
“Covenant Loyalty in a Convenient World”

1 SAMUEL 20:1-23

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At A Glance

This message, *“Covenant Loyalty in a Convenient World,”* calls us to rediscover what holds our marriages, friendships, and church relationships together when the fire comes. Faithfulness is tested in the heat, proven by courage, and sustained by confidence in the covenant-keeping God.

Introduction

In a world where promises are disposable and convenience often outweighs commitment, 1 Samuel 20 gives us a striking counterexample. David is running for his life; Saul’s jealousy is burning in his heart; in the tension stands Jonathan.

What kept Jonathan loyal when everything around him collapsed? One word: covenant. Not comfort, not convenience, but a binding loyalty rooted in God Himself.

This passage calls us to ask: *What holds our church relationships, marriages, and friendships together when the heat gets turned up?* Here we see that covenant loyalty reflects the very heart of Christ, our truest Friend and rightful King.

1 Samuel 20:8

“Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you...”

A Conversation Among Friends

In **verse 1** David fled from Naioth to Jonathan and asked not *if* Saul was coming for him, but *why*. David appears to be willing to consider the possibility that he has sinned against Saul and was willing to make amends, asking, **What have I done?**

In **verse 2** Jonathan shows his naivety. He didn’t want to believe that his father could break a promise he made in the Lord’s name. But he presumed too much on his father’s integrity. Ironically, Jonathan narrowly escaped Saul’s spear himself in 14:45. He should have known.

David convinced Jonathan that Saul knew how close the two of them were and that’s why he kept his intentions a secret in **verses 3-4**.

In **verses 5-7** David laid out a plan for Jonathan to feel his father out on the matter. A plan that kept David from having to find out the hard way. They devised a plan for Jonathan to excuse David should Saul ask where he is.

But why in the world would David turn to the son of the man bent on killing him? Why would he anticipate that Jonathan would spare him? Jonathan had every reason to dispose of David. What gave David the confidence to turn to Jonathan?

The Meaning of Hesed: Love That Keeps Its Word

The answer is: *covenant*. We see this once again in the verse we opened with, **verse 8, “Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you...”** He’s referring to the covenant of 18:3-4.

When David asked Jonathan to **deal kindly** with him, he was asking for *hesed*. Hesed is the Hebrew used here and is also used in verse 14 translated, “steadfast love” of the Lord. Hesed is an affection toward another person that goes beyond feelings. It is loaded with loyalty, dependability, and commitment. It will be a central concept in our application today.

In **verses 9-11** the conversation goes back and forth with Jonathan asking rhetorically, **If I knew that it was determined by my father that harm should come to you, would I not tell you?”** Then David asked how Jonathan would be able to relay Saul’s response. At that point they determined they needed to go someplace more private and went out into the field. What ensued was a doubling down on the covenant between them.



Covenant Promises

Verses 12-13 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? 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. This seems to be a reasonable answer to David’s question.

Jonathan then ratifies and even strengthens the covenant between them. ^{13b}**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.**

Once again we see incredible irony. David is in the position of weaker partner. He needs Jonathan, not vice versa. Jonathan, as crown prince, should have been the one in power. But Jonathan knew the Lord had selected David to reign after Saul. Jonathan gave up his future throne for the sake of the Lord’s will; only asking of David what David asked of him – *hesed*. Covenant loyalty.

In **verses 18-22** Jonathan goes over the plan again, concluding in **verse 22 But if I say to the youth, ‘Look, the arrows are beyond you,’ then go, for the LORD has sent you away.** Jonathan’s response reveals a wise, reflective, and healthy way to deal with a potentially devastating reality.

He said, **the Lord has sent you away.** That is a humble heart wholly submitted to the will of God.  *“Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Though art the potter, I am the clay.”* 

Finally in verse 23, Jonathan ratifies their covenant. And as for the matter of which you and I have spoken, behold, the LORD is between you and me forever.”

Three times in this passage David and Jonathan appeal to a covenant. This begs the question, what is the significance of covenant? In our world today it seems we’ve lost sight of *hesed* or covenant relationships. We’ve traded covenant for convenience. This passage is instructive in a lot of ways, so let’s move to the first point of application.

Covenant Loyalty Is Tested in the Fire

David asks Jonathan in verse 8 to “deal kindly” (Hebrew *hesed*), a covenantal term often used of God’s faithful love. Their friendship models God’s faithfulness.

To that point, we need to recognize that God values covenantal faithfulness because it mirrors His own faithful character. There will be times in your life when covenant loyalty is tested in the fire of familial relationships. You might find yourself at odds with your natural family – perhaps over your faith, or over your marriage. The Bible instructs and expects you to choose covenant over convenience!

At the same time, let’s acknowledge the gift of grace that the Lord blesses us in the form of loyal love in a fallen world. Jonathan’s willingness to protect David points to the greater covenant friend who “...*laid down His life for His friends.*” *John 15:13* Grace writes Christ’s pattern of self-sacrifice into our human relationships.

Embrace Depth

This gift transforms relationships into a picture of redemption; most obviously the case with marriage, but also the case in friendships, especially in the church.

To this end, we ought to pursue covenant relationships in marriage and in the local church. To truly understand *hesed*-type loyalty, we have to move beyond superficial attraction and surface-level fellowship.

