Focus

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” Two famous sentences from the opening of A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens.

Have you ever been in such trouble that it could be called “the worst of times”? We’ve all had our bad days, but there is a man described in the Bible who definitely could label a part of his life “the worst of times.” Not Job—but David, the “man after God’s own heart.” He needed a friend. Jonathan was that man.

That model friendship between Jonathan and David is the subject of this first lesson on the fine art of friendship.

For a true friend is one who is faithful even in times of trouble.
And, we all need friends, in both the worst of times and the best of times. For,
He that has a thousand friends
has not one friend to spare,
And he who has one enemy
shall meet him everywhere.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

1 Samuel 19:1-7; 20:1-42; Proverbs 16:28; 17:9

COMMENTSARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

A true friend is one who is faithful even in times of trouble. Such faithfulness is seen in the following true story of two friends in World War I.

Two buddies had enlisted together, trained together, and fought together in the trenches of Europe. During a surprise attack, one of the men was critically wounded and unable to crawl back to his foxhole. He lay in a field of barbed wire obstacles as the whole area was being bombarded by enemy crossfire. His friend, knowing the danger of trying to reach him and pull him back to safety, nonetheless tried.

As he jumped to get out of his own trench and go for his friend, his sergeant pulled him back inside and ordered him not to go. “It’s too late. You can’t do him any good now, and if you try you’ll only get yourself killed.”

But as the sergeant turned his back, the man instantly jumped from the trench and went after his friend. A few minutes later, he staggered back, mortally wounded, with his friend, now dead, in his arms. The sergeant was angry, yet deeply moved. “What a waste,” he blurted out. “He’s dead and you’re dying. It just wasn’t worth it.”

With his last breath, the dying man replied, “Oh, yes, it was, Sarge. When I got to him, the only thing he said was, ’I knew you’d come, Jim!’”

One of the marks of true friends is that they are there when there is every reason for them not to be; when being there is costly. As Proverbs 17:17 puts it, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

The friendship of Jonathan and David was like that. It was marked by true faithfulness. We will examine four
qualities of their friendship, which are also the characteristics of any genuine friendship tested and under fire.

The Loyalty of Friendship
(1 Samuel 19:1-7)

Loyalty is an indispensable ingredient in any friendship. Jonathan’s loyalty to David was based on two things. First, he took great delight in David (he “had taken a liking to David,” 19:1). They had similar abilities, interests, and both had a deep faith in God. But, because fondness may be a temporary emotional feeling, the loyalty between these two kindred spirits was founded on something far more substantial.

The secret of David and Jonathan’s friendship is found in David’s words to Jonathan in 1 Samuel 20:8, “As for you, show kindness to your servant, for you have brought him into a covenant with you before the Lord.” That is, David was relying on more than an emotional bond, or an association of convenience, in their friendship. They had, in fact, a loyalty for one another based on covenant love.

They had a covenant friendship, which is central to the biblical idea of friendship. Abraham, for example, is the only person in the Bible called a friend of God, and the basis of that title is God’s covenant with him. In the New Testament, Jesus calls us “friends,” and the context of that label is while He was in the Upper Room, after He had given His disciples the cup for the first time as a symbol of the new covenant. The concept of covenant friendship is central to God’s gift of friendship.

Covenant friendship is simply “being there” for one another. It’s saying, “Listen, friend, I am here for you, and you can count on me. I’m not here just because I enjoy playing tennis with you, or drinking coffee with you. I thank God for those things we share, but I am committed to you as your friend in loyal love.”

The Test of Loyalty

That kind of commitment in friendship will inevitably be tested. Jonathan and David’s friendship came under intense pressure as Jonathan’s father, Saul, sought to kill David out of his own jealousy and rage. Psalm 59 gives us insight into the methods used by Saul and the sorrowful response David felt.

Jonathan had been there while his father had put his friend’s reputation through the shredder. And Jonathan had some very good reasons for agreeing with Saul’s anger toward David. After all, it was his father, and David was a threat to Jonathan’s being chosen to naturally succeed Saul as king.

All of us will find ourselves in positions in which our friends are being criticized. Our response to that is one of the evidences of friendship. As David was criticized, Jonathan remained loyal to him—even as David’s popularity and prestige rose while Jonathan’s declined.

No friend is exempt from criticism, and nowhere is our loyalty shown more clearly than in how we respond to it. Proverbs tells us: “A perverse person stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends” (Proverbs 16:28). “He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends” (Proverbs 17:9).

