

1 SAMUEL 20
FRIENDS!

Friends – a TV programme that shaped a generation! Some of you will know it much better than me; have you watched every episode? Here's the blurb: "the 1994 sitcom, six people are all friends, living off of one another in the heart of New York. Over the course of eight years, this average group of buddies go through massive mayhem, family trouble, past and future romances, fights, laughs, tears and surprises as they learn what it really means to be a friend." For a generation, this shaped their view of the world; this became the way life should be; they should spend time with their friends, and build friendships; these were the relationships that mattered, spending quality time with your friends; so people looked for friendships through work, at the gym, in other places; they met their friends for coffee and the rise of Starbucks and other coffee shops became popular as places where friends would meet together and share the coffee experience together. For some, these relationships mattered more than any other and even took the place of family for some; friends became the new family.

There is nothing new in friendships; friendships have always been there. There are always have been people that we've known as friends and we have always spent time with friends, and built friendships in all sorts of ways and places. There are people we met as students at school or university; people we met at antenatal classes or playgroups; people we worship alongside in Church who have become firm and close friends. Some of these may be people that we now may not meet very often, but are people with whom you pick up the conversation as if you have just left it off; you don't need to prove yourself or justify yourself, but just be yourself with good friends. But here's the thing: Not everyone likes us as we are! We like to think that we're lovable and yet not everyone loves us all time; there are times when these friendships are tested by hard times that we go through, even times when people treat us as their enemies; when we struggle with life, our best friends are still there; they stick with us; we stick with them and there is mutual help and support. The wonderful testimony is that God helps us through the ministry of other people, even our friends.

There is a legendary Bible friendship between David and Jonathan. Friendship took them through some tough times, and it survived; by that friendship, David's path to become king was made possible. There was a time when it looked impossible for David to become king, but his friendship with Jonathan saw him through tough experiences. Jonathan is the son of the king, a prince in Israel; by rights, Jonathan might have expected to be king himself after his father died; we would expect that he would be jealous of David, as a threat to his inheritance; Jonathan would hate him, and do his best to be rid of him, and undermine David at every turn. Jonathan did none of that! Their friendship was tested when Saul threatened David and Jonathan stood by his friend, even against his own father; he saw his father treat his friend more and more unjustly. By Jonathan's friendship, David's path to the throne was secured; God was at work in and through their friendship. We will come to the end by asking who our friends are through whom God has blessed us and who are the people to whom we are friends like this, that God may bless them through our friendship?

The story starts in chapter 18: "*Jonathan became...*" (1 Samuel 18:1,3f) There are four descriptions of the quality of their friendship: firstly, they were one in spirit: they thought the same way, believed the same things, as something that acted as a bond to bring them together. Secondly, Jonathan loved David as himself – there is no real deeper description of good friendship than this, that Jonathan loved David as himself;

this is the Bible's common way of describing the ideal of our love for others. Thirdly, Jonathan made a covenant: this is a word that we don't use very much now, but is all about a commitment to one another, a pledge of mutual loyalty and friendship, stronger than just a promise. Fourthly, there were gifts, five of them: a robe and a tunic, the very clothes from Jonathan's back; his weapons and arms; all of that would represent a fair investment of money in David on Jonathan's part, these are no small gifts that he has given his friend. In these four ways we see Jonathan establish his friendship with David there is no sense of jealousy, simply friendship, love, and a commitment to him.

Then that friendship is put to test. Saul tries to get rid of David. He sees David as a threat; he is jealous of David's growing popularity, his celebrity status because of the battles he has won: there was Goliath and then there are others. We've spoken already about the six attempts on David's life and how each one is thwarted by one way or another. They make up a test to see just how serious the threat from Saul really is. It all revolves around a banquet that the king is giving and David is expected to be there. David decides that the test will be his not turning up; how will Saul react? If he says nothing, everything is fine, but if he flies into a rage, David should run away! The friends make up a secret code with arrows in a field so that David will know how things stand! Read the rest of 1 Samuel chapter 20 to see how it works.

