

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 15

HEARTBREAK



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

Saul's reaction to David's absence at the New Moon feast is startling and heartbreaking. Jonathan delivers the news to David, and David flees—but not before weeping with Jonathan.

But David will do his fair share of heartbreaking things, first lying to Ahimelech in a way that will get a bunch of priests killed, then cowardly feigning madness in front of King Achish.

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! Samuel, Week 15 — Heartbreak
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1 1 Samuel 20:18–26

Then Jonathan said to David, “Tomorrow is the New Moon; and you will be missed, because your seat will be empty. And when you have stayed three days, go down quickly and come to the place where you hid on the day of the deed; and remain by the stone Ezel. Then I will shoot three arrows to the side, as though I shot at a target; and there I will send a lad, saying, ‘Go, find the arrows.’ If I expressly say to the lad, ‘Look, the arrows are on this side of you; get them and come’—then, as the LORD lives, there is safety for you and no harm. But if I say thus to the young man, ‘Look, the arrows are beyond you’—go your way, for the LORD has sent you away. And as for the matter which you and I have spoken of, indeed the LORD be between you and me forever.”

Then David hid in the field. And when the New Moon had come, the king sat down to eat the feast. Now the king sat on his seat, as at other times, on a seat by the wall. And Jonathan arose, and Abner sat by Saul’s side, but David’s place was empty. Nevertheless Saul did not say anything that day, for he thought, “Something has happened to him; he is unclean, surely he is unclean.”

Jonathan doesn’t want to believe that his father now wants to kill David. Saul swore an oath against that.

So Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan, and Saul swore, “As the LORD lives, he shall not be killed.” — 1 Samuel 19:6).

Nevertheless, Jonathan takes David’s claim seriously and devises an elaborate plan to protect David while he sorts through what’s going on. That’s good, but what’s up with the arrows? Why can’t Jonathan just talk to David later? Why does he set up a bizarre code to communicate the results?

Jonathan realizes that David might be right. That leads to a disturbing chain of deductions. If David is right, then Saul hasn’t been telling everything to Jonathan; he’s been keeping secrets. Thus, Saul’s next move could be anything, and it’s likely to be deceptive. Having Jonathan followed is a real possibility, especially if Saul gets upset over Jonathan’s excuse for why David isn’t at the feast.

All trust between Jonathan and Saul has been lost.

Imagine how painful this is for Jonathan. His father is being unreasonable and, now, untrustworthy.

Everything used to be pretty awesome. First his dad gets anointed king. Then this huge, horrible enemy is knocked off by David. Next David marries his sister. Then Jonathan and David become best friends.

But then, bolt out of the blue, Jonathan’s father goes nuts and wants to kill David. Fortunately, Jonathan talks him out of it and Saul pledges that David shall live. For a moment, it looks like the dream is alive.

But no. It was all a lie. Worse, it looks like Saul doesn’t trust Jonathan—and, of course, Jonathan can’t trust Saul either.

The family is divided. That hurts.

2 1 Samuel 20:27–34 (ESV)

But on the second day, the day after the new moon, David's place was empty. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, "Why has not the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?" Jonathan answered Saul, "David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem. He said, 'Let me go, for our clan holds a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to be there. So now, if I have found favor in your eyes, let me get away and see my brothers.' For this reason he has not come to the king's table."

Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die." Then Jonathan answered Saul his father, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" But Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him. So Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death. And Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger and ate no food the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, because his father had disgraced him.

Things were nutty before. Now Saul's nuttiness has gone nuclear. Saul is so anxious to have Jonathan succeed him as king that he's willing to kill him to make it happen. That sounds like a Yogi Berra-ism.

"I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous." — Yogi Berra

This is heartbreaking—for Jonathan. He's so upset, he doesn't eat.

Do not miss why Jonathan wouldn't eat. It was *because his father had treated him shamefully*.

His father had basically cussed him out. The phrase, "*You son of a perverse, rebellious woman*," hints that he's illegitimate—that Saul isn't actually his father. Then he used the word "shame" twice, implying that Jonathan's actions (letting David's attend his own family's feast) shamed himself and his mother.

Then he, at last, gets to the point. "*For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Therefore send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die.*"

But how does Saul know this (or even think it)? Does he know that Samuel anointed David?

Probably. Samuel told him that the LORD has rejected him as king and picked someone else.

And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." — 1 Samuel 15:28 (ESV)

So, Samuel must have anointed someone. It's pretty obvious by this point that it's David.

Both Saul and Jonathan know that David has been anointed king. But Saul is kicking against the goads.

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." — Acts 26:14b

3 1 Samuel 20:35–42

And so it was, in the morning, that Jonathan went out into the field at the time appointed with David, and a little lad was with him. Then he said to his lad, “Now run, find the arrows which I shoot.” As the lad ran, he shot an arrow beyond him. When the lad had come to the place where the arrow was which Jonathan had shot, Jonathan cried out after the lad and said, “Is not the arrow beyond you?” And Jonathan cried out after the lad, “Make haste, hurry, do not delay!” So Jonathan’s lad gathered up the arrows and came back to his master. But the lad did not know anything. Only Jonathan and David knew of the matter. Then Jonathan gave his weapons to his lad, and said to him, “Go, carry them to the city.”

