

A Tale of Two Responses to Others Success

1 Samuel 18

*But when saw and knew that **the LORD was with David**, and that Michal, Saul's daughter loved him, Saul was even more afraid of David. **So Saul was David's enemy continually.***

Introduction: Charles Dickens started out his most famous work of fiction, "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness...*" For anyone who remembers reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, you'll remember the selfless act of a character named Carton, who looked just like his friend Darnay and saves him from the guillotine. Carton started the story as a cynical drunkard who secretly loved Lucie Manette, who was married to Darnay. In the end, this act gave meaning to his misspent life. Carton's last speech to Darnay in his prison cell awaiting sure death bookended Dicken's famous start: "*It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known.*" In the end, the worthy Darnay had his life spared in an unexpected way, and the opposite paths of the lookalikes both ended up in a redemptive way.

1 Samuel 18 could read like a Dickens novel: "*It was the best of time* (Goliath defeated, Philistines on the run), *and it was the worst of times* (Saul tries to kill David by a spear twice). *It was an age of wisdom* (Jonathan) *and an age of foolishness* (Saul). The problem with this story is there is no redemption for the father of a son whose heart was exposed when someone came on the scene with **MORE SUCCESS** than he ever experienced. The son leaned into what God was doing, while the father resisted. The son responded in love, the father in rebellion. Jonathan had given himself to something greater than himself, namely God's **kingdom and glory**, where Saul tried desperately to hold onto a deteriorating semblance of a kingdom that he had for a short time. What we see in this chapter is a **tale of two responses that clearly revealed the heart**. When God's glory is the aim, love and joy are possible in any circumstance. When our glory is the aim, we lose the capacity for both joy and love.

Before delving into the nuts and bolts of the story, it's important to clarify the key difference between Jonathan and Saul. It is the difference between someone who is **born again, who has believed and repented of their sin, sought and received forgiveness, and has new life and righteousness**. When we come to Christ, we turn from our former direction, desires, and thinking, and follow Christ with all that we are. We are a **new creation** (2 Cor. 5:17), we have been crucified with Christ and He now lives in me (Gal. 2:20), and have been **set free from sin to become slaves of God** (Rom. 6:22). We now no longer live for ourselves but **FOR THE GLORY OF THE LORD** (1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31). Life is not about us but about Him, and we have the ability to choose **NOT** to sin, to truly love, and find joy in any and every circumstance (James 1:2). This is what is evident in the life of Jonathan, who believed by faith and trusted in the LORD with all of his heart.

On the other side, Saul operated with a hard heart, one that focused on self-preservation, self-glory, self-indulgence, and every other "self" word one can think of. He was a rebel who refused to yield. He kept up a veneer of religiosity, making sacrifices, feigning praise and credit to the LORD, and crying out when he was in desperate straits. His heart became evident, and will be on display in this chapter as he tumbles down a pathway of madness. Unrepentant sin will only harden our heart more, and Saul's heart was becoming granite.

This chapter helps us answer the question: **what does it look like to glorify the LORD, and how are we supposed to do it?** We will have a positive illustration in Jonathan, and a negative one in Saul. The goal

is for believers to strengthen their resolve, and for any unbeliever to realize the futility of their life apart from Christ. We will start with recapping the story and then looking at the particulars of each man's response to **David's rise to fame**.

David's Rise – Saul's Demise

After killing Goliath and sending the Philistines running back to Gath, getting pummeled all the way, the people of Israel came back with plunder, a giant's head, and armor as a trophy. Saul brought David into his service and did not let him go home again. As David returned after the battle with Goliath, it says that **the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul with tambourines, songs of joy, and musical instruments** (v. 6). This was not without precedent, and an almost exact scene is recorded in **Exodus 15**, where Miriam led the singers after Pharaoh and his armies were drowned in the Red Sea. The key difference was the obvious focus of each song. In Exodus 15, the focus was to **"Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."** (15:21) Yet Israel in the time of Saul had devolved into praising **men** rather than God, singing to the fact that Saul had killed 1000's, but David 10,000's! This was unintentional, but expanded an already growing divide in the kingdom.

