

“Friends” 1 Samuel 20

¹Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan, “What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?” ²And he said to him, “Far from it! You shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. And why should my father hide this from me? It is not so.” ³But David vowed again, saying, “Your father knows well that I have found favor in your eyes, and he thinks, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.’ But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.” ⁴Then Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you say, I will do for you.” (ESV)

Several times as we’ve been looking at 1 Samuel, the relationship of Jonathan and David is emphasized. I was thinking this week, “What does this remind me of?” One of the things that immediately came to mind was “The Lord of the Rings.” If you haven’t seen the movie, you should. If you haven’t read the books, you’ve had about 60 years, so I don’t feel guilty for spoiling anything. Sam and Frodo are best friends. Frodo is the hero or the antihero and Samwise Gamgee is his best friend. In the last part of the first movie, Frodo decides that he has to take the Ring of Power into Mount Doom, like into the bowels of hell, to throw it in there to destroy it. The Orcs are overrunning all of his fellowship and he decides, “If these people stick with me they’re all going to die.” So he’s going to go it alone. He decides to leave them and go to Mordor by himself. He gets into a little canoe on a lake, and just as he’s leaving he hears someone yelling, “Mr. Frodo! Mr. Frodo!” Frodo looks back and it’s Samwise, and he says, “Sam, I must go alone.” Sam says, “I know, and I’m coming with you.” Then Sam plunges into the water to go out to Frodo to go with him into the bowels of hell. But, Hobbits cannot swim at all. So Sam is drowning, and Frodo reaches down and pulls him up into the boat and he gives him this look as if to say, “You’re crazy. What is it that would make you risk death to come with me to more death?” Remember what Sam says? He said, “Gandalf told me. He said, ‘Don’t you leave him, Samwise Gamgee’ and I don’t mean to. I made a promise.” What is it that would have Sam risk his life in order to be Frodo’s friend? He made a promise.

There are lots of things that are involved in being friends or being in a relationship with someone. But there’s one glue that holds them all together, and it’s this concept of promise. In the Bible it’s oftentimes called “covenant.” In order to understand relationships, in order to understand what holds things together in the Bible relationally whether it’s God and man or man and man, you have to understand the concept of covenant.

Before we jump into the text, let me give you a brief overview. There are basically two big covenants in the Bible and there are lots of little ones that fall under the big ones. The first covenant theologians call the “Covenant of Works.” That was made between God and Adam. The Covenant of Works goes something like this: “Adam, if you don’t eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you’ll live and I will bless you. If you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die and I will curse you.” In other words, a covenant is always initiated by a greater to a lesser, and the greater dictates the terms of the deal. The Covenant of Works basically works like this: If you obey, if you do the right thing, you will be blessed and if you do the wrong thing, you will be cursed. The Covenant of Works feels like going to court (or if you’ve seen it on TV or been disposed), and putting your hand on the Bible when they ask, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God?” And you say, “So help me God.” The Covenant of Works is based in fear. Why do they make you swear on the Bible? They’re hoping that you care that if you lie that God’s going to smite you, I guess. It’s sort of 50/50, you do your end of the deal and I’ll do my end of the deal. You obey and I’ll bless you. You know how that worked out if you’ve been in church for more than a few days. Adam ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and immediately God came into the garden and began to discipline them. But he also immediately institutes what theologians call the “Covenant of Grace.”

The Covenant of Grace is initiated by the greater to the lesser. But where the Covenant of Works says, “If you obey then you’ll be blessed. If you fulfill your end of the bargain you’ll get the blessing,” what the Covenant of Grace says is, “We’re going to be in covenant together.” There are still blessings and cursings, but here’s the beauty of it. “I, the greater, God, am going to fulfill 100% of this covenant.” In other words, “I’m not only going to fulfill My promise to bless, but I’m going to fulfill your promise to obey.” You say, “But I can’t obey.” That’s why it’s called the Covenant of Grace. God promises that He will provide 100% of what it takes for the covenant to be fulfilled. So if someone needs to be punished, God will provide the lamb. If someone needs to be blessed, you get the blessing. It’s a win-win situation for us. What’s an example of the Covenant of Grace? There are lots of them, but marriage is the first thing that comes to mind because in a marriage you don’t have a greater making a covenant with a lesser, you have two equals making a couple, and when two equals make the covenant, what are they both promising to do? To fulfill 100% of the obligation in this marriage. It’s not 50/50. Whoever says it’s 50/50 is lying. They haven’t been married, I don’t think. From time to time one spouse or the other is providing 100% of what it takes to fulfill this covenant. That’s what the Covenant of Grace feels like. Someone is providing 100% of what it takes.

