

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Valuing what God has given us: The friends God gives us

“There is something not altogether disagreeable in the misfortune of one’s friends.” So said La Rochfoucard, expressing, no doubt, what is very often true of us secretly, but we would probably disagree with publicly. In our series on valuing what God has given us, we have already looked at valuing our time and valuing our talents. This morning, we shall consider how we might value the friends that God has also given to us. On occasions we may be called to serve alone, and in such circumstances God will always give the necessary strength to do so. But, in general, we are social beings who need the company of one another. So it is necessary to examine ourselves to see whether we value what God has given to us.

I remember as a child writing a letter to the Queen. Sometime later a response came. Now although the letter had only been sent on her behalf, rather than actually written by her, I kept it for ages. It wouldn’t surprise me if my mother still had it in her box of special things that all mothers seem to possess. That letter held no monetary value – in that sense it was not valuable. But it was valuable because of the giver. We should view our friends in just such a light. If God has given us something, then it should be extremely precious to us.

This morning, to help us learn how to value the friends we have, I would like to look at perhaps one of the best friendships we find in the Bible. Throughout the book of 1 Samuel, and into the early chapters of 2 Samuel, we read of the enduring friendship of David and Jonathan. It was a friendship that God used, and one that would last until death, and even beyond. In a world where so much is temporary, this kind of friendship is increasingly rare, and so all the more valuable. We shall learn 7 important lessons in our study, beginning in 1 Samuel 14.

### Choosing good friends.

There was a time early in the reign of king Saul, when the Philistines were dominating the Israelites. One day Jonathan, with only his armour bearer in support, went over to the camp of the Philistines. After climbing a steep rock face, they fell upon the enemies of God, killing over 20 of them in the first onslaught. Their actions were to spur the rest of the Israelite army to attack the Philistines and lead to their temporary defeat. In this we see the godliness and courage of Jonathan. He was no pampered prince who enjoyed all the trappings of royalty, but took none of its responsibilities or hardships. He led by example.

This highlights to us the real importance of choosing our friends carefully. Whilst it may be nice to have an address book full of names and numbers, to be out every night with a different person, it is far more important to choose our friends, as directed by the Lord, with care. Firstly, we ought to pray that God will give us those friends who will be of spiritual benefit to us. There is a saying, “bad company corrupts good morals”. Sadly, too often this is especially true for the believer. Now I am not saying that the Christian should only have Christian friends, but it would be unusual for a Christian’s best friend to be an unbeliever. Indeed, if we are to effectively share the Gospel, then we need to have acquaintances, work colleagues and neighbours with whom we have built up a friendship. But as we consider those friends to whom we look to spend substantial amounts of time with, to whom we turn for support or guidance, then we do need to ensure they are going to be a spiritual help to us. Jonathan was just such a person. He had already shown a love for God, and a care for His honour. He had proved by his actions that he was prepared to put his life on the line for what he believed in. And he had shown that he was a man of his word.

Particularly when it comes to the choice of our most important human friend, our spouse, we need to choose someone who will be as spiritually keen as us. It is no use basing a lifetime’s commitment to someone on looks or favoured hobbies. These inevitably change with time. We need to base our choices on those qualities that can last. I can thank God for the times that my wife has been a spiritual prompt to me, or has stopped me from things that would not have been a help. I can hope there have been times when I have been so to her. But even in considering just our ordinary friendships, we need to exercise care. If I choose a friend who has little interest in the work of God, then I am likely to come under pressure to compromise. Now finding good quality friends is unlikely just to happen. So this highlights one of the tremendous necessities for regular fellowship together with other believers. If I am never at the prayer meeting or Bible study, if I am infrequently at church on a Sunday, if I never go to meetings on a Saturday, or other days of the week, then I am unlikely to find friends who will spiritually help me. Now let us move on to the first time we read of David and Jonathan together, though undoubtedly they had met before.

**Friendship not consumed by jealousy.**

At the beginning of 1 Samuel 18, we read, "Now when he had finished speaking to Saul, 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 armour, even to his sword and his bow and his belt."