A few things to point out about David at this stage. 1) **David was loved by all...except Saul** – Six times the text points out who **loved** him: Jonathan twice (18:1, 3), all of Israel and Judah (16), Saul's daughter Michal (20), all the king's servants (22), and Michal again for good measure (28). It was clear that David not only made a great impression but was beloved by the nation. 2) **David was successful** – Whatever David did or engaged in he found success, especially as a soldier. Wherever Saul sent him, he was successful (5) in all his undertakings (14), and Saul saw it (15). David had MORE SUCCESS than all the servants of Saul, and so that his name become highly esteemed (30). 3) **The LORD was with David** – This was the obvious but emphasized key difference between David and Saul: *the LORD was with David but had departed from Saul* (12). This was the impetus for Saul's angst against David, since he had once tasted the LORD's presence but now it not only departed, but was residing on the young man with whom all the praise and success was found. 4) **David was still a humble servant** – Remember, David had been anointed as king, but still served Saul in any and every way that was asked of him, from playing the lyre to leading an army, David respected the role of king even if the man on the throne did not live up to the part.

In this narrative, David then became the lightning rod, as the reader palpably sees Saul becoming crushed under the weight of his own incompetence and David growing exponentially in success and favor of all the people. In an *almost* comedic way, Saul tried 4 different ways to get rid of David or at least diminish his influence, and each time it backfired and only strengthened David's position in the hearts of the people:

1. **He tried to pin David to the wall – TWICE – as he played the lyre for him** (10-11) – After stewing on the national song about David's accomplishments which dwarfed his own, Saul showed he was a lousy shot when he was mad, missing David multiple times.
2. **He moved him out of the palace and into full time military service** (12-16) – The thinking was sound: I want to get this young punk out of my sight, so I'll send him out with the big boys and perhaps that will be his demise. But the opposite happened, as David simply became a military hero before all the people.

3. **Tried to entice David with his oldest daughter at the cost of fighting more battles** (17-19) – Again, under the guise of honor, Saul tried to get the Philistines to do his dirty work, thinking that the more David fought, the more likely he would die. But when David held up his end of the bargain, Saul simply married Merab off to another
4. **Finally, he used his daughter Michal’s love for David as a trap** (20-29) – Michal loved David, but it was also clear that she had an idol problem (v. 21; 19:13), and Saul wanted to exploit that against David. But he also put the bride price at 100 Philistine foreskins, an odd but apparently acceptable price for a princess. Saul’s motivation was to have David fall by the hand of the Philistines (18:25). All David did was kill **200 Philistines** and become the king’s son-in-law, confirming to Saul that God was with David, that Michal chose him, and that he was going to be a mortal enemy.

In spite of his efforts, David simply was solidified as a soldier (30), beloved in the heart of the nation, and now was an official member of his household. But there is something else pointed out in this narrative, and that is how David affected the men in Israel’s royal family, Jonathan and Saul. One saw David’s success as a reason to love, befriend, and rejoice in him, and the other turned to anger, fear, hate, and jealousy.

The Joyful Sacrifice of True Love (1-4)

Jonathan had everything to lose with David coming on the scene. He was the rightful son of the king, putting him in line for the throne until Saul sinned his way out of that. He was a war hero himself (1 Sam. 14) who boldly took on the Philistines nearly single-handedly. He was beloved by the people who stood in for him when Saul tried to have him killed for eating after he made an ill-timed and short-sighted vow. David was infringing on Jonathan’s space, future, standing, and position. If anyone would have wanted him gone, it was Jonathan.

