

## “A Daring and Costly Choice”

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Continuing a series *A King for God's People*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 18-20

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It's been a while since we've been in this story that I'm calling *A King for God's People*. So some re-introductions might help.

Re-introducing King Saul. God's people Israel, wanted to have kings like everyone else did. God knew it was a bad idea. Monarchies are the world's ways, not God's.<sup>1</sup> But they persisted. So, with a strong warning, God gave them their king. God picked Saul. Rich family, tall, handsome . . . Saul fit the part!<sup>2</sup>

Now, re-introducing Davey. He was the youngest, almost-forgotten son in an unremarkable family from a hardly-noticed village. Then he visited his brothers who were in Saul's army. The enemy champion, Goliath, was terrorizing the Israelites. No one dared stand up to him. But little Davey went out, knocked the giant flat and finished him off.<sup>3</sup> People started asking about Davey.<sup>4</sup>

Hardly anyone knew that, because Saul had gone against God's ways many times, God had by then rejected Saul. God chose Davey to replace the king. Saul had no idea. I don't think Davey got it. But we know.<sup>5</sup>

### II

Jump ahead a few years. Dave serves in Saul's army. He goes on missions for his king, and returns victorious. Saul makes Dave his general. But Saul resents him.

The people applaud Saul, their king. They celebrate Dave, their hero. Dave is on the rise. Saul fears Dave has higher ambitions. But Dave is not conspiring against Saul. He is loyal to his king.

Saul offers Dave his daughter in marriage, maybe to secure his loyalty. But Dave says he is not important enough for a princess. His family is poor and could never afford the sort of bride-price a king's daughter would deserve. (A man paid the father for the right to marry his daughter.) Dave declines the proposal.

Saul tries again with his other daughter, Michal. When Dave starts pleading poverty again, Saul says don't worry. The only bride-price he wants is 100 of his enemies, dead. I think he hopes Dave will back off and seem a coward, or accept challenge and died in the

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<sup>1</sup> See 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 8.

<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 9.

<sup>3</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17.

<sup>4</sup> Beforehand, Davey had been serving as a musician/poet in Saul's court. It seems he wasn't very noticeable, however, because when he showed up at the front lines, Saul didn't recognize him.

<sup>5</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 16.

attempt. Well, Dave goes to work and comes back with proof that he's slain, not one-hundred, but two-hundred enemies.<sup>6</sup> Dave's legend grows. He marries Michal. Now he is in the royal family. Saul is more afraid!

The king turns to his heir. Of course Jonathan will side with his father, both for loyalty and to protect his own place in line for the throne. Saul expects Jonathan to help him against Dave.

But something has happened, something Saul knows nothing about.

. . . Jonathan's life became bound up with David's life, and Jonathan loved David as much as himself. From that point forward, Saul kept David in his service and wouldn't allow him to return to his father's household. And Jonathan and David made a covenant together because Jonathan loved David as much as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his armor, as well as his sword, his bow, and his belt. David went out and was successful in every mission Saul sent him to do. So Saul placed him in charge of the soldiers, and this pleased all the troops as well as Saul's servants.

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 18:1-5  
Common English Bible

### III

Jonathan and Dave have a deep, steadfast relationship. They are committed to each other. They are friends.

Might they be more? Folks have wondered. Were they lovers? Maybe they were. The Bible's descriptions certainly sound more intimate and personal than we are used to for guys who are simply "best buds."<sup>7</sup> *"Jonathan's life became bound up with David's life"* it says. *"Jonathan loved David as much as himself."* He bestowed on David his robe, his armour, his sword. Later, Dave will say, *"your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women."*<sup>8</sup>

We need to remember, though, that how things sound to us can be quite different from their meaning in other times. In that culture, these words and actions between Dave and Jonathan were very much about a covenant. Yes, "love" can express affection. But love was also a political word. A ruler and a subordinate were said to "love" each other, without being "an item" or even friends. That's how they talked about political alliances. Kissing

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<sup>6</sup> For the delicate nature of the proof he is told to show, and does, see 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 18:45. For historical background to this practice, see V. Philips Long, "1 Samuel" in John H. Walton (ed), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 354.