Jonathan could have responded to his father’s attack upon his friend by selling out, agreeing with his father, and betraying his friendship with David. But he didn’t do that. Instead, he went to David, told him what had happened, and encouraged him in God.

Burden-Bearing in Friendship
(1 Samuel 20:1-11)


He ambushed David’s house and commanded his soldiers, “Bring (David) up to me in his bed so that I may kill him” (1 Samuel 19:15). But the plot failed as Saul was betrayed by his own daughter, Michal, who helped her husband David, to escape. David now carried the burden of being a fugitive, and for the rest of Saul’s life, David was a hunted outlaw.

In David’s flight from Saul, a second characteristic of true friendship is seen. Jonathan not only defended David’s reputation, but as we are told in 1 Samuel 20:1-11, he became involved with David’s problems. When we are overwhelmed with the press of problems, it is in that time of need where the crucial test of friendship is found.

Genuine love is displayed when involvement becomes costly. As the apostle Paul put it, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

The Friendship of Being There

Jonathan made himself available to David, and as his covenant friend, came alongside David and shared the weight. When David was discovered by Saul at Ramah while he was with Samuel, he fled to Saul’s very hometown of Gibeah, for he knew Jonathan would be there to help. Someone who is there for us, available, committed to help, and caring in a time of crisis is one of the greatest gifts God can give us.

But Jonathan was not merely a willing listener, he was an honest friend. He disagreed with David, and told him so (1 Samuel 20:2). As Proverbs 27:5-6 says, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be

Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away.

—George Eliot
trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Like Jonathan did for David, sometimes the greatest thing a friend can do for us is to challenge us rather than simply to agree with us. Though Jonathan doubted David’s fears, he did not refuse to help, “Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do for you” (1 Samuel 20:4).

Edification in Friendship
(1 Samuel 20:12-17)

Friends build each other up, especially in times of trouble. True friends encourage one another to become all that God wants them to be. One of the most moving dialogues in all Scripture is that between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 20:12-17. As one commentator has said, “This (story) indicates such a power of mutual affection . . . that . . . for dramatic interest and moral beauty, (it) stands unrivalled in the records of human friendship.”

Jonathan could have viewed David as a competitor. It is easy at times to see our friends that way. Instead, Jonathan chose to see David as his brother. Jonathan was a genuine man of faith, and because he lived for God’s glory, and not his own, he could edify David. He could rejoice in seeing his friend enjoy God’s best for his life.

Trust in Friendship
(1 Samuel 20:18-42)

The final characteristic we see in the friendship between Jonathan and David is trust. Each placed himself completely in the other’s hands. As Jonathan departed to return to his father, he entrusted his future to David’s hands. And David trusted Jonathan to inform him of his father Saul’s plans toward him (1 Samuel 20:12-13).

In fact, Jonathan even trusted his children into David’s care. All Jonathan had to rely on was David’s promise, which he fulfilled by his kind treatment of Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth, as 2 Samuel 9 recounts.

The price Jonathan had to pay for intervening on behalf of his friend is revealed in 1 Samuel 20:30-33, after Jonathan had tried to explain David’s absence to his father:

Saul’s anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, “You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don’t I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own 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!”

“Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” Jonathan asked his father. But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Jonathan risked his life for David. And David trusted Jonathan with his life. The confidentiality of friendship is a sacred trust. As Jonathan put it, “And about the matter you and I discussed—remember, the LORD is witness between you and me forever” (1 Samuel 20:23). A friend is trustworthy. There are some things that pass between friends that are between those friends and the Lord, and must go no further. Confidence giving and confidence keeping are qualities shared by authentic friends.

Not only did they place their trust in one another, but they entrusted one another to God. Realizing that their friendship never again would be normal, their last moments were deeply emotional.

David . . . bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together—but David wept the most. Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have 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’” (1 Samuel 20:41-42).

Life Affirmations

We can make several affirmations regarding friends who are faithful in times of trouble.

1. The concept of covenant friendship is one we very much need to recapture. There ought to be, among friends in the Lord, an open declared commitment of one’s life to a person as a friend.

2. To place our trust fully in God allows us the freedom to do whatever we can to see God’s purpose fulfilled in our friends. Our motives become Christ-centered and pure, away from self-gain.

