

Men of Covenant

BY ERN BAXTER

David and Jonathan: an example of loyalty in friendship

Many years ago, I found myself sitting across the table from a young man who was a card-carrying Communist. I knew he had given everything he had to the party, and was intensely involved in the spread of communism. I thought to myself, I've got to press the claims of Christ on him. And when I did, he listened to me very courteously, but then made a piercing remark: "Ern, I have been in situations where my comrades have been shot or terribly tortured. I have comrades whom I stand with, even though our lives are at stake. When I see that kind of dedication among Christians, then I may listen to you."

We as Christians should be walking in a degree of relationship that reflects the depth of covenantal love we share through the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. We need to have covenantal relationships with one another.

One of the most enduring, touching, and descriptive examples of a covenantal relationship

is that of David and Jonathan. Both young men understood the nature of God's covenants with Abraham, Moses, and Israel; they lived in a society that understood covenant. Today, however, we're handicapped because we do not apprehend the true nature of covenant. But by examining David and Jonathan's relationship, we can learn many lessons about being people of covenant in our day.

The Meaning of Covenant

First, it is important that we know what covenant means. In 1 Samuel 18:3, we read: "Then Jonathan made [cut] a covenant with David because he loved him as himself" (NAS). "Cutting" covenant is meaningful because when covenant was made in the Old Testament, sacrificial animals were cut in half, the two parts representing the covenant makers, who were symbolically laying down their lives for each other.

When the two people walked between those cut animals they were saying, "I give my life to you; and you give your life to me." And afterward, the eating

of the sacrificed animal was regarded literally as eating each other's life so that the two would become united in a covenant of blood.

Because of their knowledge of covenant, David and Jonathan understood they weren't entering into some sentimental promise to one another; rather they related their covenant to the Lord. When they pledged their commitment to each other, David said, "Therefore deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you" (1 Sam. 20:8 NAS). The covenant was not just between Jonathan and David; it was between Jonathan, David, and God.

Having the Lord involved in our covenantal relationships should naturally sober us. His involvement causes us to seriously assess the sincerity, integrity, and veracity of our commitments. And that's good. But dwelling only on the serious side of covenant tends to make us lopsided, because our nature has another side that laughs, claps its hands, enjoys, and

plays. And that's equally valid.

The Delight of Covenant

I have found in covenantal relationships with my brothers that we've had to walk through some bloody places together, but we've also had a lot of fun together. First Samuel 19:1 says, "Jonathan, Saul's son, greatly delighted in David" (NAS). David wasn't just loved by Jonathan; he was Jonathan's delight. They had a relationship, and they liked to be together. A covenant where men are knit together in God is not only designed for loyalty, integrity, veracity, and standing together in times of testing. It also is meant to extend into every aspect of life, including enjoyment and happiness with one another. Covenant is not all suffering and sacrifice, confrontation and blood. We need all the joy and the happiness and the relational fun there is in covenantal relationship, because, as we can see by looking further into the story of David and Jonathan, our covenant will, in fact, be tested.

The Test of Covenant

It was a time when Jonathan's father, King Saul, began to look for a way to kill David without letting Jonathan know. When David said to his covenantal friend, "There is hardly a step between me and death," here was Jonathan's reply: "Whatever you say, I will do for you" (1 Sam. 20:3-4 NAS).

Jonathan was speaking out of a situation where he was the son of Saul, the king. He was the heir to the throne—a celebrity in the nation. David, on the other hand, was on his way out—about to be exiled. And yet Jonathan understood that when he cut a covenant with David, it wasn't to be kept just when things were easy, but rather to the death.

Are we willing to maintain our commitment when the chips are down? It's fine to be in covenant when everything is going well, but when our brother is in a crisis, when he's in difficulty, do we stand with him?

Jonathan told David that if he found out that Saul was not really after David's life, he would send a messenger to David so that he could come back. But if he instead found a plot to harm David, he would put his life on the line by going to David and seeing to it that he escaped. And then Jonathan said:

"And if I am still alive, will you not show me the lovingkindness of the Lord, that I may not die? And you shall not cut off your lovingkindness from my house forever, not even when the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth" (1 Sam. 20:14-15 NAS).

Extending the Covenant

Here we see their covenant extended and renewed. David and Jonathan have gotten along fine so far, and now the covenant can stand a little more weight. We too find that as covenantal relationships mature, we can put more weight on them. Jonathan wanted a pledge from David, as he would pledge to him, that if he died in protecting his covenantal brother, David would take care of his family; and if David got in trouble, he would take care of David's family.

I believe that the spirit of Acts 2 and Acts 4 is the perennial spirit of a sound covenantal Christianity, which says in the hour of crisis, "What I have is yours—we hold all things common." I'm not opposed to private enterprise. I'm not against us having our own bank accounts. But I am saying that

the spirit of covenant is "What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine. In a time of crisis there won't be even a split second of hesitation—I will share with you and you will share with me." Thus, out of their covenant, Jonathan could ask David to pledge himself to take care of Jonathan's family.

