

1 Samuel 20

Covenant Love

Introduction

When your world is falling apart and death itself seems only a step away, where do you run? When everyone has turned against you and betrayal lurks around every corner, who can you trust? This morning we're looking at 1 Samuel 20, a chapter that reveals the beauty and power of covenant faithfulness in the darkest of times. And ultimately, we'll see how this story points us to the unbreakable covenant we have in Jesus Christ—which of course means, he will never fail us, even when everything, and everyone else does.

Previously in 1 Samuel, Saul tried to kill David, but David was repeatedly protected. Jonathan warned David of the danger and persuaded Saul to swear an oath not to harm him. However, after David's continued military success, Saul's envy flared again and he tried to spear him. David escaped for his life with help from his wife Michal, who used deception to buy him time to get away. David fled to Samuel at Ramah. When Saul and his men came to arrest David there, the Spirit of God came upon them and made them prophesy, allowing David to escape back to Gibeah where Jonathan was staying.

Summary

Chapter 20 picks up with David returning to Gibeah to seek out Jonathan to ask why Saul wants to kill him. Jonathan didn't know Saul had broken his oath and tried to kill David again. David assures him it's true, saying "*there is but a step between me and death.*" He explains that Saul hid his intentions from Jonathan because he knew Jonathan would be grieved and would either warn David or try to dissuade Saul, as he did before.

Jonathan and David devise a plan to prove Saul's deadly intentions.

At the upcoming New Moon meal—where court protocol demands everyone be present—David will be absent. When Saul asks why, Jonathan will use righteous deception, saying David requested leave to attend his family's yearly sacrifice in Bethlehem. If Saul accepts this explanation, then he doesn't want David dead. If Saul is angry at this answer, his murderous intent is confirmed.

David then makes Jonathan swear by their covenant to reveal Saul's true response. Jonathan takes David into the field under the open sky and swears covenant faithfulness again to Him. And this is the chapter's central moment.

They then arrange how David will receive the news about Saul's intentions. Jonathan will shoot arrows into the field

where David is hiding. If Jonathan tells his servant boy that the arrows are on this side, that is closer to Jonathan, then it's safe for David to return. If he says the arrows are far away, on that side, then David must flee.

The plan unfolds as expected.

At the feast, Saul notices David's absence, but he assumes David is ritually unclean. What other reason would there be for his absence? Certainly not that Saul is trying to kill him.

When David is gone on the second day, Saul asks Jonathan where is "the son of Jesse." He refuses to even use his David's first name, which means "Beloved." Jonathan then delivers the rehearsed story about David's family feast.

Saul instantly knows that Jonathan is lying and calls him "the son of a perverse and rebellious woman." Then after insulting his wife, he tries to make Jonathan feel bad by appealing not only to Jonathan's shame but also his mother's shame that Jonathan brought upon her. What is the shame that Jonathan brought upon himself and his mother? Why is Saul so angry? He says, "For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established."

Saul wants Jonathan to inherit the throne, but David—anoointed by Samuel and the Lord—stands in the way. He demands Jonathan bring David to him to die.

Instead of complying, Jonathan defends David, saying he's done nothing deserving death. This only enrages Saul more, so that he now hurls a spear at his own son. Jonathan leaves the table in fierce anger and fasts the rest of the day, grieved for David because Saul had disgraced him. Jonathan cared more about David being disgraced and shamed than he cared about his own shame.

On the morning of the third day, Jonathan goes to the field and shoots the arrows, signaling to David that he must flee. They embrace, kiss, and weep—David weeping most. Jonathan blesses 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.'"* David departs, and Jonathan returns to the city.

Covenant

That is the story of 1 Samuel 20. It is long and drawn out, narrative that is designed to illustrate the beauty of the covenant.

What is the covenant? The covenant is a life and death promise. It is a “Bond in Blood.” People who enter into a covenant with one another, and with the LORD, make vows to be faithful to one another, unto death.

In Malachi 2 it states that the covenant union between a husband and wife, for example, makes the two one. So when a man hates his wife and divorces her, he covers *his own* garment with violence. A covenant brings two people into a union together such that they are one. And breaking that covenant is violence and murder against the one you are in covenant with, and it does violence to yourself. The idea of covenant can therefore be expressed by the word, “Union.”

Your covenant partner’s life and goodness is your very own. And any violation of the vow, any violation of the life and goodness of your partner by you is therefore considered to be death to your covenant partner. Therefore, one who breaks covenant deserves to die, since it is as if a man murdered his partner.

The only way that one can get out of a covenant is by death. This truth is reflected in the Ceremony of Holy Matrimony when the couple makes this vow – till death do us part.

