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Q&A#132 David and Jonathan

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Today's question: "What's the significance of David and Jonathan's friendship? Is there something more significant in terms of redemptive history or biblical theology that warrants it being highlighted so frequently and with such strong terms?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I thought I'd answer a question that was sent to me a few months ago. I go through my archives every now and again, so I'm not just answering the questions that have been sent to me in the last week.

This one was sent back in November, and I never got around to answering it, but it's an interesting one, and I thought I'd revisit it. What's the significance of David and Jonathan's friendship? Is there something more significant in terms of redemptive history or biblical theology that warrants it being highlighted so frequently and with such strong terms? First of all, this is a very good question to ask. This is the sort of question that arises from attention to the text, because as we read through 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel,

we see the friendship between David and Jonathan given a lot of attention, and there are accounts of their friendship that just seem excessive, accounts in the sense of the amount of space in the text that's devoted to it just seems unnecessary, and the details of, for instance, the sign sent with the lad and shooting the arrows and all these other sorts of things that are sent as a message to David, why do we have all of that stuff? It just seems strange and unnecessary, and so asking the question of what is the importance of this friendship, why would our attention be drawn to it, is a good thing to think about.

When we look at the friendship between David and Jonathan, first of all, it's worth considering the age gap between them, because we don't usually think this way. We usually are focused so much upon the intimacy between the two of them that we don't actually fit the details together of the text and realize that Saul and Jonathan were fighting at the beginning of Saul's reign, and Jonathan presumably would have been at least around 18 at that time, and so the age gap between him and David, which we can ascertain from the time that David comes to the throne and all these sorts of other details that we have in terms of the chronology, it would seem that David is maybe late teens, early 20s, and Jonathan is in his late 40s or early 50s in the time of the events that we most have a record of, have the most record of in these chapters. Other things to notice, when we read through the story of David, it plays off the story of Genesis at many, many points.

David is like Joseph. He's someone who has brothers, who he's working with the sheep of his father. He's sent out to his brothers to bring out news back from them, and his brothers do not like him.

They think he has ideas above his station. He's someone who's the youngest. He's the one who is particularly favored by God, and he has a status that's given to him above his other brothers, but he goes to his brothers and his brothers resist him, and yet he ends up being the one who's raised up to power in the house of the king.

He's the one who has all these other things that are brought to him, and the hearts of the people turn to David. What we also see is that David ends up being the savior of the people. He's a significant figure then.

Other things that we can see playing out against the background of the story of Genesis are relations within this family network, and these family networks can play out in different ways, and perhaps the strongest connection between David is with the character of Jacob, that David is like Jacob in a number of respects. David is like Jacob in his relationship with Saul, Saul being like Isaac and also like Laban and also to some extent like Esau, and we see those stories of David and Saul playing on all of those themes, sometimes in succession, sometimes very closely together. Let me give you some examples.

If you read about the story of David going into the cave, cutting off part of the corner of Saul's robe, you have words that remind you of the story of Isaac and the blessing of Jacob. Is that your voice, David, my son? The voice and the connection with the son and these other themes that Esau ends up lifting up his voice and weeping in despair. Later on, we see Saul doing the same thing.

Saul is like Laban. He switches his two daughters. He promises Merab to David, but ends up giving him Michael instead, and he's someone who tries to trap Saul, try to trap David.

He's not a good father-in-law. He's like Laban, and he tries to reduce the status of David. He's threatened by David, who's taking over the hearts of his people, the hearts of his household, and his daughter ends up deceiving him like Rachel deceived Laban, and in all of these stories, we're seeing parallels between David and Jacob and then Esau and Saul, Isaac and Saul.

Saul is blind in the darkness of the cave. He's also blind in his sleep as David takes the spear and the jug, and he's also like Laban. He's the wicked father-in-law.

We see other connections between David and these characters in the story of Jacob. In the story of Nabal, in the story of Nabal, Nabal is Laban backwards, and events occur at the time of sheep shearing, which is the time when Jacob leaves the house of Laban, and there's this conflict, and we also have David trying to go to kill Nabal with 400 men, and that might remind you of the story of Esau. Esau comes to kill Jacob or to meet him, presumably with violence, with 400 men, and Abigail sends gifts ahead and then brings peace in the same way as Jacob does with Esau.

So there are these sorts of parallels that we can see. Esau is one who despises his birthright. He ends up losing his birthright.

He's someone who's this person who does not honor the covenant and ends up suffering as a consequence, and he has a sense of remorse for what he's lost and despair, but yet he can't get it back, and in many ways, the story of Saul is like no one so much as Esau. Esau is characterized by futile remorse, and the same is true of Saul. Esau, we might think of him as, he's someone who despises his birthright, and his place is taken by another.

He's also like Isaac. He's the one who will not give the blessing to the right son, and here we start to get closer to hints into what Jonathan might be. Jonathan is the son of Saul.