When you understand that, you can begin to understand what's going on in the text. We're going to look at three things today: the power of the covenant, the permanence of this covenant, and finally the peace of the covenant.

What is the power of the covenant between David and Jonathan? Jonathan and David are best friends. The Bible says, "Jonathan loved David." So Jonathan, the greater, the son of the king initiates a covenant with David. Covenants that are based in grace are motivated by love, not fear. So the one who has all the power says, "I'm going to be committed to you." Jonathan did that. Then a little bit of time passes and Saul begins to try and kill David because he feels jealous and threatened by him. The last time we saw Jonathan was in the last chapter when he interceded for David and talked to Saul. Saul said, "I'm not going to kill him, I swear to God." So Jonathan brought David back and said, "Hey, things are good to go with my father." That's the last time we heard from Jonathan. Then as soon as Jonathan walked out of the room, we assume, Saul gets upset. He tries to pin David to the wall again and then tries to kill him at least three more times. Now David is on the lam. From a human perspective and from a political perspective and from an Ancient Near Eastern perspective, the last place in the world that David would go to seek help would be the heir to the throne of the king who's trying to kill him. Saul is trying to kill David. The last place you would go is to his son because his son stood to lose everything by letting you live. If Jonathan would just kill David, his life would be pretty sweet because we know that Saul's crazy so eventually Saul's going to do something to get himself killed or taken out of the equation. Jonathan is a pretty decent guy. He seems to be godly. Saul's out of the equation. Jonathan becomes king automatically and life is sweet for Jonathan. So the smartest and easiest thing from a human perspective would be for Jonathan to just kill David when he sees him. Yet you see the power of the covenant between Jonathan and David in the very first verse.

¹Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?" (ESV)

Jonathan and David have made a covenant together. Jonathan initiated it, so Jonathan promised, "I am going to be there for you no matter what. I'm going to be your advocate. I'm going to be your champion and any kind of harm that comes to you will come to me instead." That covenant is the basis upon which David has all the security in the world to go back to Jonathan. If David thought of things from a political perspective or from a human perspective or from a secular perspective or a common sense perspective, Jonathan would be the last person he went to. Yet from a grace perspective and a covenantal perspective, Jonathan is the first person he would go to because Jonathan's the only one who has promised David he's not going to fail him or forsake him. That's who you need to seek when you're in the midst of trouble. Not anyone else but the person who's made you that promise, that covenant. That is what the Gospel says to us as well. I know it's counter-intuitive, but if you think about it, if you're a sinner and you know that you're broken and you're needy and you have anxieties and troubles, common sense would tell you that the very last person you should go to is God. Why? Because common sense says, "God is holy and I'm not. God expects perfection and I'm not. God says that He will punish every single sin and I seem to be made of nothing but sin. So why would I go to Him? He's the last person." Unless He has made a covenant. Unless there is a promise where God says, "I don't care what anyone else thinks about you. What I think about you is that you are completely loved, completely accepted more than you can ever imagine." You say, "What about my sin?" He says, "Your sin was taken care of on the cross. Your comfort and your solace and your power are here." Now the last person you think you should run to is the only person who has made you a promise, and that is God Himself. What He has promised is that if you put your faith in Jesus He will in no wise cast you out. He's never going to kick you out of the house. No matter how badly you behave, if you're willing to come back to Him He will always take you. When you sin big and when you sin in an embarrassing fashion do you go back to God or do you sort of avoid Him for a while thinking maybe He'll forget about it? It doesn't work that way. Go to Him whether you're a Christian or not a Christian. Run to Him and He will take your sins away. That is the power of the covenant.

In the story with David and Jonathan, just to be faithful to the narrative, David goes back to Jonathan because he feels secure to do so. He basically says, "What have I done? Your father's trying to kill me." Jonathan's remarks seem curious unless you remember that the last Jonathan knew everything was good. That's why Jonathan says, "That's crazy talk, David. My father tells me everything and I know he's not trying to kill you." David says, "He didn't tell you this because he knows we're friends and he knows you'll take care of me." Jonathan says, "I don't know about that." David says, "I swear." David appeals to the covenant between them as well. "I'm telling you the truth that I'm a step away from death." Jonathan says, "Well if that's the case I'll do whatever you need me to do." So what do they decide? David cooks up a scheme to not go to the New Moon Festival, or the harvest dinner at Saul's house. This sets a conflict for me, by the way, because I think, "Was he really planning on going in the first place knowing that Saul wanted to kill him?" I don't know. What the story says is, "I'm not going to go and if your father reacts well to that then you'll know everything's okay. If your father reacts poorly to that you'll know that everything is not okay." So that's the plan that they hatch between them.