3. Friendships in the Lord are investments for eternity. “The LORD is witness between you and me” is not a barrier, but a bridge.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
rumor, but having lots of friends is just not where it’s at. If you have two or three friends in your whole lifetime who can be counted on, depended on, and prayed with, you know what the real essence of friendship is all about. Quality counts in friendship far above quantity.”2

- In times of trouble is it better to have lots of friends, or “two or three friends... who can be counted on”? Why?

2. A Faithful Friend

Begin your discussion by referring to the topic of this lesson: “A true friend is one who is faithful even in times of trouble.” Then invite your group to think about the following question: “Has there been someone in your life who you would describe as having been a faithful friend to you in your times of trouble?” Invite your students to think of one such person and ask several to share the characteristics that describe the faithful friend. Use this to introduce the lesson on the characteristics of friendship in times of trouble and need.

3. Friends for Life—and Death

Open your session by sharing with your students the story of the two World War I friends found at the beginning of the Commentary section above. After relating the story, have your students respond to it by considering the following questions:

- How does that story make you feel?
- Can you relate to the story in some way? How?
- Do you think the man who recovered his wounded friend but died in the process did the right thing, or do you agree with the sergeant?

4. My Best Friend

Ask your young adults to think back to their younger years and identify their one very best friend. Then ask them to identify what qualities made this person a great friend.

PRESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today’s topic.

1. Minilecture/Discussion

Present some or all of the material in the Commentary section above and allow adequate time for class discussion. Provide a copy of Duplication Master No. 1 for each of your students, which is an outline of the lesson. Encourage them to take notes on the handout as you present the lesson, and to write down questions for discussion.

2. Our Friendship

Provide each of your young adults with a copy of Duplication Master No. 2 which contains several quotes on the nature of friendship. As you present today's lesson, have them refer to those quotes as they relate to the friendship between Jonathan and David, and as they relate to their own friendships. Invite your students to share their own insights to the quotes and to the lesson.

3. Group Study

Divide everyone into four groups. Assign one of the following scriptures from the Commentary section to each group:

A. The Loyalty of Friendship (1 Samuel 19:1-7)
B. Burden-Bearing in Friendship (1 Samuel 20:1-11)
C. Edification in Friendship (1 Samuel 20:12-17)
D. Trust in Friendship (1 Samuel 20:18-42)

Have each group study their assigned scriptures and try to come up with the characteristics of friendship as seen there. Supplement this with the material in the Commentary section above.

SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and to give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Enjoyer or Edifier?

As you bring your session to a close, pose the following question to your young adults. “Do your friendships include edification of one another, or are they simply for enjoyment?” “Can there be friendships where there is edification but little enjoyment?” Stress the role each of us plays in building up one another in Christ.

2. Covenant Friendship

Highlight the covenant nature of Jonathan and David’s friendship.

Read 1 Samuel 20:42 to your young adults. Invite them to think of one person in their life with whom they could say these words: “The Lord is witness between you and me... forever.” Emphasize that the Lord’s presence between friends is meant to be a bridge, not a barrier, and that His presence liberates friends to be all God means for them to be for Him and for one another. Allow your students time to pray for their friend before you end your time together.

3. Your Significant Others

Have your group consider the following questions:

- Who are the important people in your life?
- Are they your friends?
- What makes each of them significant to you?
You might want to read to your young adults the three life affirmations found at the conclusion of the Commentary section.

4. Friends Should . . . Shouldn’t

Ask your group to help you create two lists. One list will describe things that good friends should always do or be. The other list will describe things that good friends should never do or be.

5. Friend Quotient

Ask your group to rate their own strong and weak points when it comes to being the kind of friend described in the story of Jonathan and David. How can they build on their strong points? How can they work on their weak points?

Use INTERSECT: Young Adult Discussion Starters to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today’s lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

NOTES


Selected Bibliography


The Marks of Faithful Friendship

1. LOYALTY (1 Samuel 19:1-7)

2. BURDEN-BEARING (1 Samuel 20:1-11)

3. EDIFICATION (1 Samuel 20:12-17)

4. TRUST (1 Samuel 20:18-42)
Friendship

Insomuch as anyone pushes you nearer to God, he or she is your friend.

—Anonymous

The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship; it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone else believes in him and is willing to trust him with his friendship.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

He who has lost a friend has more cause of joy that once he had him, than of grief that he is taken away. Shall a (person) bury his friendship with his friend?

—Seneca

He that has a thousand friends has not one friend to spare, And he who has one enemy shall meet him everywhere.

—Arab Proverb

We never know the true value of friends. While they live we are too sensible of their faults; when we have lost them we see only their virtues.

—Anonymous