He's the one who Saul wants him to be king, but yet Jonathan is not cooperating. Jonathan gives his garment to David. In chapter 18, we read that Saul, when he finished speaking to Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.

Saul took him that day and would not let him go home to his father's house anymore. Then Jonathan and David made a covenant because he loved him as his own soul, and Jonathan took off the robe that was on him and gave it to David with his armor, even his sword and his bow and his belt. Now, this is a very significant thing to do.

He's giving these signs of his rule to his brother. Now, what might this remind us of? There are a number of places in Genesis that this might recall. We might think about the many stories of divestment of clothing in the end of Genesis, in the Joseph narrative, and most particularly the fact that Joseph has his brothers strip his garment off him, the garment that represents his rule, his favored status of his authority, given favored status given by his father and his authority that he enjoys in that regard.

In this, we see something different. We see the favored son, who is not in fact the son that God would have as the one inheriting. He voluntarily strips himself of his garment, and he gives it.

These signs of his rule, he gives to the one who's truly to inherit, to David. Later on, we'll see another event, which might alert us to some connections. When they meet and the signal is sent that David should not return to the palace, they meet and Jonathan sends his weapons, gives his weapons to his lad and sends him to carry them into the city.

Now, as soon as the lad had gone, David arose from a place toward the south, fell on his face to the ground and bowed down three times. And they kissed one another and they wept together, but David more so. Then Jonathan said to David, "'Go in peace, since we have both sworn "'in the name of the Lord, saying, "'May the Lord be between you and me "'and between your descendants and my descendants forever.' So he arose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city." Where else do we have two people meeting in that same way, bowing before each other and falling on the face, bowing down, kissing each other and then weeping together? Where else do we see that? And where else do we see them going their separate ways afterwards? Well, there's an obvious place.

It's in the story of Esau and Jacob. Jacob meets Esau. He crossed over before Leah and Rachel and he bowed down to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother.

But Esau ran out to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept. It's the meeting between Esau and Jacob, but now there's no poison in the relationship between them. They're at peace.

And when we're reading the story of David, I think that's part of what we're seeing going on with Jonathan. That Jonathan is like the inverse of the brothers who stripped the garment from Joseph. Here, he takes his garment, his rule, his authority from himself voluntarily and gives it to the Joseph character, the one who's been cast as a Joseph character, facing the hostility of his own brothers in the previous chapter.

But now the character who reminds you of the sons that are favored over the more favored sons, they give that, he gives that authority voluntarily. Likewise with the Esau theme, there was no violence. There was no opposition.

There was no antagonism between these two brothers. Their hearts are knit together. And the description there, I think is quite important that the text says in chapter 18, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.

That language of a deep entanglement of two people, they're twins as it were, even though there's this age difference, even though they come from different houses and there's a sense of rivalry playing out, there is deep peace between them. Now, that is a profound thing, particularly when we think that Jonathan is the son who, why wouldn't he inherit? He's someone who shows great strength and might in battle. He's someone who shows faith and he's someone who really seems to be a naturally suited king.

And yet he gives voluntarily his rule to David. These garments that he takes from him are not himself, are not just signs of authority. They're not just signs of showing favor in some way and saying, you're a good guy.

Here's some of my clothes. They're a sign of his status. He's handing over his status as crown prince to David, the presumed rival of the house in the eyes of Saul.

What can we do to fill out this picture a bit more? Well, the story of Genesis is very much a story, particularly towards the end of how you deal with the conflict between the favored and the unfavored son. And perhaps nowhere do we see that more fully addressed and that pattern worked out more beautifully than the story of David and Jonathan, where there was no rivalry between them, but the unfavored son gives up for the sake of the favored. And the favored son weeps for the loss of the unfavored son later on and then shows kindness to his house.

This is playing out stories of Esau and Jacob. It's also playing out stories of Cain and Abel. They meet in a field, the place where Cain and Cain killed his brother Abel.

Here you find peace and a covenant being made between David and Jonathan. So I think there are those sorts of redemptive historical themes. I think we also see that the relation between David and Jonathan is a relationship between Judah and Benjamin.

If we look back in chapter 44 of the book of Genesis, we see an expression that should remind us of something. It says, now therefore, this is Judah interceding for Benjamin. Now therefore, when I come to your servant, my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, it will happen when he sees that the lad is not with us, that he will die.

Here we have Judah interceding for Benjamin, his life for Benjamin's life. And also the way that he speaks about his father and his attitude towards this son, towards Benjamin,

that Benjamin's life is entangled with the life of Jacob. It's the same thing as the way that the soul of David and Jonathan become entangled.

As it were, you can't have the soul of Jonathan without the soul of David and vice versa. Same with Benjamin and Jacob. And Judah's intercession for Benjamin, here we see in many ways the thing, the pattern being reversed when Benjamin gives back to Judah.

And so I think there are deep redemptive historical themes. There's a great deal more that I could say about this, but that should give you some clues to do some more of your own digging on the subject. Thank you very much for listening.

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