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_and\\_Jonathan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_and_Jonathan)

<sup>8</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 1:26.

could be romantic; it was also a pledge of loyalty, service, reconciliation and friendship.<sup>9</sup>

Jonathan and Dave are very good friends and maybe more. But the story emphasizes that they are allies. Here's what's remarkable. Jonathan is probably older, has more power, much higher status, and is successful.<sup>10</sup> Yet he binds himself to Dave in a covenant alliance of equals. There is even a sense that he transfers what is his to Dave . . . including his right to be king.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV

King Saul knows none of this. He is becoming more hostile toward Dave. He publicly hints that his general should be killed. "*Will no one rid me of this turbulent general?*" he might have said.<sup>12</sup> But Jonathan contradicts his father and king in public, and defends Dave. Saul tries to kill Dave himself. Dave flees. Saul orders Dave's arrest. Dave gets away, helped by his wife (and Saul's daughter). Saul sends assassination squads after Dave. Each one, however, gets caught up in an explosion of religious exuberance you'd expect at a holy-roller prayer meeting. Saul himself comes, and the Spirit of God takes him over too.<sup>13</sup>

Saul's plans against Dave fail. Of course they do. We know that his struggle is really against God. God has chosen Dave.

Jonathan finds Dave in hiding. And he promises again to stand with his friend and ally against his king and father.

Then Jonathan told David, "I pledge by the Lord God of Israel that I will question my father by this time tomorrow or on the third day. If he seems favourable toward David, I will definitely send word and make sure you know. But if my father intends to harm you, then may the Lord deal harshly with me, Jonathan, and worse still if I don't tell you right away so that you can escape safely. May the Lord be with you as he once was with my father. If I remain alive, be loyal to me. But if I die, don't ever stop being loyal to my household. Once the Lord has eliminated all of David's enemies from the earth, if Jonathan's name is also eliminated, then the Lord will seek retribution from David!" So Jonathan again made a pledge to David because he loved David as much as himself.

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 20:12-17  
Common English Bible

<sup>9</sup> Long, 472.

<sup>10</sup> I infer that Jonathan is older than David, because he is regularly described as fighting in Saul's army, alongside his father, before the young David arrives at the front lines in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17.

<sup>11</sup> Long, 353.

<sup>12</sup> Words King Henry II of England is supposed to have said about Archbishop Thomas Becket. Henry's henchmen took the hint, and killed the bishop. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Becket#Assassination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Becket#Assassination)

<sup>13</sup> All this is related in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 19.

V

It's amazing what Jonathan says. Yes, he pledges to help his friend escape. But he also looks ahead. He sees his future lying with his fugitive friend, not his father. His future will not happen because of his status, or becoming king himself, or even in his own survival. His future, and his family after him, will be secure because of his friend. God binds Jonathan to Dave; that is his security.

Do you see the choice Jonathan makes? It is daring! It is costly! He should support his father. He should obey his king. He should see Dave as a challenger, a rival, a threat. Instead he chooses Dave, his friend, his future.

I imagine Jonathan's choice is wrenching. I imagine it involves much pacing and many tears. He loves both his father and friend. He doesn't want to choose. It is Saul — insecure and paranoid — who makes Dave into his enemy, forcing Jonathan to choose.

We know Dave is the obvious choice. Even if you don't know how the story goes, it's clear that Dave is on the way up, Saul is on the way out, and God has decided this. But Jonathan doesn't know that. What he can see is that Saul holds all the institutions of power. Dave is running for his life. Who would you bet on?

Yet God placed the future of God's People on Dave. God is bringing in a new king, David. Jonathan chooses God's not-so-obvious future. He commits to him: fully, faithfully, sacrificially, lovingly.<sup>14</sup>

We have choices. So often the "Saul" choice makes the most sense. Choose power. Choose continuity and stability. Choose fear and paranoia. Choose the safest bet for yourself, your family, your future.

But on whom has God placed the future?

On Jesus, great David's greater Son,<sup>15</sup> the Messiah of God's People and Saviour of the world, God has placed your future, our future. Jesus gave up power. Jesus disrupts and destabilizes. Jesus casts out fear.

Who would make a bet on Jesus? Jesus, for God's new reign, God's future?

May God's work in Jonathan give us courage to choose. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 150, 153.

<sup>15</sup> From the first line of "Hail to God's Own Anointed," by James Montgomery. See Voices United #30.