But Saul attempted to manipulate Jonathan and alienate him from David by reminding him of his right to the throne:

"For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Therefore

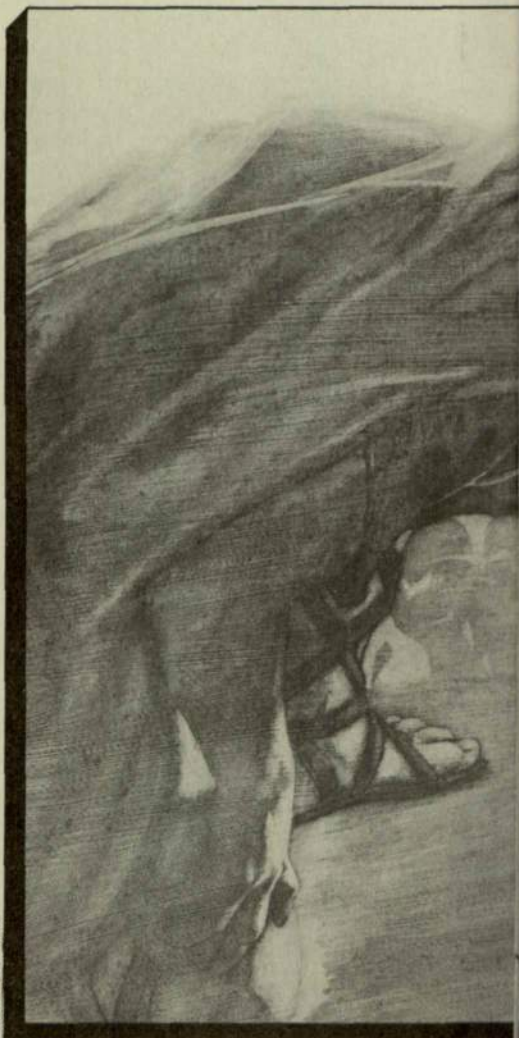


Illustration: J. A. M.

now, send and bring him to me, for he must surely die" (1 Sam. 20:31 NAS).

But Jonathan wasn't thinking of *his* throne—for now it was *their* throne. In covenantal relationships, it is no longer *my* ministry; it's *our* ministry. It's no longer *my* reputation; it's *our* reputation.

Laying Down Our Lives

Despite his father's persuasions, Jonathan continued in his covenant with David and went to warn him of Saul's plot to kill him. He found David, and as they parted, "they kissed each other

and wept together, but David more" (1 Sam. 20:41 NAS). David and Jonathan—these men of war and courage—displayed covenantal emotion. For a man to show emotion is often thought wrong. Men, society says, are supposed to be stoical and unmovable. I don't believe that. I believe there is a valid expression of emotion in our covenantal relationships, particularly when we go through trials and problems and difficulties. Men can weep together unashamedly and can mingle their tears, and can find the warm, strong wrap of a brother's arms imparting strength. There is nothing wrong

with expressing emotion in our relationship with God and one another. Emotions are a valid part of a covenantal relationship.

After David and Jonathan said their good-bys, they went their separate ways. This used to raise a perplexing question for me: Why didn't Jonathan go with David? I used to believe that Jonathan did everything but the one thing he should have done—gone with David. But I no longer think that. I believe instead they felt that Jonathan should stay in Saul's house, that he would be David's man in Saul's court. And I think that Jonathan, literally and in very



deed, laid down his life for David.

When we talk about covenant and laying down our lives, let's not mouth cheap words. We, too, may lay down our lives for one another someday. Jonathan laid

with his father because he had covenanted with David. And as David looked at this poor, benighted creature, lame in both feet, the remnant of Saul's line, he made yet another promise. This one was to restore Saul's

leader of one of them. One day I was trapped alone by a rival gang and, taking advantage of the situation, they soon had me down on the ground.

Somehow the word quickly got around, and as I was being pummeled, I looked through the the legs of my enemies and I could see this female running around the corner, skirt above her knees, beautiful red hair flowing out in the wind, eyes flashing, and face flushed. My sister moved in on those fellows and sent them flying in all directions. "The slain in the Lord were many!" When my enemies were all on the ground, she leaned over me, her eyes full of fire, and asked, "Did they hurt you, Dear?"

At home we regularly fussed with one another. But out there, I was her brother! If we must quarrel, let us quarrel at home, confronting one another within the confines of covenant. But out there, let us be brothers, saying, "I don't care what you've done, you're my brother—I'm going to fight for you."

Let us restore loyalty. Let us restore integrity and courage. Let us be men of God and cut covenant with one another. And when we cut covenant, let us remember whom we are cutting covenant with—each other and the Lord. Let us pledge with our very lives to lay down our lives, one for the other. □

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down his life and died, so it wasn't a happy ending. But in a very real sense it was a happy ending, because the ending doesn't come with death. In eternity, Jonathan will stand in the day of God, holding his head high, standing beside the progenitor of our Lord, the great king of Israel, and David will look at him with favor.

Integrity and Loyalty

Even after Jonathan's death, David remembered his covenantal promise to look after Jonathan's house. In 2 Samuel chapter 9, we see David fulfilling that promise when he showed kindness to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's crippled son, saying to him: "Do not fear, for I will surely show kindness to you for the sake of your father Jonathan (2 Sam. 9:7 NAS).

I think David said that with a sob in his throat as he thought of that tall, straight, manly young man whom he cut covenant with on that day long ago. It must have brought back vivid memories of that young man who risked his life, his reputation, his crown, and who eventually died on the battlefields

land to Mephibosheth and to have him eat at his table regularly (see 2 Samuel 9:7). That is covenantal integrity and loyalty!

I would like to see the word *love* replaced in the Christian vocabulary by the word *loyalty*—at least for a while. God is calling us to loyalty. I believe there is a disloyalty among Christians that must make angels weep. Let us redeem loyalty. Let us put integrity back before the sons of men. Let men know that we do not publicly deride and expose one another, but that we will stand with our brother; that we may confront him in the house but fight for him in the field, rather than expose him before his enemies.

"You're My Brother"

I have a redheaded older sister. When we were kids, she was a fireball! At home, we would get into fights, as brothers and sisters will, but in public she was loyal to me.

Back in those days in public schools, at recess the girls were on one side of the playground while the boys were on the other. We had our gangs, and I was a