



David's Friend for Life: Blood not Thicker than Water (1 Sam 20) *Commentary: Week Eleven*

New American Commentary¹

(12) Jonathan Protects and Covenants with David [20:1-42](#)

[20:1-3](#) After witnessing four attempts on his life in one day, David certainly had no reason to doubt Saul's determination to kill him. Yet to escape the king's attacks, David would have to abandon the two most significant people in his life, his best friend Jonathan and the wife of his youth, Michal. Even if he were to escape and live, would life be worth living under those circumstances?

Hoping he was wrong but fearing he was right, David "fled from Naioth at Ramah and went to Jonathan" (v. [1](#)) to discuss the matter further. Perhaps the fault was David's; perhaps he had committed some "transgression" (Hb. *'avôn*; NIV, "crime") or "sin" (Hb. *ḥaṭṭā'î*; NIV, "have wronged") against Saul. If so, then he could repent, make reparations, and so end the nightmarish attacks; his life of love and friendship could return to him once more.

David's melancholic musings seemed like nonsense to Jonathan, and he rejected the conclusions. If anyone should know Saul's thought processes, it was Jonathan, for Saul did not "do anything, great or small, without confiding in" (v. [2](#)) Jonathan.

But David, who had "wisdom like that of an angel of God" to "discern good and evil" ([2 Sam 14:17, 20](#)), saw what Jonathan could not. The cold facts of the situation pointed to only one conclusion: Saul was passionately determined to kill David. In fact, at that moment David was "only a step" ahead of "death." Yet Saul had insulated Jonathan from the deadly scheme so his son would not "be grieved" (v. [3](#); cf. v. [34](#)).

[20:4-10](#) Jonathan, like David, had much to lose if the accusations against Saul proved true; he would forgo the companionship of his best friend and experience alienation from his father. In an effort to put the matter to rest, he agreed to cooperate with David in the investigation. Whatever plan David might put forth, Jonathan would follow it.

David, the man described more frequently than any other in the Old Testament as possessing success-inducing wisdom (*śkl*; cf. [18:5, 14, 15, 30](#)), had an ingenious ploy to force Saul to reveal his true intentions toward David. The plan was simple yet effective. It proactively safeguarded David by sequestering him, and it avoided any use of force. Granted, Jonathan would have to tell his father a lie, but not one that would violate either the letter or spirit of the Torah, since its purpose was to preserve innocent life. For his part David would merely absent himself from the royal court for two days. In so doing he would fail to be present at the sacrificial meals associated with an ordinary new moon festival (cf. [Num 10:10](#)).

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 210-219.

Jonathan's role would be more complicated. Most of the time during the next two days he was to be merely a passive observer of his father. However, when Saul commented on David's absence, Jonathan was to convey a respectable—though specious—excuse to account for David's empty chair at the meals. After that he was to note Saul's reaction: a positive response to Jonathan's words would mean that David "is safe" (v. [7](#)); a hostile response would mean that Saul was "determined to harm" David.

Apart from that plan, however, David had another proposal—one that could eliminate the need for the previous one. David asked Jonathan himself to kill him before Saul could—if Jonathan was aware of any "transgression in" David's life (v. [8](#); NIV, "if I am guilty"). Reminding Jonathan that he had established a solemn "covenant of Yahweh" (NIV, "covenant ... before the LORD") with David, he asked his friend to "deal faithfully" (NIV, "show kindness") with him in this matter.

Jonathan reacted strongly against David's second proposal: "Never" (v. [9](#)) would he himself take David's life. So strongly did Jonathan value his friend's life that he would immediately let David know if he "had the least inkling" that his "father was determined to harm" him.

Now that David had been exonerated by Jonathan, the pair could work out the remaining details associated with David's first proposal. The final issue was figuring out the particulars of how David would be covertly warned in the event Saul still intended to kill him.