But far from this being a horrible thing, we need to understand that the covenant is meant to provide us with security when times are bad. Love is easy when things are easy. But when trouble comes, that is when your covenant vows matter most. In fact, that is the reason you covenant together, because you will need someone to help you when times are tough. You need someone to care for you and they need you to care for them, when things are difficult.

Again, appealing to the Wedding Ceremony, you get married so that you have a partner who cares for you when things go bad for you, and you would care for the other when things go bad for them.

*for better for worse, for richer for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
till death us do part,
according to God's holy ordinance;
and thereto I plight thee my troth.*

Eccles. 9

⁹*Two are better than one,
Because they have a good reward for their labor.
¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.
But woe to him who is alone when he falls,*

For he has no one to help him up.

¹¹ Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm;

But how can one be warm alone?

¹² Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him.

And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

This gives us insight as to why David, when fleeing for his life from Saul, ran back to Jonathan, who is staying in Saul's palace in Gibeah. Why go back to where Saul lives? Why did he not just keep running? Why not go immediately into hiding? Why go back to Jonathan?

Because he and Jonathan made a covenant together in the Lord. And both of their lives were bound together as one. Jonathan is the one David was to run to when times were tough. Jonathan was the one to help him. David could not just leave without Jonathan. He is bound to Jonathan by covenant. They were knit together as one soul. The life of either one of them was in the others hand.

Thus, after explaining to Jonathan the plan about him not being at the feast, in order to determine Saul's intentions, David then says:

⁸ Therefore you shall deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you.

In other words, David is calling upon the vows of the covenant, and reminding Jonathan of his oath to protect him and bless him as his very own soul.

Nevertheless, if there is iniquity in me, David says, kill me yourself, for why should you bring me to your father?"

David says to Jonathan, "You made an oath to protect me, Jonathan, and if the vow to protect and defend me means nothing to you, then don't lie to my face and bring me to your father, who wants to kill me. You do it, right here, right now.

Jonathan responds saying: *"Far be it from you (to say such a thing)! For if I knew certainly that evil was determined by my father to come upon you, then would I not tell you?"*

So Jonathan is committed to David's life as his very own.

¹⁰*Then David said to Jonathan, "Who will tell me, if your father answers you roughly?"*

¹¹*And Jonathan said to David, "Come, let us go out into the field."*

So they both go outside, into the field under the open sky, before the face God and all the Heavens, and Jonathan

comforts David by swearing an oath to him once again saying,

*“The Lord God of Israel is witness!” When I have sounded out my father sometime tomorrow, or the third day, and indeed there is good toward David, and I do not send to you and tell you, ¹³ **may the Lord do so and much more to Jonathan.***

“But if it pleases my father to do you evil, then I will report it to you and send you away, that you may go in safety.”

In other words, Jonathan is invoking a curse upon himself if he breaks his vow made before God to inform David concerning Saul's intentions.

Why invoke a curse on himself? Because Jonathan's life and goodness are wrapped up totally in David's life and goodness. Jonathan is committed to doing good to David and protecting him. If Saul truly is determined to kill David, Jonathan will absolutely tell him so that he can escape in safety. And if he doesn't tell him, Jonathan reckons his own life as forfeit for David's sake.

Jonathan then acknowledges that David is truly the next King of Israel, invoking a blessing upon him: *“And the Lord be with you as He has been with my father.”*

As the Lord was with Saul, empowering him to be king by His Spirit, so may the Lord likewise be with David, and empower you to reign.

Hesed

But now that Jonathan swore an oath to David, Jonathan makes David also swear an oath to him for his life and goodness. He says to David:

"And you shall not only show me the kindness of the Lord while I still live, that I may not die; but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever, no, not when the Lord has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." So Jonathan cut a covenant with the house of David, saying, "Let the Lord require it at the hand of David's enemies." Or "May the LORD take vengeance on David's enemies." (1 Samuel 20:14-16)

Listen carefully to what Jonathan is asking of David here. He's not merely requesting personal protection when David becomes king. He is pleading for *covenantal kindness* that extends beyond himself to his entire household, even after his death, and when God destroys all of David's enemies.

Talk about trust. Jonathan is asking, "When you come into your kingdom and execute judgment on all who oppose

you, remember that my house is not your enemy. Show us kindness."

That word kindness is *hesed*. *Hesed* carries the idea of love, compassion, affection, and kindness, but with the connotation of unshakeable loyalty and faithfulness to do good to another. It is not merely love, but *loyal* love. Not merely kindness, but *lovingkindness*. Not mere affection, but affection that is rooted in the bonds of life and death, bound by solemn oath, and sealed in blood.

