

## TO TELL THE STORY



LUKE ITALIANO

## Closer than a Brother

The first day David was missing, Saul celebrated anyway. It was a New Moon festival. It was meant to be a celebration: all his household gathered together! Perhaps David had some excuse. Perhaps something happened. It was fine. Saul distracted himself by pounding the butt of his spear against the ground, calling the servants to bring more food. More wine!

But then the second day started, and David was still missing. And now, Saul was concerned. What was the son of Jesse up to? What was this man who had killed Goliath – what was he doing? Was he missing because he was starting some trouble? Was he missing because he was moving in on the throne?

Saul summoned his son, Jonathan, David's closest friend. If anyone knew where David was, the crown prince would know. The one who would follow Saul as king, as long as this upstart shepherd from Bethlehem, this David, didn't take the throne by force! Saul asked, "Why hasn't the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?"

And Jonathan answered, "David earnestly asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem. He said, 'Let me go, because our family is observing a sacrifice in the town and my brother has ordered me to be there. If I have found favor in your eyes, let me get away to see my brothers.' That is why he hasn't come to the king's table."

Jonathan looked up at his father and waited for the reaction.

At first Saul leaned back on his throne. He stroked his graying beard. His eyes grew darker and darker, until finally his anger flared, and he shouted at his son, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know you've sided with the Son of Jesse to your shame, and to the shame of the mother who bore you! As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he must die!"

Yes. As long as David lives, Jonathan will never take the throne. Jonathan doesn't care. He'll take the shame. He'll lose the respect of his father. He'll stand up for his friend. "Why should he be put to death? What's he done?"

And Saul took up the mark of his office, the royal spear, and he flung it at his son, intending to pin him to the wall, intending to murder his own son, for having the audacity to stand up for that good for nothing David.

A gasp went up from around the table. Jonathan spun away, felt the shaft of the spear pass him, heard it clatter to the ground. He glared at his father. They held each other's gaze for a long moment. The dining hall was silent.

Jonathan stalked away, refusing to eat anything else, refusing to share a table with the father who would so wrong his friend David.

In the morning, Jonathan went out to the field and preformed the prearranged signal, and David knew: Yes. Saul was out to kill him. But Jonathan couldn't say goodbye like that. He dismissed his servant and ran to his friend.

They held each other as they wept: The crown prince, and the one God had chosen to be king.

They were being torn apart, these two that were closer than brothers. And Jonathan looked into David's face and he said, "Go in peace. We've sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'"

And then, tears in his eyes, David left. And Jonathan went back to town. Back to his father.

As far as we know, these two never saw each other again. But such friendship is not easily forgotten. Years later, when Jonathan and Saul were both dead, when David was king, David found that Jonathan had a son: Mephibosheth. It was the height of folly to bring in this heir of the previous dynasty, to welcome him in. And yet, David summoned the son of his friend to stay with him in the palace. And all the rest of the days, David looked after the son of his dearest friend.

Greatness has brothers. David had Jonathan.

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My brothers and sisters,

It would be so good to have a friend like that, wouldn't it? So good to have a friend who would sacrifice honor or possibly even his life for you.

You have a friend like that, and so much better. His name is Jesus. He stood between you and the righteous anger of his Father, and he took the punishment you earned, so that you could have life.

And this story is true.

I Samuel 20

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