But a strange thing happened as David entered: **“the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1)**. *What??!!* Not only was David a threat to Jonathan, but they did not have much in common. David was clearly younger than him, came from a poor family, and they had completely different backgrounds and experiences. Nothing in the makeup of each individual would scream *besties*, but here they were, knit together in a **covenant friendship, an iron-clad bond that transcended conventional wisdom**. Jonathan had such a clear focus on the glory of God, His kingdom, and had given himself to something greater than himself, and thus he was willing to embrace David as a brother. Here is what Jonathan showed, which is instructive to us:

- 1) **Genuine Love** – Love seeks the highest good of another, and only when we are set free from selfish thinking and worldly concerns can we truly love another. Love is selfless. This is why Jonathan did not see David as a threat, did not compete with him, but could actually rejoice in **HIS SUCCESSES**. Remember, the more David thrived, the more possibility Jonathan had of losing influence and power. He and David **made a covenant**, which in OT culture meant an unbreakable promise, seen in both God’s commitments to Israel and in a marriage bond. This love was proactive, pursuing, and protective, as Jonathan would risk his life and future for his friend.
- 2) **Generous Humility** – Love without humility is impossible. One cannot seek the highest good of another and keep one’s own self-interest as a priority. Jonathan demonstrated his love and humility by taking off his own royal robe and his armor, sword, bow and belt to David. Not only

did this signal how he viewed David, it showed how he thought about himself. *“This deed on his part was an act of faith. Only faith makes us willing to be lesser. Faith causes us to surrender our rights we pretend to have.”* (S.G DeGraaf) This would have been a grandiose endorsement by Jonathan to David before the people and the army, knowing that the military was loyal to Jonathan already.

A committed life of faith to the glory of God frees us to see **three important parts to life**, areas that Jonathan demonstrated:

- **The Basis of Christian friendship** – I’ve often said I wish we could teach a class called *“how to make a friend in the church”*. When there is no connection in friendship, often people feel like they are not a part of the core or feel like they are perpetually on the fringe. Also, a question asked of men, especially who are struggling with temptation, job, marriage, or depression is this; *who are their friends?* Often the answer is a deafening silence or awkward and rambling response. We can get lulled into thinking that friendship has to be based on *external commonalities*, i.e. stage of life, age, interests, etc. But what Jonathan and David proved was their differences, though many, were not a hindrance to what drew them together, namely their **common commitments to the LORD, convictions, and purposes in life**. The love displayed was one of choice, that was willing to **give, bless, and rejoice**.

“We love by understanding the vulnerabilities, fears, and weaknesses of others, and then reaching out with help and strength at precisely these points. To those who are discouraged, love gives encouragement. To those who are wayward, love gives kind, biblical counsel. To those who are overworked, love gives understanding and practical help. To those who are broken in suffering, love gives compassion and tears.”¹

We need true, deep, and committed friendships, not so we have someone to do hobbies with, but who can know us, love us, defend us, and rejoice as God gives us success.

- **The Foundation of Christian marriage** – Some have wrongfully and despicably tried to assign some form of sexual love between Jonathan and David, motivated to turn something beautiful and God given into a deplorable act. However, there is something that their mutual love DOES show and transcends into marriage. It’s the fact that marriage is based on **a covenant commitment, not personal (or personality) compatibility, on common convictions, not physical attraction, on a willingness to love sacrificially and humble completely, not waiting for our spouse to change**. The delight of Jonathan’s heart was to see David thrive – and when a spouse has this desire for their spouse, they can walk in joy and true love.
- **The Following of Christ’s love** – Not only does Christ love to the point of death when we were still enemies (Rom. 5:8), but He demonstrated that love to his disciples in washing their feet (John 13:15) and laying down His life for them (John 15:13). He calls His disciples friends (John 15:14-15), not withholding that part of a relationship from us. The love that He showed, He desired would be shared by all believers. *“A faithful friend is a strong defense in adversity, a soothing medicine when one is deeply wounded. **Men need friends well-chosen from the***

¹ Richard Phillips, *“Reformed Expository Commentary”*, p. 321

number who love the Lord. It is clear that Jesus wants to see our love for Him worked out in the love for the brothers.”²

The Joyless Spiral of Self Love (5-30)