[20:11–17](#) A remarkable transformation occurs in the narrative beginning at v. [11](#) and extending through v. [23](#) as David, the most dynamic character in 1, 2 Samuel, becomes a silent and passive presence on the story line. A total of 162 Hebrew words occur in four different quotations in this section, but all of them are spoken by Jonathan. The two longest quotations attributed to Jonathan in the Old Testament (seventy-six and seventy-seven Hebrew words) also are present here. Furthermore, these quotes contain nine mentions of Yahweh's name, an unusually high number for a stretch of text extending only thirteen verses.

These facts suggest that the author intended this stretch of text to be more than just the simple completion of a plan to convey Saul's thoughts about David. In fact, this section may be viewed as the thematic centerpiece of the story of Jonathan. Several content-based reasons can be given to support this contention.

First, this section shows that Jonathan, the individual next in the dynastic succession to be king after Saul, was also the one who took responsibility for David's escape from Saul. Of his own accord Jonathan swore two oaths before the Lord (vv. [12–13](#)) that he would obtain the information David needed, pass it along in a timely manner, and if necessary, "send" David "away safely" (v. [13](#)). Since it was Jonathan who came up with the plan and swore the oaths, this scene negates any claim that David duped or coerced others into participating in this flight from the king.

Second, this section depicts the establishment of a covenant between the house of David and the house of Jonathan that would later lead David to defy conventional wisdom regarding the elimination of potential rivals to the throne. Under the terms of the agreement, when David became king he was to show the son of Saul "unfailing kindness like that of the LORD" (v. [14](#)), seeing to it that Jonathan would "not be killed" in a purge. Furthermore, David must "never terminate the commitment to be loyal" (v. [15](#); NIV, "not cut off your kindness") to Jonathan's descendants—their lives, too, must be spared. David later honored the terms of this agreement; instead of killing off all members of the Saulide dynasty, David gave Jonathan's son Mephibosheth great wealth and a place at the royal table (cf. [2 Sam 9:7, 10](#)). He even spared Mephibosheth's life when there was reasonable suspicion that he participated in a revolt against David (cf. [2 Sam 19:25–29](#)).

Third, this section contains the first indication that the Lord would someday grant David success on an international scale. Jonathan's requests assume that the Lord would "cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth" (v. [15](#)) This glimmer of prophetic insight in Jonathan's words would later be explicitly affirmed by the narrator ([2 Sam 8:14](#)). Jonathan's words unwittingly were at the same time condemnatory of his father, who had only recently called David his "enemy" (cf. [19:17](#)).

In this way Jonathan "made a covenant" (Hb. *kārat*; lit., "cut") "with the house of David" (v. [16](#)). The treaty sought the mutual welfare of both parties and was motivated by the noble kind of love enjoined in the Torah (Hb. *'āhāb*; [Lev 19:18](#)), for Jonathan loved David "as he loved himself" (v. [17](#)).

[20:18–23](#) Here Jonathan provided the specific details about how he would pass the vital information along to David. Because Saul and the royal household observed the Torah-prescribed new moon festival (cf. [Num 10:10](#)), David would be expected to participate in its ritual meals. His absence would certainly be noted because his seat would be empty (v. [18](#)). Nevertheless, David was to bide his time until the third day—"the day after tomorrow" (v. [19](#)), and then wait for Jonathan at the place where David "hid when this trouble began." More precisely, David was to "wait by the stone Ezel" (lit., "the stone, the departure"; v. [19](#)), apparently a rock outcropping significant or unusual enough to have been named.

On the third day Jonathan, accompanied by a young servant, would journey to that location for some target practice. The king's son would strategically "shoot three arrows" (v. [20](#)) to the side of David's lair. The impact point of the arrows, and especially the words Jonathan would shout to his attendant, would convey the essential information to David.

If the signal was given indicating that it was safe to return to Gibeah, David needed to be absolutely certain that the information was accurate and trustworthy. Knowing this, Jonathan swore a solemn oath by the "life of Yahweh" (NIV, "as surely as the LORD lives") that he would not lead David to return unless he knew that "there is no danger" (v. [21](#)).