Fresh from his awesome defeat of the giant Goliath, David is brought before Saul again. How easy it would have been for Jonathan to be jealous! Here was a rival for his father's affections. Here, too, a rival for the affections of the army and the nation. Perhaps, until now, Jonathan had been the inspiration for both. But now all that had changed. David had in single combat done what no other was prepared to, and defeated Goliath. What act could compare to that? Not even the silly song of the women, that was about as wise as examining the back teeth of a starving crocodile, could poison the love that David and Jonathan had for each other. Jonathan might legitimately have viewed David as a rival for the throne.

As Saul's son, he was next in line. David might have viewed Jonathan as a stumbling block to taking the place that God had promised to him through Samuel. But instead of letting these thoughts of mutual distrust fester and separate, there was a deep affection between these two men of God. Indeed, Jonathan goes so far as to give David his own sword and bow. Had he used these weapons against the Philistines, as we have already thought? In any friendship, there will be times when one prospers more than another. Particularly at times like this, we need the spirit that Jonathan showed, that rejoices wholly in the glory of another, and does not in so doing perceive a slight against oneself. If we can truly rejoice when our friends rejoice, and mourn when they mourn, then we will have gone some way to valuing the friends whom God has given us.

**Peacemaking.**

Sadly, it was not long before the relationship between Saul and David broke down. So in the opening two verses we read: "Now Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David; but Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted greatly in David. So Jonathan told David, saying, 'My father Saul seeks to kill you. Therefore please be on your guard until morning, and stay in a secret place and hide.'" Jonathan then proceeds to speak up for David in front of Saul, until in verse 7 we read: "Then Jonathan called David, and Jonathan told him all these things. So Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as in times past." Inevitably, within a friendship, there will be times of conflict. Other individuals will claim prior friendship, or fall out with one half of the friendship. It is at times like this that we need to undertake the valuable work that Jonathan performed. All too easily he could have chosen his father's side, or David's. Instead, he confronts the wrong attitudes of his father and speaks up for David. One can picture fawning servants agreeing with Saul, and slandering David. Perhaps alone in that royal circle, Jonathan spoke up for David, so convincingly, that David is welcomed back as before.

Jonathan's actions also highlight for us another important characteristic. He isn't hasty to accept the bad report he is given as regards David, even though it was his own father speaking. In 1 Corinthians 13:7, one of the qualities that Paul identifies in love is that it believes all things. Now the idea behind this word does not suggest a naivety that accepts that black is white. What it does mean is that until proven to the contrary, love will accept what it is told or knows about another. Within a friendship, if we hear something spoken against another, we ought not to believe it straight away, but rather weigh it against what we know, and check it out face to face. So much damage has been done within the church of God because people have acted upon lies, half truths and one sided stories. Indeed, love is the opposite of gullible, for it demands the very fullest truth before action is taken, and is never too big to say "sorry". One of the greatest acts any friend can perform is that of making peace between those who have fallen out. It is in truth performing an aspect of the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us (2 Corinthians 5). For Jonathan it was a thankless task, and one that was to ultimately prove futile. There are times when one party or another, in Jonathan's case his father, will just not be reunited in friendship. And yet, even in such a case, Jonathan refused to let it spoil his friendship with David, as we see in chapter 20.

**Bearing the cost of friendship.**

It is a lovely thing when a friendship can exist which is of benefit to both parties equally. But what is beautiful to see in the case of David and Jonathan, is that despite the cost to himself, Jonathan remains constant in his love for David. Saul had again taken sides against David, and was now desperately seeking to kill him. So it is that David and Jonathan make a pact to protect David from Saul. It was a decision that was nearly to cost Jonathan his life. Unbelievably, he was almost pinned to the wall by his own father's spear. Just imagine the hurt and shock for Jonathan as his own father tried to kill him! Despite all this, Jonathan keeps his word to David, and protects him in hiding from his father. Ultimately, at the end of chapter 20, we read of the final parting of these two friends "and they

kissed one another; and they wept together, but David more so.” In one awful day, Jonathan was to lose his father and his friend. At this stage, there seemed to be no benefit for Jonathan, only pain, and yet he remains faithful and steadfast. What a wonderful example to all of us who would ever claim to be friendly! So often we expect something out of a friendship, a reciprocal benefit. And yet, here, Jonathan would teach us that to truly value the friends God gives us, we must be prepared to give and give and give, even when there is no prospect of receiving anything in return, other than pain and heartache. His friendship almost literally cost him his life, and yet such was his love for God and David, that Jonathan would remain loyal to both through thick and thin. Against such a backdrop, some of the petty things that we fall out over really do seem so trivial. We grumble if we are kept waiting for five minutes, or a phone call is not returned. What a difference there would be within the church of God, if we all started to act more like Jonathan, ready to lay down our lives for one another, giving utterly without any thought for repayment. Ah, I hear you say, as I hear my own inner voice echo, I would if they would. But that was not Jonathan’s way.

