

Why were Saul and Jonathan so different in their relationship with David?

Jonathan, the oldest son of King Saul, was the heir apparent to Israel's throne, but he was also David's close friend. His name means "Yahweh has given," which could be a clue to the complicated relationships among these three men. God gave Jonathan to Saul (as a son) and to David (as a friend) to serve as a mediator between Saul and David. Jonathan's actions and loyalties in his intermediary role demonstrated Saul's unworthiness as king and confirmed David's election to the throne (see 1 Samuel 20:13).

Jonathan is portrayed in the Bible as a brave and honorable military leader and loyal son to King Saul. He had the potential to become one of Israel's greatest kings, but, instead, Jonathan became best known for his deep friendship with David. The two men first met shortly after David's defeat of the giant Goliath: "There was an immediate bond between them, for Jonathan loved David. . . . And Jonathan made a solemn pact with David, because he loved him as he loved himself. Jonathan sealed the pact by taking off his robe and giving it to David, together with his tunic, sword, bow, and belt" (1 Samuel 18:1-4, (NLT)).

The "bond between them" is a translation of a phrase in the original Hebrew that means "their lives were tied together," or, as the English Standard Version states, "the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David." In his inner being, Jonathan seemed to divinely intuit that God had not destined him to be Israel's next king but instead had chosen him to facilitate David in his God-ordained ascent to the throne. When he gave his royal robe, tunic, and weapons to David, Jonathan symbolically passed his kingly mantle to David.

Besides their initial covenantal bond (1 Samuel 18:3-4), Jonathan and David made at least two more solemn pacts to protect each other's lives. In 1 Samuel 20:3-17, David swore to show kindness to Jonathan's descendants for helping him escape from Saul. David kept this vow after Jonathan's death by showing kindness to his son Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9:1-13).

In 1 Samuel 23:15-18, when Saul sought to kill David in the wilderness of Ziph, Jonathan went to him and encouraged David to stay strong in the Lord. He said, "Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this" (verse 17). Then, David and Jonathan renewed their covenant before the Lord.

King Saul was consumed with jealousy and resentment toward David. The people's love for David filled Saul with an intense fear of losing his kingdom. Several times, Saul plotted to kill David (see 1 Samuel 19:1-24; 20:24-34; 23:15-18). On many of these occasions, Jonathan tried to reconcile the two men, interceding for David (1 Samuel 20:24-29) and speaking well of him to his father (see 1 Samuel 19:4-7). Throughout the ongoing turmoil between Saul and David, Jonathan stayed loyal to his father and unswerving in his devotion to David.

Jonathan was confident and secure in his calling from God. Saul was not. Jonathan recognized that God had chosen David to be his father's successor, and he pledged to stand by him (1 Samuel 23:17). King Saul was unwilling to accept or submit to God's plan.

Saul had no real love, friendship, or sacred bond with David. He was jealous of David's

popularity, fearful of losing his power, and insecure about his position on the throne. On the other hand, Jonathan, as the king's rightful heir and firstborn son, could have understandably been intimidated by David and envious of his election as Israel's next king. Instead, he submitted to God's will, understanding that he had no right to the throne.

After Jonathan died, David was deeply grieved. He lamented, "How I weep for you, my brother Jonathan! Oh, how much I loved you! And your love for me was deep, deeper than the love of women!" (2 Samuel 1:26, NLT). The relationship between Jonathan and David was one of unconditional love. They shared the deepest of connections, drawing closer to one another than brothers through their covenantal bond (see Proverbs 18:24). Their lives were "tied together" in genuine friendship, which, according to the Bible, involves fidelity, commitment, sacrifice, cooperation, and an emotional attachment. This bond of friendship set apart Jonathan's relationship with David.