Saul mirrored so many today. He had everything. He had looks, wealth, power, position, a family, and prestige. He was in want of nothing, except he was missing everything. His life was built on his own ability to control outcomes, and when circumstances were **out of his control**, his wicked, shallow heart was revealed. Though God communicated with him, made promises to him, and was gracious to him over and over, Saul continued to run away from God. **Saul is an advanced and concentrated portrait of a rebel against God**, a man who COULD not truly love, find contentment, or ever have joy since he tried to hold so tightly to his own life, regardless of how miserable it was. Let’s look one more time at the marks of a rebellious life apart from salvation:

- **Anger** – Anger and jealousy go hand in hand (2 Cor. 12:20). Since Saul’s priorities were all based on worldliness and selfishness, his anger came out readily. Anger is volcanic. It can exist under the surface of a smile or faux encouragement, only to build steam and brew beneath, ready to spew out molten magma at any moment. Since Saul valued **his name and fame more than the Lord’s**, any competitor was an object of jealousy. When an innocuous song was sung about David’s success, instead of praising the Lord that Israel actually did what God wanted them to, or in rejoicing in what God did in this young man’s life, his anger and displeasure burst open in a physical tirade and desire to either kill or significantly wound David. His words revealed his heart: **“what else could he take from me if not the whole kingdom”** (8). It was this kind of angry jealousy that rallied the Pharisees to put Jesus on the cross, since they *“loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”* (John 12:43). And that is the tell-tale sign. We are to put away our anger (Col.3:8) because our lives are hidden with God in glory. Our anger reveals what we glory in, and when it is ourselves we truly cannot love others or rejoice in their success, which means we care more about ourselves than them.
- **Fear** – Fear is an emphasis of this text, as Saul was afraid of David since God was with him (v. 12), afraid of his success (15), and that even his family loved him (29). Fear makes us **insecure, unconfident, and suspicious of others**. Since fear is self-focused and self-preserving, it is willing to use other people, even those closest to us, for our own gain. Fear of losing what we value the most is misplaced, and leads to paranoia, easy offense, and resentment. Sins like fear are always **devolving**. It’s understandable that in Saul’s younger years he would be appalled that he tried to kill a young man simply for doing what God called him to do, or use his own daughters to accomplish his insidious plot. Since fear resents people, **hatred** of others goes hand in hand with fear. Fear is the opposite of love, since **“there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love”** (1 John 4:18). Fear borrows trouble and expects the worst. But true, sacrificial, and Christ centered love casts out fear – and that is the only antidote.
- **Pride** – Ultimately, Saul was the lord of his own life, trying to control, fix, and keep something he never could. Pride made him a sinful brooder, a joyless soul, a self-focused mess. When everyone else rejoiced, he stomped off to the other room. When his loved ones were in front of

² Walter Chantry, *“David: Man of Prayer, Man of War”*, p. 37

him, he simply looked past them and used them for some other use. Pride misses what is most important and clings to worldly things that can never be kept.

Conclusion: Where does this leave us? What should we walk away with in this chapter? 1) A life that is committed by faith to glorify God alone through Jesus Christ is one characterized by humility, love, and rejoicing in others success. In Christ we are the most content, secure, selfless, and deferential people in the world. This should be reflected in our friendships and marriages, since these reflect our most important values.

2) A life of self-glory WILL be characterized by **anger, fear, jealousy, resentment, hatred, pride, and duplicitousness**. If that at all is what is true of your life, it should concern you, convict you, and call you to **repentance**. The joyful reality is that you do not HAVE TO LIVE THIS WAY, since you have a loving Savior who died in your place to forgive you and give you His righteousness. But you must believe and turn to Him, yielding yourself to Him in all areas, living for His glory rather than your own. When this happens, everything changes from the inside out. Learn from Saul and Jonathan. One lived a full life of love and joy, the other spiraled into madness. The difference is who they served, worshipped, and trusted in. That is the call for everyone this morning, for the glory of God, the magnifying of Jesus Christ, and joy of all people.