### **Divided Loyalties**

By the time we reach chapter 31 we learn the awful result of divided loyalties. Poor Jonathan! What a choice he had to make. God’s law told him to honour his father. Could he really abandon him as he rode off to war against the Philistines? On the other hand, I suspect he knew in his heart that, although next in line, he would never be the next king, and that was now what his father was fighting for. Could he really have ridden off to David, and potentially faced his own father on the battle field? Two men that tore Jonathan’s heart apart.

During the Wars of the Roses, as the houses of Lancaster and York fought for the throne of England, the brother of the Earl of Warwick, the Kingmaker, faced a similar dilemma. He chose to fight alongside his brother, but against his two closest friends. As was the custom, he wore the colours of Lancaster on his surcoat and banner. But as the bodies of the dead were stripped and searched after the battle, he was found to be wearing the colours of York under his armour. What bitter tragedy!

One of the greatest attributes any friend can have is the ability to remain true and impartial when competing demands are placed upon a friendship. It is all too easy to take sides and cement division. But throughout his life, Jonathan’s friendship to David remained constant, whilst his obedience to his father was uncompromised. In our lives there are times when we may be called to build bridges between two individuals or groups who would otherwise remain apart. Jonathan could have been excused for throwing in the towel, and giving up on both of them. It is a tribute to the strength of his affection for David that he never did so. True friendship is a lifelong commitment.

### **A tribute to friendship.**

As we move into 2 Samuel 1 we see the glowing tribute of a grieving David. What enormous loss prompted the special tribute that David paid to Jonathan! Having already likened him to a swift eagle or a strong lion, David laments, in verses 25-27: “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan was slain in your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished.” It is a wonderful thing to be able to praise another. Now Jonathan would have had his faults, just like any of us. And yet David is able to overlook these and pour praise on him. It is strong testimony indeed to the strength of the friendship that these two men of God enjoyed.

It is just sad that Jonathan never got to hear this tribute himself. Well, there may be nothing that we can do about that, but let us resolve not to wait until death separates us before we tell our friends what we think of them. It is incredible what a few well chosen words can do to change the complexion of a day. We ought not to be held back by embarrassment or a sense of it “not being the done thing”. If we are to truly value the friends whom God has given us, then let us not only pray for them fervently, but let us also praise them. There was no fawning flattery in David’s eulogy, just an outpouring of the heart. It is all too easy to take our friends for granted, but a thank you card, a meal out or some such small token expressing the value we hold another in is important in keeping any friendship fresh and vibrant.

### **Longstanding friendship.**

Once David has secured the throne, he asked an important question of his servants, in 2 Samuel 9:1: “Is there still anyone who is of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?”

In this simple question we see the measure of the value that David had placed upon his friendship to Jonathan. Normally, it is usual for a king to eliminate all his potential rivals for the throne, for fear of civil war. Yet here we have David wanting to find out whether any of Jonathan’s family still lived so that David could show him favour. If you read the rest of the chapter after this broadcast, you will see for yourself just how far David was to go to express that desire to honour his dead friend. A crippled son of Jonathan receives all the benefits of life in the palace, and the full

protection of the king. So inseparable had these two friends been that even in death, David would find a way to express that love that he had had for Jonathan. There were no obstacles too great for that feeling to be expressed. True friends will always find a way to bring reality to the friendship that they share. The lengths that we are prepared to go to bear eloquent testimony to the value we place on our friends. If we are not prepared to put ourselves out for another then we might rightly assume that the friendship we have is very shallow.

As we come to an end of our broadcast this morning, let us just take a moment to consider our friends. Do we truly value them? Have we been careful in choosing friends who will spiritually help us? Having done so, let that friendship be free from jealousy and other negative emotions. Let us be peacemakers and keepers, ready to bear the cost of sustaining that friendship at all times. When loyalties are divided, let us remain true and let us always be ready to express the gratitude we have for our friends. Finally, let us be constant in our friendship, ever looking for ways to prove the depth of the value there is in the friends whom God has given us.

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