We have to embrace *Jonathan-and-David* relationships—deep bonds rooted in shared faith, mutual sacrifice, and spiritual accountability.

There are a few implications for us then. First, we should view small groups and discipleship relationships where believers know and bear one another’s burdens as part and parcel with faithful Christian living. “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” *Galatians 6:2*

The idea that simply showing up to church is faithful Christian living is false. Not only does the body miss out on your gifting and your contribution, but so do you miss out on a deep, covenant love that the body has to offer.

Likewise, unity in the church is not simply emotional harmony but mutual submission to Christ’s authority. Our congregation is best when we stand shoulder-to-shoulder in loyalty to Christ and His Word, even when the world turns up the heat. Ask the persecuted Christians in Nigeria or China of the importance of unity in Christ.

We also need to redeem covenant faithfulness in marriage. We should model and teach our children and grandchildren that covenant love is not a feeling but a promise. We ought to reflect God’s *hesed*—keeping our word even when it’s hard.

It’s one thing to model and teach covenant love and loyalty in times of ease and peace. But true covenant loyalty is tested in the fire. Often our true heart is only revealed in conflict. Pressure exposes character.

Man’s natural tendency is to cling to self-interest. In this story, Jonathan was forced to deny the very inheritance he was born to claim. It reminds us that covenant loyalty requires true surrender to the purposes of God.

But sin causes us to resist God’s purposes. The natural heart sets itself against the One whom God has chosen to rule in our lives. Thus, God often uses the refining fire of conflict to bring the dross of our sinful hearts to the surface.

So do not be surprised at the fiery trial. It is refining your faith and revealing your character defects; which leads us to the second point of application.

Covenant loyalty requires courage to submit to the right King

Like David, many of us today live in a world where faithfulness to God can bring misunderstanding, exclusion, or even hostility. The temptation may be to compromise truth for acceptance.

We might ask, **“What have I done?”**. Only not in true humility, but out of fear of man or desire to not rock the boat and avoid conflict. Many gauge faithfulness as doing whatever is necessary to maintain social equilibrium.

It’s a real challenge to navigate this. David was weary and anxious because he knew he was being hunted. Saul quite literally wanted to cancel David!

The modern Christian may find himself or herself facing a similar crisis. We live in a cancel culture today. It’s not easy when you’re told that your message is hateful, bigoted, or just not nice.

The challenge we face is discerning whose voice to listen to – the voice of the accuser or the voice of the Lord. And ultimately, who to submit to: the king of the age or the King of kings?

Remember the words of Jesus, *“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Matthew 16:25*

What we need to discern is when loyalty to Christ must come before family expectations, cultural norms, or social acceptance—and how to do so with humility and grace.

I think we imagine persecution today as being told to stop preaching the gospel in our church. But that’s short-sighted. I think today’s culture is pretty much content to allow Christians to say whatever they want inside the building.

The pressure is going to be much more subtle than that. The enemy is too slippery to get caught up in that tactic today. It didn’t work in the first church, and I don’t see it working now.

Instead, he uses gas-lighting and manipulation to silence believers from speaking the truth out there, even in love. When you find yourself wondering what you’ve done to be hated, how you respond may be a test of your submission to Christ over against your comfort.

The enemy is constantly offering a subtle “out” for us – a way to just sort of blend in – “Don’t be so loud with your convictions and everyone will like you. Keep them to yourself and your small group of like-minded Christian friends. There’s a way for you to be faithful to Christ and liked by everyone else! Don’t you want that?”

Watch out. All Daniel had to do was close his window. All Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to do was kneel. All you have to do is shut up out there...and the world will love you for it.

If you don’t, you’ll be hated. So how do we embrace conflict that brings us to that point? The answer is confidence; not in ourselves, but in God.

Covenant loyalty is rooted in confidence in the covenant-keeping God

Even while God’s name is seldom mentioned directly in this story, His providence is at the base of every step of David’s life. David’s restraint and Jonathan’s oath both reflect their trust in God’s sovereignty.

David felt unsafe and confused, “What have I done?” which is a reminder that even God’s chosen servants experience anguish when we don’t see God’s hand at work.

While Saul's kingdom unraveled, the covenant between David and Jonathan stood fast. It serves as a microcosm of God's enduring covenant with His people. So, when God seems silent, we need to remember that He is still faithful. But how do we *know* He is still faithful?!

Christ Connection:

Enter: the person and work of Christ. Jonathan risked everything to protect David; Christ gave everything to redeem us. Where Jonathan could only protect one man, Jesus intercedes for all His people, binding us to Himself in an everlasting covenant.

So even when human relationships fail - even covenant relationships - Christ's love will not. Our security is not in God keeping us from challenging and disappointing circumstances but in the faithfulness of the covenant-keeping God.

The call for us today is to live as those bound by a greater covenant with the One who will always keep it. Jonathan and David sealed their covenant in the LORD's name; we are sealed by the blood of Christ.

Every Sunday gathering is a covenant renewal ceremony—we come to the table, we remember the blood, and we go back out strengthened to be faithful in the world in Jesus' name. When we stand in the fire, He is right there with us and His *hesed*, His steadfast, covenant love, holds us fast.