The power of the covenant is this promise that can never be revoked. What's interesting next is the permanence of the covenant. What's interesting is that it's Jonathan who invokes the permanence of the covenant, not David. The covenant is

made between the greater and the lesser and this is a turning point in the whole book. Up to this point in the book Jonathan is the greater, at least on paper. Once Jonathan has committed to support David, especially support David against Saul, now Jonathan is the lesser. Now Jonathan appeals to the permanence of the covenant. Let me read to you what he says here.

¹² And Jonathan said to David, “The LORD, the God of Israel, be witness! When I have sounded out my father, about this time tomorrow, or the third day, behold, if he is well disposed toward David, shall I not then send and disclose it to you? ¹³ But should it please my father to do you harm, the LORD do so to Jonathan and more also if I do not disclose it to you and send you away, that you may go in safety. May the LORD be with you, as he has been with my father. ¹⁴ If I am still alive, show me the steadfast love of the LORD, that I may not die; ¹⁵ and do not cut off your steadfast love from my house forever, when the LORD cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth.” ¹⁶ And Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the LORD take vengeance on David’s enemies.” ¹⁷ And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved his own soul. (ESV)

If Jonathan was crazy from a human perspective for honoring his side of the covenant with David and not killing him, David is crazy from a human perspective for not doing the same to Jonathan right here. Jonathan has admitted and knows, “David, you are going to be the next king of Israel.” In the Ancient Near East what kings would do once they took the throne is they would kill every one of the potential contestants to the throne that existed. The person from whom they took the throne and anyone else who had any relationship to the throne, if they killed all the sons then they would assure that no one would be constantly pecking away at them to take their throne from them. Jonathan asked something that’s really just crazy. In fact, some commentators use these two things as an example that the Bible may not even be true because that’s how crazy it is. In the ancient near east, no king or no heir to a throne would actually promise another heir to the throne that he’s taking over, that he’s going to take care of him forever. He just wouldn’t do it. Well, this isn’t just the ancient near east, this is the Bible and in the Bible things are motivated by a different standard, namely by grace. Jonathan basically said, “You are going to be the king. I’m blessing the blessing bearer and now I’m appealing to you to take care of me lest I die, or take care of my family forever.” David swears that he will and it says he does it because he loved him as his own soul. The Covenants of Grace are motivated by love, not fear. David could have said no. David was in complete control here to say yes. I will promise you that I’ll take care of your family forever.” Or, he could have said, “You know, let’s see how it pans out. Once I become king we’ll see how loyal you are. Once I become king we’ll see what a good subject you are and if you’re good for a certain amount of time, I’ll let you stay; if you’re not good, I will have you killed.” David doesn’t say that. He promises, “I will take care of you and your family forever.” That’s the same thing that the Gospel says to you and me. Most of us tend to think of things in terms of common sense. Right? “Okay, I’ve trusted God. He’s made this covenant with me. Jesus has taken away my sins and there’s power in that because supposedly I’m acceptable, but am I really? Is there permanence to God’s covenant with me?” On one hand there’s the theoretical answer yes. The question I have for you is, “What’s the practical answer?” In your own life do you live as if God’s covenant with you is going to last forever, that he will take care of you forever and for always? Or do you act like someone who says, “You know, He accepted me but now I better keep my nose clean. He accepted me so now I better be good for some probationary period in case I die in the meantime because then at least I’ll know I’m going to heaven.” Or do you trust that no matter what has happened in your life and what happens even now or in the future, that God’s covenant with you is not going to change? If you really believe that, it changes everything. Then instead of struggling to be free from your sins, now you’re free to struggle with your sins. You’re free to deal with things because you know God’s not going to kick you out. It’s only in that context that you have peace. Everyone longs to have some kind of peace in their lives, and the only way to get it is from this understanding of covenant with God. That’s how the text ends today.

Jonathan goes to Saul’s house and David skips the dinner. Saul says, “Well, maybe he’s unclean and that’s why he didn’t come.” The second night Saul asks, “Where’s David?” Jonathan says, “I gave him permission to go visit with his family in Bethlehem.” As a member of the royal household, Jonathan had the ability to do that. At that Saul becomes furious, and he tells Jonathan all of the things he’s given up.

³⁰ 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? ³¹ 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.” ³² Then Jonathan answered Saul his father, “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” ³³ But Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him. So Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death. ³⁴ 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. (ESV)

So David and Jonathan do the scheme but it doesn’t fool Saul. Now Jonathan can either start talking fast, run, or stand up and throw his lot in with the blessing bearer. That’s what he does. He says, “What are you going to do about it?” Saul tells him, “You’ve lost everything by doing this.” And he throws in some really choice language that in English they don’t

translate really that well, but probably for the better in church. He calls him filthy names and basically says, “You’ve blown everything.” Jonathan says, “What has he done?” Then Saul tries to kill his own son. He tries to pin him to the wall, and at that point Jonathan says, “Maybe David wasn’t talking crazy when he said my dad was trying to kill him.”