It is the New Moon festival and the king throws a banquet. David is expected to be there, but isn't. On day one Saul is well-behaved; he says nothing and assumes that David will turn up the next day. On day two and there is still no sign of him, Saul can contain himself no longer: "*Why hasn't...*" (1 Samuel 20:27) "*David earnestly...*" (1 Samuel 20:28) How will Saul react? Here is the test! Is he calm and restrained? No! He flies into a rage and throws his spear at Jonathan: "*You son...*" (1 Samuel 20:30f) Is there any doubt left as to way Saul thinks? Not really! "*He got...*" (1 Samuel 20:34) The friends meet next morning in the field and the secret signal tells David that all is not well; he must leave at once to save his life. "*Jonathan...*" (1 Samuel 20:42f) It was an emotional farewell; there is no record of them meeting again and Jonathan is killed in the battle at the end of 1 Samuel, on the same day as his father takes his own life; "*How the mighty are fallen!*" was David's lament.

How can the Bible shape our friendships? How can we interact with this story in such a way that it impacts on the way we treat our friends? There is another Bible piece that we need to listen to. Jesus, when speaking to His disciples on the night before He died spoke about the quality of love that He has for us and that we need to have for one another. "*My command...*" (John 15:12f) 'Love' is a word that the Bible uses a lot and Jesus commands us to love, but then, here, He shows us the nature and the quality of that love; to lay down our lives for our friends. Jesus is about to do that on the cross; He calls them His friends and is about to go out into the night to go the way of the cross and to lay down His life for them. Such is to be the quality of our love for our friends too! Let's see what that means.

Be friends who give. What is the motive for friendship? Are we friends with someone because of what we want to get out of that friendship? I know that friendship is mutual and we gain from these relationships as much as we give. But this is about motive; this is about why we are friends. Are we friends simply to get as much as we can from someone else because that is what we need? Or are we friends to give to our friends as much as we can for their good and for their benefit? Jonathan was David's friend with no thought for himself; his sole concern was David's welfare. If he was in the friendship for what he could get, then he would have been full of jealousy and the friendship would have died. Give, with no thought of getting anything back; give, with no thought of reward; don't manipulate your friendships to your own

advantage. As Christians, don't make friendships so that you can use these as mission opportunities; make friends for friendships' own sake; give and keep giving.

Be committed friends. 'Covenant' is not a word we use much today, but it is all about commitment; God makes a covenant with us, committed to our well-being; Jesus makes a covenant by His death, committed to our well-being; Jonathan made a covenant with David, committed to his well-being, a commitment that withstood all the tests thrown at it. Be committed friends: I suspect we've all known people who have been our friends for a time, but when that friendship has been put to a test of some kind, they have disappeared and that friendship has withered and died. They couldn't cope, perhaps, with difficult things. There may even be times when people we once classed as friends, have walked past us in the street, appearing not to notice us or recognise us for some reason. How that hurts! If you are a friend, don't give up on that friendship. I know there are times when friends drift apart and contact is lost and there have been good reasons for that, but be committed friends. Jesus spoke of friends who are committed enough to give their life for their friends; how does that sound to you?

Friends who give. Committed friends. Here's a thing: through these friendships, God is at work. without Jonathan, David was at risk of giving up his calling to be king, or to sink into retaliation and hatred; God worked through Jonathan's friendship to protect David from Saul and to protect David from himself. Our friendships with other people, giving, committed friendships, somehow bring the grace of God into the lives of other people. I'm not entirely sure how it works, but I know that it does. As we love and care for our friends, especially at times when they are in need, the grace of God touches their hearts. The opposite is also true: when we abandon our friends in tough times, they develop a sense of being abandoned that includes being abandoned by God. I'm not sure that I understand this altogether, but I see it happen!

Thank God for your friends, for those friends who have given you of themselves again and again and again; those friends who are committed to be your friend, come what may! Thank God for Jesus, the friend who is willing to lay down His life for you and who did exactly that on cross. What kind of friend am I? Are you? The fly-by-night, fair weather friend, who is only out to use or abuse your friendships for what you can get out of other people, sucking them dry and walking off to take advantage of someone else? Or the friend who gives and gives again with no thought of the cost or a reward? The friend who is 'there' all time, even in tough times? The friend who is committed, even to lay your down life? These are searching questions. Are you part of the *Friends* generation? Here's the Bible's take on that idea! It goes deeper, it runs further. Be the friend who gives, who commits to the other's well-being. Jonathan had no jealousy, but loved David as himself, a committed, giving friend, through the ravages and tests of life. Here the thing: God is at work!