To You and Your Household

This is how the LORD treats us in Jesus Christ. Christ shows us the kindness of God's covenant while we live, but not only to us, but also to our households even after we die. The covenant promises of God are not merely individualistic; they extend to our children and our children's children.

Deut. 7:9 says:

*"Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a **thousand generations** with those who love Him and keep His commandments;*

When God finally cuts off every last one of Christ's enemies, putting them all under His feet—when Christ returns and executes final judgment on all who have opposed His kingdom—we have the certainty of God's covenant promises, bound in the shed blood of Christ, that He will protect not just us as individuals, but also our households. We stand under the banner of Christ's covenant loyalty, and our children and our children's children, will stand with us.

Jonathan's request is of course fulfilled later in Scripture. Years later, when David was firmly established on the throne of the kingdom, and both Saul and sadly, Jonathan too is dead, David asked, "*Is there not still someone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God for Joanthan's sake?*" (2 Samuel 9:3).

And there was Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. He was lame in both feet, hiding in obscurity, expecting judgment. But David showed him *hesed*. He told him, "*Do not fear, for I will show you kindness – hesed – 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.*"

David treated this crippled, vulnerable son of Jonathan as his own son—not because Mephibosheth deserved it, but

because David had made covenant with Jonathan, that he would save him and his household.

Do you see the gospel here, people of God? Mephibosheth was lame, in both feet—unable to come to the king on his own. He was in hiding—afraid of the judgment he thought he deserved. He had nothing to offer.

But the king sought him out, lifted him up, restored his inheritance, and brought him to the royal table to feast in the king's presence forever. This is *hesed*. This is covenant love that remembers, that pursues, that saves, that adopts, that feeds, and protects.

And if God did this through David, an imperfect earthly king, how much more does the true and greater David—the Lord Jesus Christ—show covenant faithfulness to you and to your household?

And this is what we celebrate here in Church every single Lord's Day. Because of the covenant promises of the greater David, we have been shown unspeakable kindness, given an inheritance among the sons of God, are comforted in our afflictions, and are invited to eat at His table with Him always.

Christ: The Ultimate Covenant Keeper

Jesus provides the ultimate comfort in the face of death and trouble. He is full of grace and truth. He is the one who will never leave you nor forsake you.

Jesus is a greater Jonathan. Jonathan could only promise to warn David of danger and help him escape. But Christ does not merely help you escape death—He enters into it for you. He doesn't just point you to safety—He is your safety. He doesn't simply risk His life for yours—He deliberately, willingly, joyfully lays it down for you so that you may live.

Where Jonathan invoked a curse upon himself if he failed to keep covenant to protect David, Christ actually bore the curse of the covenant that you failed to keep. Every penalty, every judgment, every consequence of your unfaithfulness—He took it upon Himself at Calvary. The sword of divine justice that should have pierced you, for your infidelity to God, pierced Him instead. Because Jesus is committed to your life and goodness, he took the curse of the covenant that you incurred. So that you might live.

The Unbreakable Bond

Christ has bound Himself so close to you that you and He are one soul. The older language that theologians used is “mystical union”—you are *in* Christ and Christ is *in* you.

But this is just another way of expressing covenant. His death on the cross is your death on the cross. His resurrection from the grave is your resurrection from the grave. His righteousness is your righteousness. His Spirit dwells within you. His Father has become your Father.

This covenant that Christ made with us is therefore everlasting and eternal because it was cut in the body of Christ, who, now being raised from the dead, and who cannot die, we are protected forever by Him. The covenant cannot fail because it rests not on your faithfulness but on Christ's faithfulness. It cannot be revoked because it has been sworn by an oath of the unchanging God who cannot lie.

Your Refuge in Every Storm

What this means, people of God, is that when you are beaten down by the world, wracked with guilt over your sin, terrified of death, weary from the fight, when your loved ones are sick, dying, and in trouble; when it feels like all the world is against you – you can come to Him.

In Christ, you can know with absolute certainty that nothing shall separate you from His love. Not tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword. Not death, nor life, nor angels, nor

principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That is covenant.

A bond in blood, confirmed by death and resurrection, and sealed by the Spirit, with this promise from Christ, I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will protect you, and save you – you, and your household.

This is *hesed*—loyal, covenant love that will not let you go. Jesus is determined to show the lovingkindness of God to you. He is the gospel. He is your hope of glory. He is your refuge.

So come now, to Him, Beloved. Run to your covenant Lord. He is waiting with open arms, saying, "Come to Me, and I will give you rest." Amen.