a fan of the new song. He began to watch David closely. David's music no longer soothed him as much as David's victories irritated him. One day, while David was playing to calm Saul's mind, Saul suddenly leaped to his feet, grabbed his spear and flung it at him. It was either a bad throw, or David was very quick, or both, but it missed, and David got away. "Jonathan, your father just tried to kill me."

"David, my father loves you."

"He'd love to see me dead."

"You know what he's like when he's in his fits. He doesn't know what he's doing. Sometimes he even strikes out at me."

"Did he ever try to pin you to the wall with a spear?"

"Trust me, David. In his heart, he wishes you no harm."

"Jonathan, of course I trust you. I trust you with my life. But your father . . ."

But it did seem that Jonathan was right. The next time David saw Saul, all was fine again. One day, the king summoned David. "Son, you may not know this, but I had said that whoever killed Goliath should marry my daughter."

"I *had* heard that, yes."

"You were so young at the time that I didn't say anything at first, but now that you're older we should talk."

"My lord, I hardly know your daughter Michal. I've noticed her, of course, but —"

"Oh, I don't mean Michal. She's my younger daughter. I mean her older sister Merab."

David hesitated. “Ah. Merab. My lord, it’s not fitting for a lowly commoner like me to be the king’s son-in-law. I have no such high aspirations. Please forget your vow. I gladly release you.”

Whatever David might have been thinking, his refusal was reassuring to Saul. An ambitious man would have jumped at the chance to marry into the royal family. So Merab was married to a man named Adriel. Shortly thereafter, though, word came to King Saul that his younger daughter, Michal, was in love with David, and that David apparently had lost all his scruples against dating princesses. “David, I hear you’ve been seeing a lot of my daughter Michal.”

“She a lovely woman, my lord.”

“I hear that she would like to marry you.” David was silent. “What about all this ‘I’m too lowly to marry the king’s daughter’ business?”

“Younger daughters are different, my lord. I should know. I’m a younger son.”

Saul was suspicious again. “Tell you what,” he said. “You can marry Michal, but I’ll need you to pay a dowry. One hundred dead Philistines.”

“My lord?”

“Kill one hundred Philistines, and you can have her. You’ll need to prove it, of course, and prove that they were uncircumcised Philistines. Bring me one hundred Philistine foreskins, and you can marry Michal.” Saul wasn’t always rational, but he was always smart. This was win-win for him. If David killed a hundred of the enemy, great. If David was killed in the attempt, well that solved a problem, too.

So David and his squad went to the front lines. The text doesn’t give details here, for which we can all be grateful, but eventually David returned with double the suggested dowry, which somebody had to count – you’re welcome for planting that mental image in your mind – and soon David was married to the king’s younger daughter, Michal. The people of Jerusalem sang David’s praises even louder, and Saul sank deeper into his paranoia. He sent some of his servants to keep an eye on David’s house, to watch for a time when he would be off his guard. In Saul’s fevered mind, it was time for David to die.

It was David’s new wife Michal who saved him. She knew Saul’s spies by sight, so when she saw them gathering outside the house, she warned David something was up. He climbed out a back window, and Michal fixed up David’s bed to make it look as if he were asleep. Saul was furious with his daughter. “Why are you helping my enemy?” he demanded.

David disappeared, but Jonathan knew where to look. He found his friend out in the fields, in a place where he and David had often hunted. “Come back to court, David. It’s time for the feast of the new moon. Come eat with us, like always.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? Your father wants to kill me.”

“Only when he’s not thinking straight. I tell you, deep inside he still loves you.”

“Jonathan, you’re precious, you know that? What’ll it take to convince you? Tell you what. I’ll skip the new moon feast. If your father asks about me, tell him that I’ve gone to visit my family for the annual sacrifice at Bethlehem. See how he reacts.”

Jonathan agreed. At the first day of the feast, Saul glowered at David’s empty chair. On the second day, he demanded, “Where’s your friend David?”

“Oh, he said he had to go to Bethlehem for the annual sacrifice.”

As David had predicted, Saul exploded. “I see what’s going on! You’re all against me, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why do you love David more than your own father? Why are you plotting against me? Don’t you see that as long as David’s alive, you’ll never be king! David has to die!”

“Why? What has David ever done to you except bring you victories? He’s your greatest friend.”

“*Your* greatest friend, you mean!”

“All right, *my* greatest friend, then.”

“That’s treason, Jonathan! You have to choose between us. Do you love David or me?”

Jonathan lifted his chin. “Father, I would lay down my life for you, and someday I may do that. But I won’t break my word for you, and I won’t betray a friend.” Jonathan left the court and went back out into the fields.

“Believe me now, Jonathan?”

“He says that as long as you live, I will never be king. He says I have to choose.”

David waited.

“I choose my friend. I choose you. And if you do become king –”

“Jonathan, I –”

“Hush, David. My father’s wrong about a lot of things, but he’s right there. You’re going to be king. I’ve known that from the beginning. As I was saying, *when* you become king, take care of my family, will you?”

“Whether I’m king or not, I vow it with all my heart. Your family is safe while I live.”

In those days, it was not considered unmanly to cry, or to embrace another man. David and Jonathan did both. And then they went their separate ways. Jonathan went back to his father, and David went into hiding among the canyons and caves of the Judean desert.

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Many of the psalms that are identified as psalms of David come with a superscription identifying the time when the psalm was written. Scholars – who love nothing more than to ruin things for

other people – say that those identifications were probably added later, but let us ignore the scholarly wet blankets as we read Psalm 63:

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

- ¹ O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
- ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
- ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
- ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
- ⁵ My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
- ⁶ when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
- ⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
- ⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.
- ⁹ But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
- ¹⁰ they shall be given over to the power of the sword,
they shall be prey for jackals.
- ¹¹ But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.