Then in the later part of the scheme Jonathan takes a young boy out in the field. How they were going to communicate was, “I’m going to shoot some arrows, and if I shoot some arrows to the side of you things are good. If I shoot arrows beyond where you are things are bad.” Jonathan goes out and shoots the arrows beyond where David is. It says he shouted to the boy, “Hurry, go now.” He’s probably really shouting to David, “You need to get out of here, quickly.” Apparently no one else was around and they felt safe enough so Jonathan sends the boy home and they have one second-to-last meeting in which they’re weeping greatly.

⁴¹ And as soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times. And they kissed one another and wept with one another, David weeping the most. ⁴² Then Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.’” . . . (ESV)

You can understand the weeping. The author is making a case that David should be king and David didn’t steal the throne from Saul. David was grieved that all this was happening. But then Jonathan, from many people’s perspective, says something again that would be crazy. He said, “Go in peace.” How can he say, “Go in peace” when all the world is tumbling down around them? He’s got a crazy father who’s trying to kill his best friend. Israel is being beset on every side by the Philistines. Everything that could possibly go wrong is wrong and Jonathan says, “Go in peace.” How can he say that? The answer is pretty simple if you understand the concept of covenant. The peace here is not peace that’s outside, but the peace that is inside and relational. You can’t have an inner feeling of peace unless you actually have relational peace with the One who made you. You can’t have peace within yourself unless there’s peace in your family. The place that that peace comes from is from the power and the permanence of God’s covenant with you. That’s where it came from with them. In other words Jonathan’s saying, “No matter what happens around us, no matter what happens with my family, no matter what happens with the Philistines, no matter if you become king or not become king, there will be peace between us because of this covenant we have sworn one to another.” That’s the same way that you and I understand peace. The way we have peace is not because things around us are going well. Most of the time if you ever think about it, things are almost all the time not going well around us. Those of you who have lived not just twenty or thirty years, but forty, fifty, sixty – there’s always something going on that makes you think the world is going to come to an end. There are always politicians who don’t seem to know what they’re doing. So how can you have peace? The answer is by having a right relationship with God that is based on covenant with God. And not a covenant where you say, “God, I’m going to do something good if you do something good for me.” But a covenant in which God says, “Tommy, I’m going to do everything good for you. I’m not only going to bless you, but I’m going to take away your sins and all I require from you is for you to come my direction. Pursue me. Trust me. Will you trust me?” The greatest way that you can hurt that relationship is either by scorning it or not having it at all.

I was actually thinking about it this morning. The end of this reminded me of the movie, “Shrek.” “Shrek 1” and “Shrek 2” are two of my favorite movies of all time. In “Shrek 3” they sort of lost me with the promotional items and things. Shrek is about this huge, green ogre and his friend “Donkey.” They become friends. Shrek, I’ll be honest with you, is a little bit of a misanthrope. What I mean by that is he doesn’t really like other people that much. Part of it is because he lives in a swamp and whenever he sees other people they usually have torches and pitchforks so he doesn’t have a good experience trusting folks. Over the course of “Shrek 1” he has to go rescue a princess and face a dragon and Donkey goes with him (a talking donkey). They become friends over the course of the movie. They’ve done everything they’re supposed to do and they’re coming home and Donkey says to Shrek, “Hey, Shrek, what are we going to do when we get back to our swamp?” Shrek looks at him and says, “Our swamp? You mean my swamp. I’m going to build a ten-foot fence around the whole thing to keep everyone out.” Donkey responds by saying, “You hurt me real bad, Shrek. You hurt me real bad.” Then he goes on to tell Shrek, “Shrek, you just don’t get it. What it means to be a friend is that you promise one another you’re always going to be there. We have been there for each other and now you’re saying you’re going to kick me out and you’re going to build a wall so I can’t get in. You hurt me real bad, Shrek.” You know one of the greatest sins that we commit all the time is when we have all these issues and problems, whether you’re a Christian or not, and God says, “Let me take care of it” and we say, “You know what? I’m building a ten-foot wall around this swamp. It’s a swamp, but it’s my swamp.” You know what God says back? “You hurt me real bad, Shrek.” That’s just as big a sin as lying, cheating, stealing, adultery—to scorn God, either to not trust in Him when He begs you to trust in Him as a Christian or to not trust in Him for the first time to forgive your sins. That’s the only thing that’s unforgivable: not trusting in him. Would you trust him today?