In case it was necessary to inform David of a continued threat against him in Gibeah, then David "must go" (v. [22](#)). This turn of events would be tragic for both Jonathan and David, but they could deal with it if they viewed it from the proper perspective. Demonstrating rare spiritual acumen, Jonathan provided a remarkable theological framework in which to cope with the possible tragedy of separation. If it happened, it would be because "the LORD has sent you away." The Lord had permitted painful separations in the lives of Torah patriarchs (cf. [Gen 28:5](#); [37:28](#)), yet each had ultimately resulted in the preservation of life and the increase of blessing. If the Lord were to permit such an experience in David and Jonathan's life, it must also be for these unchanging divine purposes.

In addition, Jonathan reminded David that the Lord was overseeing the relationship that existed between them. God might permit their physical separation, but he would preserve their relationship. David and Jonathan's commitment to loyalty and mutual protection would remain "forever" (Hb. *'ad 'ólām*; v. [23](#)).

[20:24–29](#) Those moving words having been uttered, the crucial events were now about to take place. David dutifully "hid in the field" (v. [24](#)), and at the time of the ritually significant first meal of the new month, "Saul sat down to eat." The king sat "by the wall" (v. [25](#)), a location of prominence but perhaps more importantly a spot that afforded him greater protection from assassination attempts. Around the table were seats for Jonathan, Abner, and David. Of course, "David's place was empty."

Though Saul noted David's absence, he reasoned that David had somehow become "ceremonially unclean" (v. [26](#)) and so "said nothing that day." Saul's actions reflect positively on David, for the king assumed that David would follow Torah regulations as a matter of course. David, a devout man, was absent at a ritual meal; the Torah prohibited the consumption of a ritual meal during times of ritual uncleanness ([Lev 7:20–21](#)), so "surely he is unclean." This ceremonial uncleanness could be caused by

accidental contact with anything ritually unclean or detestable, including such diverse things as forbidden insects ([Lev 11:24](#)), moist seeds that had come in contact with a dead animal ([Lev 11:38](#)), another unclean person ([Lev 15:11](#)), and a human corpse ([Num 19:14–16](#)), to name but a few. Seminal emissions, including those resulting from routine marital contact ([Lev 15:16, 18](#)) as well as certain skin diseases ([Lev 13:11, 36](#)), would also have caused David to be in a state of ritual uncleanness.

But Saul was forced to reject his previous hypothesis when “on the second day of the month” (v. [27](#))—a nonholy day—David skipped a meal that could be eaten by ceremonially unclean individuals. As David had suspected, Saul expressed concern about David’s absence. The king began his investigation by interrogating David’s best friend—“his son Jonathan”—with words that mark a dramatic shift in attitude, one of alienation and hostility. No longer did Saul mention David by name; instead, his son-in-law had become the “son of Jesse.” This marks the first recorded instance where Saul refers to David in this manner, but it will be by no means the last (cf. also vv. [30–31](#); [22:7, 8, 9, 13](#)).

In response to Saul’s subtly hostile inquiry, Jonathan presented the cover-up story as convincingly as possible: the son of Jesse was “observing a sacrifice” in Bethlehem with the family of Jesse. David was not acting subversively or secretly in this matter; he went because a family member “ordered” him to, and he had sought permission from a member of the royal family before making the trek.

[20:30–34](#) When Jonathan lied to his father regarding David’s absence, “Saul’s anger flared up” (v. [30](#)). Furthermore, Saul distanced himself from Jonathan: no longer was the royal heir referred to as “my son” (cf. [14:39–42](#)); he had now become the “son of a perverse and rebellious woman” ([20:30](#)). Saul now accused his dynastic heir of being in league with the very one whom Saul believed would destroy the family dynasty.

In an apparent effort to bring Jonathan back to his side, Saul appealed to three powerful motivators: shame, guilt, and greed. First, he noted that Jonathan’s scandalous betrayal was bringing about personal “shame.” Second, in an attempt to elicit feelings of guilt, Saul noted that Jonathan’s actions were also bringing shame on “the mother who bore you” (lit., “the shame of the nakedness of your mother”), that is, Ahinoam (cf. [14:50](#)), whom he himself had just shamed by calling her “perverse and rebellious.” Third, Saul appealed to his son’s greed, noting that “as long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established” (v. [31](#)).