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.

The passage makes a point of mentioning that David wept more than Jonathan. Why? Why did David weep more, and why did the passage take pains to point it out?

David didn’t just learn anything; he knew it all along. Plus, he’s going to be king someday and he’s confident that nothing can stop that from happening.

Meanwhile, Jonathan is only now coming to grips with the horrible truth about his father. Relationships all around him are being reduced to ashes. He’ll have to work hard to repair his relationship with his father. Even then, the repair will likely only be superficial. How could Jonathan not weep?

But David’s weeping is greater because he isn’t weeping for himself; he’s weeping for Jonathan. David has had time to process the truth, plus he’s looking at events inside Saul’s family from a distance. He’s seeing the forest, while Jonathan is only just now seeing the trees.

David sees a much larger and more tragic problem, and his best friend is stuck in the middle of it.

Remind you of anything?

Jesus wept. — John 11:35

Why is Jesus weeping, and why does John point this out? Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead. That’s all glorious. There’s nothing to cry about, right?

Au contraire. Jesus sees the real tragedy. He sees the tragedy of death itself and the sin that gave rise to it. The magnitude of the resulting sorrow is beyond our comprehension. Jesus might also be thinking about the task in front of him to fix all that. We don’t know which things he’s crying about, maybe all of them.

By mention Jesus’s weeping, John confronts us with the real tragedy. Samuel does the same thing.

4 1 Samuel 21:1–9 (ESV)

Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” And David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, ‘Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.’ I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.” And the priest answered David, “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women.” And David answered the priest, “Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?” So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD. His name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul’s herdsman.

Then David said to Ahimelech, “Then have you not here a spear or a sword at hand? For I have brought neither my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king’s business required haste.” And the priest said, “The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you struck down in the Valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you will take that, take it, for there is none but that here.” And David said, “There is none like that; give it to me.”

That little middle paragraph about Doeg is essential to events to come. Here we learn his name and his position in the service of Saul. The fact that he was there is ominous. He’s the key to what happens next.

And what happens next is horrible. Doeg will report to Saul everything he heard and saw. Saul will have Ahimelech and every one of the priests there killed for the “crime” of helping David. David will be so shaken by this that he will write Psalm 52 about it.

But make no mistake; this is David’s fault. He lied to Ahimelech about why he was there. He was most definitely not there on *the king’s business*.

Ahimelech never knew what hit him.

One problem with lies is that the unintended consequences are incalculable. Who could have imagined that David’s “storyline” would lead to a massacre. He got off scot-free with his fabrication over why he wasn’t at the table with Saul, so he may have felt emboldened to break God’s commandments willy-nilly.

“Son, in thirty-five years of religious study, I’ve come up with only two hard, incontrovertible facts; there is a God, and, I’m not Him.” — Father Cavanaugh (in the movie Rudy)

David still has some simple truths to learn.

5 1 Samuel 21:10–15

Then David arose and fled that day from before Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath. And the servants of Achish said to him, “Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him to one another in dances, saying:

*‘Saul has slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands?’”*

Now David took these words to heart, and was very much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. So he changed his behavior before them, pretended madness in their hands, scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, “Look, you see the man is insane. Why have you brought him to me? Have I need of madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?”

The whole Old Testament points to Christ. A major part of that is how the whole Old Testament portrays our sinful nature in such vivid detail.

Here we see one of the hallmarks of sin—inconsistency. David is nothing if not courageous. It’s his signature feature. He battles lions, bears, and Goliath without fear. Lately, he even seems to know that his destiny as a future king means he won’t be killed in the meantime. He’s not reckless, but he’s fearless.

Suddenly, that’s all gone. David’s backbone turns to Jell-O. He panics in fear of Achish. Why? Sure, people recognize him, but their recognition seems honorable. They call him a king and reference his mighty deeds. Why would that cause his courage to fail?

We can’t know the details, but something out of character takes over inside David’s head. That’s the stupidity of sin in action. So David embarrasses himself by turning himself into a drooling idiot madman.

Little does he realize how apt that is; sin is a madness of a special kind.

Achish drives David out of his house. Then David pens Psalm 34.

*I will bless the LORD at all times;
His praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul shall make its boast in the LORD;
The humble shall hear of it and be glad.
Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
And let us exalt His name together.*

*I sought the LORD, and He heard me,
And delivered me from all my fears. — Psalm 34:1–3*

The LORD delivered him from his fears—even though the fears were sinful. That’s profound.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever felt the pain of a relationship destroyed?
2. What's the worst case that you know of someone resisting God's will?
3. What's the worst case you know of someone not seeing the forest for the trees?
4. What simple truth have you learned or relearned recently?
5. When have you seen grace in response to a specific sin?

Items for prayer: