



The Blessings of Covenant Love

1 Samuel 20:1-42

Grace Church | 2.28.21

Currently I'm reading a fantastic book I highly recommend. It's called *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. The main question of the book is this: in the first 250 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, how did the early church grow so rapidly in the face of unparalleled persecution and opposition? Now, your first thought may be simple: they evangelized. They were devoted to the mission of God, right? But the curious thesis of this book is that when you go back and look at the writings we have from Christians of that period, evangelism is barely mentioned at all, even in the catechisms and creeds. Sending missionaries is a foreign concept. It's just not talked about.

In the first two centuries after Jesus' death, nothing was written focusing on evangelism. Instead, what is the most studied and preached and documented topic of the early church fathers? It's patience. Three whole treatises on patience, each monumental in their own right, are written within a century of one another.¹ Sermons from this period major on this theme, again and again. Why? Because as every Christian lives as a pilgrim and a stranger in this world, we need patience to endure. It's that patience, in the end, as we wait for the return of Christ our king, that is actually our most compelling evangelistic tool in a world that has trouble seeing beyond what is right in front of them. It's that patient hope that is truly compelling.

I see the same kind of patience in 1 Samuel 20, and we will continue to see it in the life of David for the remainder of our time in 1 Samuel. Today in our text the last domino falls: from now on David will be a man on the run, with no home and no place of rest, waiting and waiting and waiting for the promise of God to come to fruition. His patient exile is prefigured in the setting of our story today. What are the two scenes of 1 Samuel 20? First, you have the royal house, and the royal table, where David first comes to Jonathan and where Jonathan dines with the king. But the rest of the action of the story happens in *the field*. For several days, David waits in the wilderness, camping behind a outcropping of rocks. Waiting to see: is Jonathan really on his side? Will he really have to go into exile? I see the marks of patience all over this text. David will have to get used to camping and running.

Although patience will be a positive and faithful virtue in the life of David during his time in exile, and certainly something we should emulate, it's not at the root of this narrative. No, something is

¹ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*



driving David's patience—some sort of cause. What is required in order for anyone to be patient? It's faith. Trust. Certainty. Peace. Security.

And where does security come from? The operating theme in chapter 20 tells us clearly. Our security comes from covenant. Although the word is only used once, it is discussed by every character and serves as the center of almost every discussion. The patient trust of David is possible because through Jonathan he is swimming in the security of covenant love.

Covenant has been a theme of 1 Samuel before, if you remember all the way back to chapter 11 when Samuel renews the covenant of the people to God at Gilgal. But covenant is not just a Samuel theme, it's a Biblical theme. A covenant is a binding relationship, a way for two parties to make promises—and it's the way God has related to his people since his covenant with Adam and Eve in the garden promised deliverance from the serpent. As we move into chapter 20, we see God's interaction with David move in more and more specific. In Chapter 18, God brings divine favor to David after Goliath's death. That favor includes protection, which is the main theme of chapter 19. That protection includes covenant love from Jonathan, which is the main theme of chapter 20. So you see we are moving from broad to specific favor like this:

Ch. 18 | God's Favor of David

Ch. 19 | God's Favor Shown in His Providential Protection

Ch. 20 | God's Protection Shown in Covenant Love

So today, let's rejoice in the goodness of God in Christ by reminding ourselves of three blessings of covenant love. God's covenant love in Christ brings trust in the midst of doubt, boldness in the midst of temptation, and peace in the midst of uncertainty.

Covenant Love brings Trust in the midst of Doubt (1-17)

Let's jump into **verse 1**. David returns to Gibeah, Saul's capital. Why would he come back? This is the most dangerous place he could be! It's for a purpose: he comes back to Saul's house presumably when Saul is away, still naked and prophesying in Ramah. David knows if he comes now while Saul is away, he can gain an audience with Jonathan. This is why in verse 1 we are told he said "before" Jonathan, not just "to" Jonathan. He comes humbly to Jonathan, who is the highest authority in Saul's absence, and he comes to get answers. He wants to know *why* is this happening, he is genuinely perplexed by his persecution. David holds out hope, giving Saul the benefit of the doubt that perhaps this can all be worked out still. He exhibits patience here, not vengeance. And his reason is, "perhaps Jonathan can help".

Jonathan, for his part, thinks he already has helped. We see in **verse 2**, apparently he is unaware of some of the developments in Saul's plot against David. Remember in Chapter 19 last week, Jonathan intercedes for David, and Saul makes a vow to God in front of him: I will not harm him. So Jonathan thinks this matter is already put to rest. He is naive to his father's plans. So David seeks



to persuade him in **verse 3**. Saul knows more than you think, he tells Jonathan. Notice the intensity of language. Already they have used phrases like “far be it from me” and “as surely as the Lord lives”. Here is an intense situation—as it should be. They are both confused, unsure of what is going on.

So David comes up with a plan. A feast is coming up, where for several days David would be expected to be in the court of the king. Surely Saul is waiting for this opportunity. So far, David has responded honorably to every attack—perhaps Saul expects this now. He is waiting for David to come right back to him, the faithful servant, so that he can finally be rid of him. So Saul would notice David’s absence. David instructs Jonathan to tell Saul that he is in Bethlehem with his brothers. This would call to mind Saul’s suspicion—remember that David was anointed king, as Saul was, in a similar assembly, a sacrificial feast. Perhaps David is returning to the place of his anointing to gather up his followers for a coup, a takeover of Saul’s throne? If Saul responds favorably to this news, then David is willing to admit that perhaps he misjudged the situation. But if Saul erupts in anger, David will be vindicated before Jonathan.

Notice David’s posture in **verse 8**. In humility, he submits himself to Jonathan, and he calls on the covenant to remind Jonathan of its stipulations. He says of him: if your Father is right, put me to death yourself! Spare me the secrecy. To ask Jonathan to go against his Father is no small thing: in essence David is asking Jonathan to support his interests over his own, to elevate him as king over himself. This is a huge ask. How does he dispel doubt over his intentions? By appealing to covenant. But Jonathan confirms his love for David in **verse 9**—he has no sympathy for Saul’s anger against David. In response to David’s plan, Jonathan has one of his own. So **verse 11**, they go into the field to have privacy.

Once they are in private, Jonathan makes a vow of his own. In **verses 12-17**, we see Jonathan renew his covenant with David, and even up the ante. I love this, that you can take all of these verses out of the narrative and it still makes sense. They are not needed to carry the story, but to David and Jonathan, this part is everything. Jonathan calls God to be his witness, and just as David offers himself, he offers himself in verse 13. If I am not faithful to you, David, he says let God bring his own vengeance on me. He then asks David for something monumental in **verses 14-15**. Jonathan knows David is the anointed king and he is not. Maybe David told him in confidence, or maybe the Lord revealed it to him. He knows that any enemy of David is an enemy of God. So he asks David: when you come into your kingdom, remember me. Don’t make me your enemy, or my descendants. Now the reason this is a huge ask is because it was normal and even expected, when a new kingly line is established, to kill or lock away any other claims to the throne, to cut them off. For David to keep Jonathan and his descendants around, and to show them favor, is preposterous.

Why all this promising, covenants, and shows of trust? Put yourself in David’s shoes: he has been faithfully following God and a faithful servant of Saul, none of this deserves! He loves Jonathan, but maybe he is beginning to question: should I even trust him? How much does he know? How much should I tell him? David is going out on a limb here. Put yourself in Jonathan’s shoes. He is no fan of his Saul, but it takes a lot of evidence to turn against your own father, to not hold out hope,



especially when he has an excuse of mental instability and has made an oath to Yawheh. And not only this, but Jonathan is the one who is due to be king. Isn't there a chance that Saul could be right, that David is secretly plotting against them, that he really is the enemy of Saul and Jonathan? Who to side with: his father, or his covenant brother? The situation is ripe for division, for mistrust, for doubt.

But David and Jonathan overcome all of this doubt, they develop trust for one another when they both perceive things differently. There is a stability here, a love that goes beyond their circumstances, their status in life, and even beyond simple friendship. What is going on here is the stability of covenant love. It's *hesed* in **verse 8**, translated "deal kindly". A transcendent, holy, covenant has brought these two men to trust each other in a way that defies all odds.

Covenants are all about trust. When we make marriage covenants, what are we saying? Here is an unbreakable union that is built on mutual trust, mutual steadfastness. The stability of marriage comes when we show *hesed* to one another, when we humble ourselves before one another. The same is true of church membership. Here is a quick reminder that if you are not a member of our church, you are a visitor. We still love you, we want to help you, but you are not yet part of us. Today at our members meeting we are affirming almost 20 new members—together with them we will reaffirm our church covenant, which is a way of saying to one another: we trust you, and we love you with steadfast love. The covenant is what brings stability, it's what brings trust in the face of doubt.

Let me remind you then of good news. Jesus Christ, by his precious blood spilt on the cross, is the instigator of an eternal covenant between you and God. And you are prone to doubt, and to wander. That much is certain. But he upholds his covenant perfectly, and so here is what that means for you: you can trust him. You can trust him when life seems uncertain and unsure. You can trust him with your doubts, you can come to him with your sin, with your pain, with your hurt. You can come to him, like David with Jonathan, with your questions. You can say "why"? You can make requests of him—like the thief on the cross, asking that you not be cut off when he comes to his kingdom—and all of this is your right in the covenant you have with him. Not because you are faithful, but because he cut a covenant with you. He was cut off so that you would never be, and that, family, is a place to take a deep breath and rest.

David and Jonathan give *more* than necessary promises to one another. It's radical, it doesn't make sense, it's love. In the same way, Christ does not stop at simply rescuing you from death. His covenant unites himself to you—you get the love and intimacy of God in Christ. What kind of gospel is this? It's an unbelievable favor. In doubt and confusion, where do you run? When you are helpless, powerless, what is the solid ground you can trust? Let it be, again and again, the covenant of Christ.

Covenant Love brings Boldness in the midst of Temptation (18-34)



I love what happens next. Jonathan and David, having established their trust for one another, move forward in action. His plan for communicating with David, in case Saul is watching, is laid out in **verses 18-22** (briefly explain). But in **verse 23**, I love the heart of Jonathan. He knows David will be waiting for days in the field to hear this news, probably sleeping little. Doubt may creep in, that the promises they have made are empty. So what does he say in **verse 23**? No David, when you are in the field and I am in the palace, and you're looking at the stars and begin to fear, remember that our covenant is before God forever. When you are tempted to forget, have the boldness to remember our covenant.

So Jonathan executes the plan perfectly. **Verses 24-27** give us the scene. David's place is noticeable—he should be there. And the first day, Saul comforts himself, saying twice inwardly: surely David is unclean, and it is just his ceremonial duties keeping him. But Saul can't hold it in, he wants to know where David is. Of course, who does he ask but Jonathan, who he is already suspicious of. Jonathan answers in **verse 28-29** David's response, and there is nothing in it that would be cause for anger. Jonathan has the right to dismiss David in Saul's absence, and David has the right to visit his family for feast day. But nevertheless, Saul is just waiting for his opportunity to explode. He launches into a verbal and physical attack on Jonathan. Notice his language in verse 30. He mocks Jonathan's heritage, essentially saying: you are no longer my son. David is called "son of Jesse" and "son of Death" by Saul—a rejection of his true sonship. So Jonathan is persecuted just as David is, **verse 31** he is told: his kingdom is gone if he chooses David over himself. This isn't just a choice between friend and father, but a choice between two kingdoms: one where Jonathan rules, and one where David rules. So Saul gives Jonathan one more chance to chose, telling him: bring him here, and we can put him to death together.

What is Jonathan to do? His Father is not only threatening him harm, but the loss of everything. He is born to be king, and in fact, he has every appearance of one. I can imagine myself in his situation, overcome with the fear of losing everything. I am so prone to hold tightly to authority, to reward, to favor with man. You can almost hear Saul yelling at Jonathan: "man up, son! Don't let *your* kingdom be taken from us because of your softness!". We see Saul embody Satan in the wilderness, tempting Christ, and the serpent in the garden, tempting Adam and Eve. What does he say but "come and take what is rightfully yours. You deserve it." All you have to do is break your covenant, your promise. But it's worth it. You can have *your* kingdom.

Friends, it takes incredible spiritual boldness to turn down that offer. It takes fortitude to fight against sin. It takes courage to choose love over power and possessions and fame. On our own, we would chose the temptation of our kingdom, every time. But Jonathan is backed by covenant. And his covenant with David has given him clarity: he knows that the kingdom Saul is offering is not his to offer. It's already been taken from him and given to David. So Jonathan responds in **verse 32**, in defense of the kingdom of God, in his own kingdom. He has covenanted himself to the favored one of God, and when the attack comes in **verse 33**, he avoids it just as David did.



Notice Jonathan's behavior in **verse 34**. He leaves without eating, fasting out of grief for David. His commitment to him is unwavering. He is grieved because his father has disgraced David. He has given up his kingdom for the one he loves, and he does not regret it. His concern is not for himself.

I want to admit to you today that this is most convicting. See, I struggle with ambition. I believe I have been blessed by God with gifts of wisdom and clarity—I can see problems fairly clearly, and I am always looking for creative ways to solve them. I get kazzed when I think about what God will do for and through our church in the future. But friends, often my ambition is not rightly ordered. It is selfish ambition, and I spend hours building and seeking my own kingdom, to my shame. I consider myself brave and bold, generally ready to face any challenge. It's why I did not back down when I believe God called me into leadership at this church two years ago, when I was just 24 years old. But when the time comes to forsake my own ambition for normal faithfulness, that boldness often escapes me. I am bold in my own ambition, and timid in the ambition of the kingdom.

But the grace of God is sufficient for me, and it is sufficient for you. Friends, the covenant of grace we receive in Christ is the means by which we fight against our own sinful desires with the boldness and resolve of a seasoned warrior. Are you tempted to abandon fidelity to Christ? Are you persecuted when you don't? Hear Jesus' words: "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." The Christian life is not a coast into everlasting rest, it's a battle, it's a fight. We must, like Jonathan, have the fortitude to stand firm when our enemy Satan offers us all the kingdoms of the earth. But we don't do it alone. We do it in the strength not of our righteousness, but the power of the eternal covenant. Jesus Christ, your covenant head, stood and took Satan's best shot, so you don't have to give in. And when you do, even then he doesn't abandon you. His covenant is not based on your boldness, it's based on his sacrifice. If that is not ammo to stand up to temptation, nothing is. In Christ, not in ourselves, in Christ, we are more than conquerors. You need not fear the spear of Satan or his temptation. Jesus Christ will keep you in his covenant love.

Covenant Love brings Peace in the midst of Uncertainty (35-42)

In **verses 35-40** we find the completion of their plan. Jonathan takes the small boy with him to avoid suspicion, communicates the message, and then sends him away. By God's grace, no one seems to be spying on them, so David gets to come out to greet Jonathan one last time. They will only have one short interaction after this for the rest of their lives. David and Jonathan go their ways, and David into exile. Notice their posture. **Verse 40**, Jonathan again strips himself his weapons. Here is an exchange of love and humility—he has not come to do Saul's bidding but God's. **Verse 41**, David falls on his face in honor of Jonathan. The future king bows before the one who gives up his throne: their love is not one-sided. They kiss one another, a greeting of friendship and peace, as you would kiss a friend or brother. David weeps the most, because he knows the truth: he is forced to run for his life, for as long as God wills. Then Jonathan gives us the real news, comforting David in **verse 42**. Go in peace, he says.



How do you think, in this moment, David hears that benediction? Who knows what his life will bring now, but certainly he does not see peace in his immediate future. From now on Saul will mercilessly seek him out, offering him no quarter or shelter and punishing those who help him. What kind of peace is that? What kind of peace is there in being a nomad, and outcast, a wanderer? But still, I believe David felt peace in this moment. And when he was being chased, his covenant with Jonathan gave him peace as it reminded him: that is what covenant love does. It brings peace where there is no peace.

Perhaps you can think of another exchange between two friends in the field, of a garden where a kiss of peace was given to a promised king. In Gethsemane, Jesus Christ spent hours in agony, sweating blood because he knew what was coming. Like David, he knew that exile was coming—he knew his enemies would give him no quarter and no rest. And like David, he trusted it was God's will. So his friend, Judas Iscariot, came to greet him after meeting with his enemies. He had a plan to communicate, but it was not like Jonathans. Jonathan's kiss communicated peace, Judas' communicated betrayal. David went into exile with an ally and friend, but unlike David, Jesus' friends abandoned him: running in haste or publicly denying him. He went into the exile of the cross alone.

But here is why Jesus Christ is the better David. David was the benefactor of covenant love, Jesus Christ is the instigator. He overcame doubt and said "not my will, but yours be done." He overcame temptation, and said "into my hands I commit your spirit", and brought peace by saying "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He did it, so that by his blood, he might secure an everlasting and final covenant between God and his people.

Notice David leaves Saul's on the "third day" of the month. David tells Jonathan in **verse 3**, "there is step between me and death." But his covenant has resurrected his "sure death, bringing him out on the third day. Jesus too left on the third day, out of the grave. The covenant he sealed with his death was too powerful to stay there. And it's that covenant, friends, that we walk in today. It's the covenant that brings us peace before God. And here this one more time: this covenant is not based on your ability to keep terms.

In Matthew 28:10 we find Jesus' first recorded words after his resurrection. The two Mary's come to the tomb and find it empty. Then they meet Jesus, and he gives them something to say to his disciples. How does he address his followers? Remember they all have abandoned him, every one of them failed to understand, none of them waiting at the tomb. They have not upheld their deal to follow him all the way to the end. But what does he call them, these faithless men? Look, we have the passage on the screen. Go and tell *my brothers*.

Jesus Christ, the king of everyone and everywhere, stands before you today, and if you have repented of your sin and bowed the knee to him, you stand in covenant with him. And there are days when you doubt that. There are days when you succumb to temptation and abandon him for lesser joys. And there are days when you forsake and betray him with your kiss instead of love him



and honor him as you should. But still he says to you: my brother, my sister. And his promise and blessing for you is the blessing of his covenant, a blessing we find in **verse 42**.

“Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying “the Lord shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.”