Having thrust these three barbs into Jonathan’s soul, Saul then issued a royal command, ordering his son to “send and bring” David, “for he must die!” Surely Jonathan must have felt as though he had betrayed his father and dishonored his mother; surely he must have felt some urge to claim the amenities of royalty for himself. Any one of these emotions could have motivated him to break his commitment to David and obey his father’s edict.

Remarkably, however, Jonathan resisted all urges to the contrary (cf. [Ps 15:4](#)) and defended David. The defense took the form of asking his father two parallel questions that hit at the heart of Saul’s responsibilities as God’s representative: “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” ([1 Sam 20:32](#)). As king over God’s people and thus chief enforcer of the Torah (cf. [1 Kgs 1:3](#)), Saul must not execute the innocent ([Exod 23:7](#)), and David had not committed any capital offense.

However, Saul was no longer acting as God’s representative; matters of justice were being subordinated to the king’s mad drive to eliminate David. Since Saul’s son had chosen to identify himself with David, he must be treated like David. Thus, “Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him” ([1 Sam 20:33](#)). Though Saul’s spear missed him, Jonathan got the point—“his father intended to kill David.”

Immediately Jonathan left the room “in fierce anger” (v. [34](#)) and spent the remainder of the day fasting and grieving. The reason for Jonathan’s understandable reactions is not one that could have been anticipated; Jonathan did not grieve because of the humiliating or murderous treatment accorded him by his father but because of “his father’s shameful treatment of David.” Jonathan’s reaction thus serves as one of the purest displays of human loyalty found in the annals of human history.

[20:35–42](#) The next morning Jonathan fulfilled his commitment to David by conveying the un hoped-for news. Taking his bow, some arrows, and a “small boy with him” (v. [35](#)), he went out to the rendezvous point and initiated the agreed-upon ritual. Jonathan sent the lad running into the field and then “shot an arrow beyond him” (v. [36](#)) to establish an appropriate context for uttering the coded words. When the boy, now some distance away, stopped to pick up the arrow, Jonathan pretended to misinterpret the boy’s actions and thus shouted out the prearranged signal to flee. So as to remove all doubt, he also added a series of three commands with unmistakable significance for David: “Hurry! Go quickly! Don’t stop!” (v. [38](#)). Unaware of the significance of any of this, the boy simply “picked up the arrow and returned to his master.” Jonathan then brought the target practice to an abrupt end, sending the boy and his weapons “back to town” (v. [40](#)). Thus Jonathan was disarmed when David came out of hiding to meet him (cf. v. [8](#)), a condition underscoring his benevolent intentions toward David.

In the solitude of the empty field, David and Jonathan met together face-to-face. Expressions of respect and mutual commitment marked their encounter. In the gravity of the moment David initially spoke no words. Instead, he silently displayed subservience and utmost respect for his friend by bowing before Jonathan three times—the greatest number of times anyone in the Bible is depicted as performing this act in a single encounter.

Jonathan countered David’s symbolic expression of subordination with one that implied acceptance as a respected peer—he kissed him (cf. [2 Sam 14:33](#)). In this case kisses were exchanged because they also functioned as expressions of farewell (cf. [Gen 31:55](#); [Acts 20:37](#)). The pathos of the moment is evident in the fact that they also “wept together.” The observation “David wept the most” emphasizes David’s loyalty and commitment to the heir-apparent of the Saulide dynasty and thus blunts implied accusations that King David tried to exterminate his predecessors.

Jonathan seemed to understand that this encounter would be a watershed; never again would these two best friends enjoy an easy, informal camaraderie. In his final moments with David he urged him to “go in peace”—an expression of goodwill used elsewhere in the Old Testament in situations involving extended or permanent separations (cf. [Exod 4:18](#); [2 Kgs 5:19](#)). Though David and Jonathan would be physically separated from one another, they would remain inseparably joined by the oath they swore in the Lord’s name (v. [42](#)). Furthermore, their commitment would be intergenerational, continuing between their “descendants forever.” Having affirmed that commitment, the two friends left each others’ presence for the next-to-last time.